The Housing Careers of Polish and Somali Newcomers in Toronto’s Rental Market

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1. Introduction

In the global context of large population movements, the cultural and racial backgrounds of new immigrant groups are increasingly different from the profile of the dominant group that they join (Castles and Miller, 1998). This is especially true for metropolitan areas in more developed countries such as Canada. These new immigrants also compete with different levels of success for housing, employment and educational opportunities (Roseman, Laux, and Thieme, 1996: xviii). The successful incorporation of immigrants into the dominant community, especially as measured by access to the basic needs of society, depends on a variety of factors. These include the material and cognitive resources of individual immigrants and groups of immigrants, barriers established by the dominant society and strategies used by immigrant groups to overcome these barriers.

Adequate and affordable housing is one of the most important needs of society. For new immigrants, finding a suitable place to live in a caring community with sufficient services is an important first step towards successful integration. The obstacles and challenges that newcomers encounter in accessing housing, and the ways in which they respond, inform us about the openness of our cities, the opportunities and constraints common to specific urban areas, and the integrative and/or exclusionary practices and institutional arrangements that prevail. Understanding the housing experiences, especially of newly arrived immigrants with limited resources, can guide community members, policy makers and urban practitioners in developing more responsive and equitable urban environments.

Relatively little is known about the housing experiences of immigrants and refugees in Canada. There is a large body of literature on various aspects of ethnicity and ‘race,’ both in Canada generally and Toronto more specifically (see Driedger, 1996; Halli et al., 1990; and Satzewich, 1992 for examples) but, until recently, little of it focused on housing and access to housing. During the 1990s, however, a number of studies have been undertaken in Canada concerning issues such as immigrants and housing tenure patterns, the role of discrimination in accessing housing, and case studies of individual immigrant and refugee groups (e.g., Balakrishnan and Wu, 1992; Bernèche, 1990; Chisvin/Helfand and Associates, 1992; Lapointe and Murdie, 1996; Novac, 1996; Opoku-Dapaah, 1995; Owusu, 1999; Ray, 1994; Ray, 1998; Ray and Moore, 1991; Teixeira and Murdie, 1997. Also, see Beavis, 1995, for an annotated bibliography). Few of these studies, aside from Owusu’s (1999) examination of the residential experiences of a sample of Ghanaian immigrants in Toronto and Novac’s (1996) in-depth interviews with minority immigrant women in Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver, deal explicitly with the housing histories of recent Canadian immigrants.

The present study extends this research by comparing the settlement experiences of two recent immigrant groups in Toronto, Polish and Somali.  

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1 This study is part of a SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) funded research project entitled the Housing Experiences of New Canadians in Greater Toronto. The formal research activities of the project involve two stages, a set of focus groups and a questionnaire survey of recent immigrants. In the focus group sessions a series of open ended questions were asked about the housing preferences of each immigrant group, the barriers encountered in the housing search process, search strategies used to overcome the barriers, and the outcomes (Murdie, Chambon, Hulchanski and Teixeira, 1996). The questionnaire survey focuses on an evaluation of the housing experiences of a
The most recent wave of Polish immigrants began arriving in the late 1980s as part of the ‘Solidarity Wave’ who left Poland when the economy deteriorated and political tensions increased. They joined an older group of Poles who first arrived in Toronto in the 1950s and 1960s. The Somalis also started arriving in Toronto in the late 1980s, primarily in response to political repression, war and famine in their home country. In contrast to the Poles, the Somalis did not have a long established community with organisations that newcomers could turn to for assistance. According to the 1996 census, 18,915 Polish immigrants and 7,135 Somali refugees arrived in Toronto between 1991 and 1996. The recently arrived Polish group accounts for about one-quarter of all Polish immigrants in Toronto while the recent Somali immigrants represent about eighty percent of their group.2

The remainder of the paper is divided into six major sections. Section two provides a brief background to the study including an overview of immigrant and refugee settlement in Toronto, a summary of Toronto’s housing stock situation and a discussion of the conceptual framework, focusing on housing careers. The third section concerns the research design while the fourth, fifth and sixth sections outline the findings including the housing search process and the outcomes, expressed as both as the physical shelter component of the dwelling and the relative level of satisfaction with the dwelling and its surroundings. Finally, the last section reviews the findings and discusses these in the context of barriers that relatively low-income refugee groups such as the Somalis face in accessing good quality and affordable housing in Toronto.

2. Background to the Study

2.1 Toronto’s Immigrants and Refugees

Throughout the post World War Two period Toronto has been the major port of entry for immigrants and refugees settling in Canada. More than forty percent of immigrants and refugees coming to Canada settle in the Toronto area, which has about thirteen percent of Canada’s population. The number of immigrants and refugees entering Canada and settling in Toronto increased dramatically in the late 1980s and early 1990s, from just under 30,000 in the mid-1980s to almost 100,000 in the mid to late 1990s (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1994: 13; Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1998: 14).

Until the late 1960s, most of Toronto’s immigrants were from Britain and other European countries. Since then there has been a substantial internationalisation of Toronto’s population with the arrival of relatively large numbers of immigrants from various countries in Asia, Africa, Central and South America and the Caribbean. These

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2 Estimates of the Somali population vary widely. Opoku-Dapaah (1995), for example, indicates that 25,000 Somali immigrants resettled in Canada between 1981 and 1995, the majority of whom have come to the Toronto area. The census figure accounts for about one-third of Opoku-Dapaah’s estimate and is likely a considerable undercount of the total.
immigrants come from a wide spectrum of socio-economic classes ranging from refugees with meagre financial resources and few personal contacts in Canada to business people with substantial capital to invest.

The spatial differentiation of immigrant groups in Toronto and the kind of housing they occupy have also changed dramatically during the past three decades. The Italians, Portuguese, Polish and Ukrainians who arrived primarily in the early post war period, first settled in the older row housing west of the city centre. Many of these houses were divided into flats and rented to recent immigrants from the same ethnic background as the owner. As each group achieved social mobility they moved to newer housing in the suburbs and were replaced by other groups. The Italians moved in a north-westerly direction, the Poles and Ukrainians moved west to the vicinity of High Park, an older residential area of the city, and the Portuguese moved further west and resegregated in suburban Mississauga. In contrast to these trends, immigrants arriving in Toronto since the 1970s have settled in a number of quite different immigrant reception areas. Now, recent immigrant groups occupy a much greater variety of housing in terms of tenure, structural type, quality and location. Spatially, concentrations of new immigrant groups in Toronto have become more diffuse and more suburban. For example, since their first arrival in Toronto in the late 1980s, Somali refugees have resided in the inner-suburbs, occupying apartment buildings that were constructed in the 1960s and 1970s.

2.2 Toronto’s Housing Stock

Opportunities for housing occupancy in Toronto vary widely. Of the total housing stock in the Toronto area about 57 percent is ownership housing of various types, ranging from expensive detached housing to condominium apartments in various price ranges (Metropolitan Toronto Planning Department, 1993). For most lower income immigrants, housing opportunities are restricted to the rental market. About half the rental stock is conventional (purpose-built) apartments in the private rental sector, while the rest is distributed amongst rented houses, apartments in houses, rented condominium units and social housing (Metropolitan Toronto Planning Department, 1993:13). Vacancy rates are very low, less than one percent through most of the 1980s, increasing to above two percent in the early 1990s and then falling back again. During the latter part of the 1990s, virtually no new rental housing has been built in Toronto.

Social or public housing accounts for a relatively small proportion of the overall total housing stock in greater Toronto. Less than ten percent is in the non-profit and government-owned social housing sector, of which only about two-thirds is rent-geared-to-income. Because of the long waiting lists for social housing, many new immigrants find rental accommodation in relatively poorly maintained buildings at the lower end of the private rental market. Black households, however, primarily from the Caribbean, are strongly over-represented in entirely rent-geared-to-income developments operated by the Metropolitan Toronto Housing Authority. The proportion of blacks in this stock has increased dramatically since the early 1970s (Murdie, 1994). Black households have been particularly affected by difficulties in Toronto’s tight private rental market because of

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3 The terminology is confusing. The terms public and social housing are often used interchangeably in Canada to refer to any housing developed and operated by the government or non-profit sectors. In a more specific context, however, public housing refers to entirely rent-geared-to-income housing that was developed by government agencies, primarily between 1950 and 1975, and social housing is used to describe the more mixed income housing that was developed between 1975 and 1995. No new social housing has been built in Toronto since 1995.
income constraints, various forms of discrimination (gender, family composition and ‘race’) and low vacancy rates (Hulchanski, 1993, 1994).

2.3 Conceptual Framework

Housing career is a term used to describe the way in which households change their housing consumption as they move through the life cycle, or more generally, the life course. The term is used interchangeably in the literature with housing trajectory and housing pathway (e.g., Biterman, 1993; Gober, 1992, pp. 175-80; Payne and Payne, 1974). Housing careers also take place within the broader context of housing system realities and existing societal realities. Managers and gatekeepers, such as private landlords and public housing agencies, often add further distortion to housing system realities by determining who gains access to scarce housing such as private and public sector rental units. In a broader sense, ‘who gets what where’ out of the housing system depends on the social construction of variables such as race, ethnicity, class and gender. The meanings that society gives to these variables can become social barriers to accessing appropriate and affordable housing if one group is viewed more favourably than another.

It is widely assumed that individuals [or households] take distinct steps during the life course to improve their housing circumstances. Michelson (1977) emphasises the notion of a ‘progressive cycle’ whereby households move incrementally towards an ideal dwelling, which in North America is assumed to be a single-family house in the suburbs. Kendig (1990), however, adds the important observation that individuals can move ‘upwards’, ‘sideways’ or ‘downwards’ when pursuing housing trajectories. Empirical studies, especially from Britain and the United States, have determined that recently divorced single parents are particularly vulnerable to ‘downwards’ moves (e.g., Crowe and Hardey, 1991; Gober, 1992, p. 177). The same scenario may apply to recently arrived immigrants and refugees, especially those with limited resources who must face the reality of a tight rental housing market.

3. Research Design

Information concerning the housing careers of the Polish and Somali groups was obtained from a questionnaire survey. The survey was administered to sixty respondents from each group (thirty males and thirty females). To be eligible for the survey, respondents were required to have arrived in Canada between 1987 and 1994, be beyond the initial (temporary) stage of settlement, be currently living in rental accommodation and have made at least three moves. These restrictions were imposed because of the two major themes of the research: access to housing following the initial stage of settlement and the barriers associated with housing access in Toronto’s tight rental market. Potential respondents were identified using snowball-sampling techniques. Interviews were conducted ‘face-to-face’ by trained Polish and Somali interviewers.

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4 Only 15.8 percent of Polish immigrants and 6.8 percent of Somali immigrants who were living in Toronto in 1996, and had entered Canada between 1991 and 1996, had achieved homeownership. (Source: calculation by the author from the 1996 Public Use Microdata File on individuals)
A combination of closed and open-ended questions was used to develop a summary of the housing circumstances of each group. The results reported here are based on a grid that was used as a framework for collecting information about the search for three residences: the first residence, the one immediately before the current one, and the current residence. The information collected included a brief summary of each move, some details about how the search was undertaken and the ease or difficulty of each search, and satisfaction with the housing they found and the neighbourhood in which the house is located. Although the information was obtained from individual interviews, the analysis in this paper is based on aggregations by immigrant group. From the interview data, it would be possible to develop transition matrices showing the change in individual housing outcomes. That, however, is not possible in the limited space available here.

4. The Housing Search Process

Modelling the housing search process has a long tradition in the research literature beginning with the classic formulation by Brown and Moore (1970). Brown and Moore (1970) put particular emphasis on ‘place utility’ or relative level of satisfaction with a specific location, including the dwelling and the neighbourhood. When dissatisfaction with the current location reaches a point of unbearable stress the household identifies the desirable qualities of a new location and begins the process of searching for another dwelling.

The Brown and Moore model has been criticised for the excessive emphasis given to choice in the housing market, a criticism that is particularly relevant for many new immigrant groups. Also, in subsequent empirical studies relatively little emphasis has been given to the role of ethnicity or race in shaping the housing search process. Recent studies of racial differences in the search for housing in the United States indicate that in the home ownership market blacks are often provided with less information than whites and therefore engage in a much more constrained search (Farley, 1996; Newburger, 1995). Much less is known about the search process by ethnic and racial minorities in the rental market.

Individual housing searches involve the identification of housing preferences, selection of information sources, the identification of vacancies, the assessment of vacancies and negotiations with landlords (or sellers). For many immigrant groups, especially those who face major problems of discrimination, the process of looking for and locating a suitable place to live is difficult. Indeed, the identification and assessment of vacancies for some households within these groups may not automatically lead to negotiation with a landlord or seller.

This section of the paper considers the housing search process in the context of several key variables for each of three searches (first permanent residence, residence before the current one and the current residence). These variables are:

1. the most important factor and most important source of information in the search process
2. the length of the search
3. the number of times shown a good apartment but rejected by the landlord
4. the number of times offered an apartment but rejected by the potential tenant
5. the difficulty of the search and reasons for the difficulty.

For the most important factor and most important source of information respondents were given a list of items that were thought to be important and an option to add others deemed to be significant in their search for housing. Multiple answers were recorded as well as the most important item. Here, discussion focuses on the most important item.

The most important factors in the search process were summarised in four major categories: cost of housing, accessibility (to work, school and public transportation), social networks (proximity to relatives, friends and members of the same ethnic group) and a residual category referred to as ‘other’. For the Polish group, the first three factors were equally important in the search for the first permanent residence (Figure 1a). In subsequent searches, the cost of housing remained of prime importance for about forty percent of the Polish respondents. This is not surprising given Toronto’s relatively costly private rental market and the extremely low rental vacancy rate. In contrast to cost of housing, social networks became less important over time. Accessibility (primarily to public transportation) was especially important in the search for a residence immediately before the current one, perhaps due to low levels of car ownership and a spatial separation between residence and place of work. When searching for the current residence, a variety of other factors appeared in addition to those already mentioned. These include a quiet and/or better neighbourhood, a larger apartment and for some, proximity to High Park, a traditional area of Polish settlement in Toronto and an area with a relatively large number of rental apartments.

For the Somali respondents, proximity to relatives and friends (social networks) were the most important factor in searching for the first permanent residence (Figure 1b). More than sixty percent of the Somali group mentioned this factor while only about ten percent identified cost of housing as the most important factor. For subsequent searches, however, social networks became less important. For the current residence, cost of housing was identified as the most important factor by almost forty percent of the respondents. As with the Polish group, accessibility was important in the search for the residence before the current one. The importance of social networks for the Somalis parallels other findings including Owusu’s (1999) study of the housing experiences of recent Ghanaian immigrants to Toronto, Opoku-Dapaah’s (1995) analysis of the social and economic circumstances of Somali refugees in Toronto and Ray’s (1998) more general study of immigrants and refugees in Montréal and Toronto. Although social networks have remained an important factor for the Somalis in their search for housing it is interesting to note that the importance of factors such as housing cost and accessibility have converged for the two groups over time. For both groups, these factors reflect the reality of Toronto’s tight rental housing market and the limited provision of public transportation in suburban areas of the city where many lower skilled job opportunities are located.

Given the importance of proximity to relatives, friends and other members of the same ethnic group it is not surprising that relatives and friends were the most important information sources used in the search for housing. Almost eighty percent of the Somalis mentioned this as the most important source in their search for a first permanent residence while the comparable figure for the Poles was almost sixty percent (Figures 1c and 1d). Over time, the reliance on relatives and friends as the most important source dropped to about forty percent for the Somalis, but remained at sixty percent for the Poles. For about thirty percent of the Polish group more formal sources of information
such as advertisements in the newspaper and ‘for rent’ signs were of prime importance but less than twenty percent of the Somali respondents found these to be their most important sources. Relatively few respondents from either group mentioned community agencies as the most important source. This is surprising given the large number of non-governmental agencies that are available in both communities to assist with a variety of settlement needs. It was also noted, especially for the most recent search, that a variety of other sources of information were of primary importance. In particular, a few Poles found housing by asking private rental apartment superintendents while a substantial number of Somalis were successful in obtaining accommodation in Toronto’s relatively small public housing sector.

Although not directly considered in this paper, the importance of proximity to relatives and friends and their extensive use in the search for housing are probably important factors in reinforcing the spatial clustering of both groups. Spatial clustering can also be an important strategy in its own right for accessing suitable housing and overcoming barriers to immigrant integration, although the extent to which ethnic enclaves promote or hamper inclusion in a broader society is an issue that is still being debated in the literature.

The length of time that immigrants spend searching for housing may indicate the difficulties of the search process: the longer the time spent searching the more difficult the search. A longer search period, however, may also indicate a desire to find the most suitable and affordable housing. Table 1 presents data on the length of search categorised as one month or less and more than four months. An initial observation is that both groups spent more time searching for the current residence than previous residences. This probably indicates an acute need upon first arrival to find suitable permanent accommodation as quickly as possible. Later, once settled in permanent accommodation, more time can be taken to find a satisfactory dwelling. Despite the common pattern, however, there are important differences between the Polish and Somali respondents. In searching for a first permanent residence almost half of the Polish respondents took one month or less while only one-third of the Somali respondents found a dwelling in this time frame. The differences between the two groups are even more dramatic for the residence immediately before the current one and the current residence. Compared to the Poles, relatively few Somalis found housing in a month or less. This suggests the difficulties that many Somalis have in finding suitable housing in Toronto’s tight rental market.
Table 1
Length of Search: Percent of Respondents Taking one Month or Less and More than Four Months to find an Apartment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage in the Housing Career</th>
<th>One Month or Less</th>
<th>More than Four Months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>Somali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>Somali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Permanent Residence</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence Immediately</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before the Current One</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Residence</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The difficulties that immigrants experience in accessing rental housing are also indicated by rejections from landlords once they have found a suitable dwelling. Table 2 indicates the number of times that respondents were shown a good apartment but the landlord rejected their application. Two indicators are presented, the percent of respondents experiencing at least one rejection and the total number of rejections experienced by these respondents. Both the percentage of rejections and the number of rejections are much higher for the Somalis than the Polish. This finding further substantiates the difficulties that Somalis face in accessing rental accommodation in the Toronto market. For both groups the percentage of respondents experiencing rejections and the number of rejections increased for the residence before the current one and dropped substantially for the current residence. There is no obvious explanation for this pattern although rental market conditions may have played a role – the market may have been generally tighter during the search for the residence immediately before the current one. More likely, it relates to behaviour by the apartment seeker. As aspirations (and needs) increased, potential renters likely sought more expensive and/or luxurious accommodation but because their incomes remained relatively low the probability of rejection was higher. Following these rejections, apartment seekers may have become somewhat more realistic in their aspirations - thus, the lower incidence of rejections when searching for the current residence.

Table 2
Number of Times Shown a Good Apartment but Landlord Rejects Your Application

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage in the Housing Career</th>
<th>Percent of Respondents Experiencing Rejections</th>
<th>Number of Rejections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>Somali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Permanent Residence</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence Immediately</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>45.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before the Current One</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Residence</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extreme Instances of Rejections (≥10) not counted in number of rejections
As long as market conditions (rent levels, vacancy rates, discrimination) remain relatively constant, it is expected that the search for an apartment will become easier over time. This is based on the premise that over time immigrants build up greater knowledge about the rental market and the most effective information sources for accessing the market. This also assumes that household circumstances remain the same or improve over time. As indicated in Figures 2a and 2b, neither group of respondents found the search ‘very easy’ over the three stages in the housing career. Surprisingly, given the longer search time and greater rejection by landlords for the Somalis, about sixty percent of both groups found the search ‘somewhat easy’ for the first permanent residence and about twenty percent of both groups found it ‘very difficult’. Over time, the search by both groups appears to have become somewhat more difficult.

The most important reasons for the search difficulty are noted in Figures 2c and 2d. These are based on those who responded ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ difficult to the search difficulty question. They are based on small samples and must be treated with caution. Nevertheless, the importance accorded to being on social assistance and the need for a guarantor and/or references by the Somalis is indicative of the difficulties, in addition to lack of income, which this group faces in Toronto’s private rental market. When the major source of income is social assistance, landlords suspect that renters will default on their rent and that they will generally lower the social status of their apartment building.

5. The Housing Outcome: Ethnic Makeup of the Neighbourhood, Tenure, Type of Housing Unit, Unit Size

The housing outcome can be characterised in two ways, as the physical shelter component of housing - housing as a roof over one’s head – and the relative level of satisfaction with the dwelling and its surroundings – the idea of dwelling as a home and the surroundings as a community. The housing outcome in the context of neighbourhood, tenure, type of housing unit and unit size is examined in this section. In the following section, consideration is given to satisfaction with dwelling and neighbourhood and the extent to which each group felt that their housing circumstances had improved over time.

Many immigrant groups, upon first arrival in a new country, prefer to live in close proximity to people from the same ethnic background. These neighbourhoods usually contain stores selling food and other goods that the immigrant is familiar with and offer services in the immigrant’s home language. When asked about the ethnic makeup of their neighbourhood there were substantial differences between the Polish and Somali groups (Figures 3a and 3b). Consistently, through all three stages of the housing career, about three-quarters of the Polish group mentioned that there were ‘lots’ or ‘some’ Polish people in their neighbourhood. Given the existence of an established Polish neighbourhood in Toronto’s west end and the presence of a relatively large number of apartments in this area it has been comparatively easy for new Poles to locate in an existing area of Polish settlement. In contrast, the Somalis did not have an established community when the first wave of refugees arrived in the late 1980s. In the following decade, however, the group has been remarkably successful in creating a network of community services and retail facilities. The results also indicate that Somalis are increasingly moving into areas occupied by ‘some’ or ‘lots’ or Somalis. By the time Somalis moved to their current residence almost seventy percent lived in such neighbourhoods compared to thirty-five percent at the first permanent residence stage.
Not surprisingly, given Toronto’s rental housing market, most respondents rent from a private landlord, at least in the early stages of their housing career (Figures 3c and 3d). As noted earlier, there are relatively few public housing units in Toronto and the waiting list is very long. More and more Somalis, however, have subsequently moved into some form of public housing. This is especially evident for the current residence, with the result that at the time of the survey almost half of the Somali respondents lived in some form of public housing. The Poles, in contrast, continue to be situated primarily in private rental housing. Most Polish and Somali immigrants live in a high rise flat, and for both groups the percentage in this form of housing has increased slightly over their housing careers (Figures 4a and 4b). Almost eighty percent of Somalis live in this form of housing compared to slightly less than sixty percent of Poles. In part, this reflects the variety of rental stock in the older west-end of Toronto, where many Poles reside. In contrast, the Somalis tend to reside in Toronto’s post-war inner-suburbs where much of the rental housing stock comprises high rise buildings from the 1960s and 1970s.

In spite of the similarity of housing stock, there are distinct differences between the Polish and Somali households in terms of size of flat (Figures 4c and 4d). Somali households occupy much larger units than Poles. The norm for Somali households throughout their housing career has been three and four bedroom units as compared to two and three bedroom units for Poles. It will be noted later that this reflects the marked difference in household size between the two groups. It is also noteworthy that over their housing career Poles have been moving into larger sized units (fewer one bedroom and more two bedroom) while Somalis have been moving into smaller units (fewer three and four bedroom units and an increasing number of one and two bedroom units). The latter may be an indication of some Somali households becoming smaller; more likely, it is a matter of affordability with many Somali households no longer able to afford large apartment units. This is an important indication that, on average, Polish households have been more successful than Somali households in establishing a progressive housing career.

6. The Housing Outcome: Satisfaction with Current Residence and Neighbourhood and Comparison with Previous Residence and Neighbourhood

In addition to objective features of dwelling and neighbourhood it is important to determine the relative satisfaction of households with their residence and its surroundings. Relative level of satisfaction will depend on the extent to which the dwelling and its immediate area match the expectations and preferences of the household as set out and modified through the search process. The nature of the dwelling is also important in determining the relative satisfaction of the household with the house as ‘home’ (the physical and social quality of the living space). Similarly, the features of the surrounding area are important in identifying the satisfaction of the household with the neighbourhood as ‘community’ (the newcomer’s sense of belonging and satisfaction with resources in the local area).

Levels of satisfaction were measured for both current residence and current neighbourhood on a four-point scale from ‘very satisfied’ to ‘very dissatisfied’. Respondents were also asked whether they felt that their house was a ‘home’ (a comfortable, cosy, safe, enjoyable and relaxing place to be) and their neighbourhood a ‘community’ (a place where you feel you belong). Again, a four-point scale was used – from ‘not at all a home’ to ‘very much a home’. Finally, respondents were asked to
describe in a few key words the reasons for their feelings about the place where they currently live and their neighbourhood,

As indicated in Figures 5a and 5b, most respondents were either ‘somewhat satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with the current dwelling and current neighbourhood (about sixty percent were ‘somewhat satisfied’). There was also relatively little difference in pattern between the two groups and between dwelling and neighbourhood. Similarly, there was little difference between responses to the satisfaction questions and the house as ‘home’ and neighbourhood as ‘community’ questions (Figures 5c and 5d).

Polish respondents who were comparatively satisfied with their dwelling and viewed it as ‘somewhat’ or ‘very much’ a ‘home’ emphasised the importance of being with family (‘together with girlfriend and kids whom I love – now at home’), the presence of friendly neighbours and safety and security (‘nice quiet area, safe, good neighbours’). For the Somali group, safety and security were primary considerations followed by proximity to relatives, friends and people from the same ethnic background (‘safe, comfortable, relaxing, good Somali neighbours’). The minority of Polish respondents who were somewhat negative towards the dwelling stressed crowded situations, lack of permanency in a rental dwelling and the desire for home ownership (‘temporary situation, cluttered’, ‘want to live in own house in nice quiet neighbourhood’). Somali respondents gave many of the same answers but with greater emphasis on crowded conditions (‘one bedroom apartment – family of four’, ‘have to hide three extra kids’). A few Somali respondents also complained about the poor maintenance of their dwelling (‘condition of house poor – old, not maintained’).

Poles who were relatively satisfied with their neighbourhood stressed proximity to facilities such as shops, churches, parks and public transportation. Many also emphasised the ‘Polish’ character of their neighbourhood and the friendliness of the people living in the area (‘beautiful with European flavour’, ‘park close, Polish stores, people, church, credit union’). Like their response to satisfaction with dwelling, Somalis stressed the peaceful and quiet character of their neighbourhood. Similar to Poles they appreciated proximity to services such as shops, mosque, and public transportation. Many also liked living in an area with other Somalis who provided mutual support. As one respondent noted, ‘lots of Somalis here, visit, help one another’. Poles who did not like their neighbourhood complained that the area was dirty, unsafe and prone to prostitution and drug dealing. Interestingly a small minority also complained that the area was too ‘Polish’ (‘too many Poles, noisy’). Somalis who did not like their neighbourhood also complained about noise, crime, prostitution and drug dealing. A small minority also alluded to racist neighbours who ‘. . . don’t say hi, won’t let [their] kids play with my kids.’

Comparison with previous residence and neighbourhood is an important indication of whether the respondents perceive an improvement in their dwelling and neighbourhood. Respondents were asked to compare each residence or neighbourhood on a five-point scale from ‘a lot better’ to ‘a lot worse’ with ‘about the same’ as the midpoint. For the dwelling, there are important distinctions between the two groups (Figures 6a and 6b). The general pattern for the Poles is an improvement in satisfaction with their residence (unit and building). The percentage responses indicating ‘a lot better’ and ‘somewhat better’ increased from ‘first permanent residence’ to ‘current residence’ and the percentages for ‘a lot worse’ and ‘somewhat worse’ declined. In contrast, the Somalis are not as positive about an improvement in their residence. For the current residence the proportion answering ‘a lot better’ declined from the residence before the current one and the proportion answering
‘about the same’ increased. While the Poles seemed quite positive about an improvement in their unit and building, the Somalis were ambivalent at best.

Respondents were also asked to comment on the ways in which the new residence or neighbourhood were better than the previous residence or neighbourhood. Most of the relatively large number of Poles who said that their residence was ‘a lot better’ or ‘somewhat better’ mentioned that the apartment was larger and cleaner than their previous unit (‘like it-clean, nice kitchen’, ‘more comfort, sunny, bigger’). A number of Polish respondents also pointed to the independence that they had in their new residence. This implies that they no longer shared with others, or that the apartment was self-contained and they were no longer required to access their unit through someone else’s space. The somewhat fewer Somali respondents who said that their residence was ‘a lot better’ or ‘somewhat better’ gave many of the same reasons as the Poles – more space, cleaner, and greater independence (‘live on my own – more privacy’, ‘better – didn’t have to share’). The relatively large number of Somalis who indicated that their residential situation had either not improved or worsened identified the major reasons as less space, poorer maintenance and fewer amenities (‘less space, poor lighting and ventilation’, ‘poor housing – leaking drains, pipe’, ‘bit smaller, hence crowded’).

In contrast to their residence, a majority of respondents from both groups said that their neighbourhood had remained about the same during all three stages of the housing career. There was also minimal difference between the Polish and Somali groups, aside from the relatively large proportion of Somali respondents who indicated that their neighbourhood was ‘somewhat worse’ when moving to the first permanent residence. Reasons for the latter included the perceived lack of safety in the neighbourhood, the presence of drug dealers and criminals and the lack of a sense of community (‘people don’t communicate’, ‘didn’t know anyone in Canada’). Somalis who indicated an improvement in the neighbourhood after moving to their current residence mentioned increased safety, greater proximity to public transit and the presence of more people with a Somali ethnic background (‘secure, peaceful, close to TTC [public transit]’, ‘more people from my ethnic group’). Poles who noticed an improvement in their neighbourhood also commented on increased safety, better access to public transit and other amenities, and less noise and dirt (‘quieter and safer’, ‘nice area, close to TTC [public transit], store’).

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Evidence from the previous sections provides strong support for differential housing careers between the Polish and Somali newcomers in Toronto. Overall, Polish households seem to have been considerably more successful than Somali households in establishing a progressive housing career. Many Polish households have moved to larger housing units while a relatively large number of Somali households have been forced into smaller units. Although there is relatively little difference between the two groups in levels of satisfaction for the current residence and neighbourhood, many Somalis were not as positive about an improvement in their residence. They cited less space, poorer maintenance and fewer amenities as the major reasons for declining satisfaction. This contrasts with the Poles, many of whom indicated that their housing situation had improved considerably through the three stages of the housing career. Two major reasons stood out, the unit was larger and cleaner than the previous apartment and many Poles had a greater degree of independence than before.
There are several possible reasons for the difference in housing careers between the two groups. The following, drawing on the information in Figure 7, offers one scenario. Major background variables include average household size, total household income and major source of income. Somali households tend to be far larger than Polish households, incomes are considerably lower and Somalis rely much more heavily than Poles on social assistance. The large family size of the average Somali household is a substantial barrier to obtaining good quality, spacious accommodation at affordable cost. Large apartments in the private sector are expensive and relatively scarce. Furthermore, private sector landlords are reluctant to rent to large families with several children. This situation is exacerbated by relatively low incomes and the social stigma attached to being on social assistance. There is also little accommodation of this size in the public sector and the wait is much longer than for smaller units.

In spite of their comparatively low incomes, a substantial minority of Somali families initially rented large units at relatively high rents. This pattern continued for many households until the residence before the current one. At this point, nearly one-third of Somali households were paying more than $1000 per month for rent. Not surprisingly, sixty percent of Somali respondents indicated that they were having difficulty paying their rent (compared to just over ten percent of Polish respondents). For some Somali families these rents apparently became unsustainable so that by the current residence it was necessary to reduce the amount paid on rent and accept accommodation that was smaller and/or of lower quality. Thus, many Somali households expressed moderate or strong dissatisfaction with their current residence compared to their previous dwelling. Although the rents paid by Polish households gradually increased over time, no Polish households were paying over $1000 per month until their current residence and then only about five percent compared to twenty percent of Somali households. Instead, the rents paid and size of flat for the Poles gradually increased through the three stages in the housing career, presumably in harmony with increased household incomes and employment prospects.

Given that home ownership is the ultimate North American ‘dream’, respondents were asked whether they would at some point like to be a home owner. Ninety percent of the Poles responded in the affirmative compared to about seventy percent of the Somalis. Of the Somalis who gave a reason for not wanting to own, a few mentioned their desire to return to Somalia but the majority simply did not believe that they could ever afford to buy a home in Toronto. Perhaps they were being realistic in the context of their limited resources and Toronto’s high priced home ownership market. If so, the prospects for many Somalis achieving a progressive housing career are not very promising. They seem to be regressing in the rental market and their prospects for home ownership are not encouraging. Furthermore, with the withdrawal of government support for the construction of new public housing and the partial removal of rent controls their opportunities in the rental market are also diminishing. In contrast, prospects for Polish newcomers achieving their ultimate ‘dream’ appear much brighter.

8. References


2a) Search Difficulty: Polish

2b) Search Difficulty: Somali

2c) Most Important Reasons the Search Difficulty: Polish

2d) Most Important Reasons the Search Difficulty: Somali
4a) Type of Housing Unit: F
- single detached
- row house etc.
- flat in house
- high rise flat
- rooming house
- other

4b) Type of Housing Unit: S
- single detached
- row house etc.
- flat in house
- high rise flat
- rooming house
- other

4c) Unit Size: P
- bachelor/one room
- 1 bedroom
- 2 bedroom
- 3 bedroom
- 4 bedroom

4d) Unit Size: S
- bachelor/one room
- 1 bedroom
- 2 bedroom
- 3 bedroom
- 4 bedroom
5a) Satisfaction With Cu Residence

5b) Satisfaction with Cu Neighbourhood

5c) Think of Your House 'Home'

5d) Think of Your Neighbour as a 'Community'