

The housing experiences of refugee youth in St. Louis

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Why housing and neighborhood experiences matter for refugee youth

Faced with the arrival of an expected 1,000 refugees from Afghanistan in St. Louis, the fate of the previous wave of refugees from Syria may offer local decision makers important insights of how to improve the newcomers' experiences.

Housing in particular, is not only an immediate and primary need for refugee families after their arrival, but it also shapes their long-term well-being and adaptation to their new environment. Finding adequate and affordable housing for refugee families however, is a common challenge in many urban areas throughout the U.S. welcoming refugees today. Their lack of financial means, language skills and guarantors coupled with tight local housing markets or discrimination by landlords often lead to refugee families ending up in overcrowded and low-quality housing located in unsafe and declining neighborhoods.

Existing research on refugees' housing and neighborhood experiences has almost exclusively focused on family- and adult-level outcomes such as employment or health. But robust bodies of research suggest that housing and neighborhood environments may have distinct effects on the healthy development and adaptation of refugee children and youth. Housing quality for instance directly affects young people's physical and mental health, while housing instability and frequent moves can have negative impacts on peer socialization and educational outcomesⁱ. Moreover, housing conditions do not operate in isolation, but often reflect characteristics of the wider neighborhood. Neighborhood disadvantage has consistently been linked to negative developmental outcomes for youth, ranging from low educational attainment, crime and delinquency to conduct problems and negative health and mental health outcomes or substance useⁱⁱ. High levels of neighborhood poverty for instance, undermine the quality and quantity of important local institutions such as schools, afterschool programs or health care facilities available to young people. Under-resourced, urban, public schools in turn, are ill-equipped to support refugee youth who have to learn a new language and often have to make up for interruptions of their formal schoolingⁱⁱⁱ. Exposure to violence and crime poses a direct physical threat to the well-being of young people and for refugee youth may also trigger past experiences of trauma and victimization. Finally, neighborhoods provide important contexts for socialization and everyday encounters that are critical settings for the acculturation of newcomers because differences between dominant and non-dominant culture are worked out in these settings and interactions^{iv}.

Given the critical importance of housing and neighborhood environments for young people's well-being and development, a better understanding of how these environments affect refugee youth may be of particular interest to policy makers and service providers in cities like St. Louis, seeking to attract immigrant and refugee families in order to stem decades of population decline. This research brief presents finding on the housing and neighborhood experiences of Syrian refugee youth in St. Louis.

Data and methods

Data for this brief consists of 21 qualitative interviews with 21 male refugee youth from Syria (age 15-20) who arrived in St. Louis between 2015 and 2017. The interviews were conducted between

December 2016 and October 2018, in some instances with the help of an Arabic translator, lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. Interview questions explored life in Syria, the war, voyage to the U.S. and early experiences in St. Louis. The youth interviews are complemented by interviews with resettlement workers, volunteers and social workers involved in the resettlement process of refugee families in St. Louis. The interviews were transcribed, anonymized, translated and systematically coded using a qualitative software package. More detailed information about the study, data and analytic strategy is available from the author upon request.

Findings

“Frankly in order to do housing [for refugee families] you have to be a miracle worker. We are asking people to take tenants that they’ve never met and that don’t have a job. I can’t guarantee that they will have a job in three months when we stop paying their rent. There is no lease. Seriously, have you ever rented a house on those conditions? And if you did what kind of house did you think it was going to be?” (K., resettlement worker)

K.’s quote aptly summarizes the challenges faced by resettlement agencies like the International Institute in their efforts to house newly arrived refugee families in St. Louis. These challenges are rooted in the way refugee resettlement is funded. The U.S. Department of State provides local agencies with a modest per capita grant intended to pay for housing, food and other basic needs for up to 90 days after arrival. In 2017 these Reception and Placement Grants were about \$2,000, out of which \$1,100 had to be used for direct support and \$900 could be spent on administrative overhead. For a family of four (2 children, 2 adults) this amounts to a total of \$4,400 in direct support, which has to cover any down payment, rent for 3 months and other living expenses, basic provisions of furniture, clothing and other necessities.

Although St. Louis is one of the most affordable urban housing markets in the nation^v, median gross rents (including utilities) in 2016 ranged from \$861 for a 2-bedroom apartment to about \$1,024 for a 4-bedroom apartment^{vi}. This means that even in a weak housing market like St. Louis, a refugee family of four, living in a 2-bedroom apartment would be spending about 70% of their monthly allowance on housing. Finding decent housing for families of varying sizes (Syrian family sizes ranged between 5 and 11) is further complicated by the often short notice – sometimes no more than 3 days – informing resettlement agencies of new arrivals.

In light of these dynamics of the resettlement process, it is not surprising that most of the Syrian families who started to arrive in St. Louis in 2015, were initially placed in medium to high poverty neighborhoods^{vii} on the north-west side and south side of the city. The map at the end of this brief also shows that those families who had been able to move, ended up in low poverty neighborhoods in the county and medium poverty neighborhoods in South City. This is mirrored in the experiences of the Syrian youth in this study. Almost all respondents described their initial housing circumstances as unclean and in a poor state of repair. Wasim (18)^{viii} for instance, distinctly remembered the moment they arrived at their new home at 2:00 AM: “And when we came to this apartment and saw it full of mice we started crying. Like four hours stayed outside crying because of the apartment. No good America, no good.” Similarly, Mu (20) described their initial apartment in an apartment complex on Hodiamont: “It was like, you could smell something bad from the house, you can see the mouse in the house and there are like a lot of bugs in the house.” As a result of the poor conditions in this apartment complex, all respondents who had initially been placed there, had moved elsewhere by the time of their interviews. Several youth noted that because of the vermin infestation of their first apartment, their families had to get rid of all their belongings before they moved.

Aside from the low-quality condition of these initial accommodations, almost all respondents also reported feeling unsafe in the neighborhood that they had moved into. These experiences ranged from hearing gunshots at night, seeing people carrying guns or robbing others, having their belongings

stolen and getting into fights with non-refugee neighborhood youth, to more severe instances of witnessing a drive-by shooting or someone getting shot in front of their house. Faisal (15) noted that there were “Always shots, always police. When it get dark after five or six you can’t go out. My dad sleep with a knife. He was wondering if someone come to the window, they know we are refugee.” And Zavier (17) remembered that “The first day we buy car, the next day we wake up the car door is broke. Because someone try to steal what’s inside.”

This general sense of danger severely limited the range of activities such as spending time outside or at local parks and restricted socializing with friends to the daytime or indoors. Mahmoud (16) described his neighborhood as: “Not safe area and you have to be careful [...] when sometimes we going to park and spend time and after 8 to 8:30 we get scared and wanna come back [home], when it get dark.”

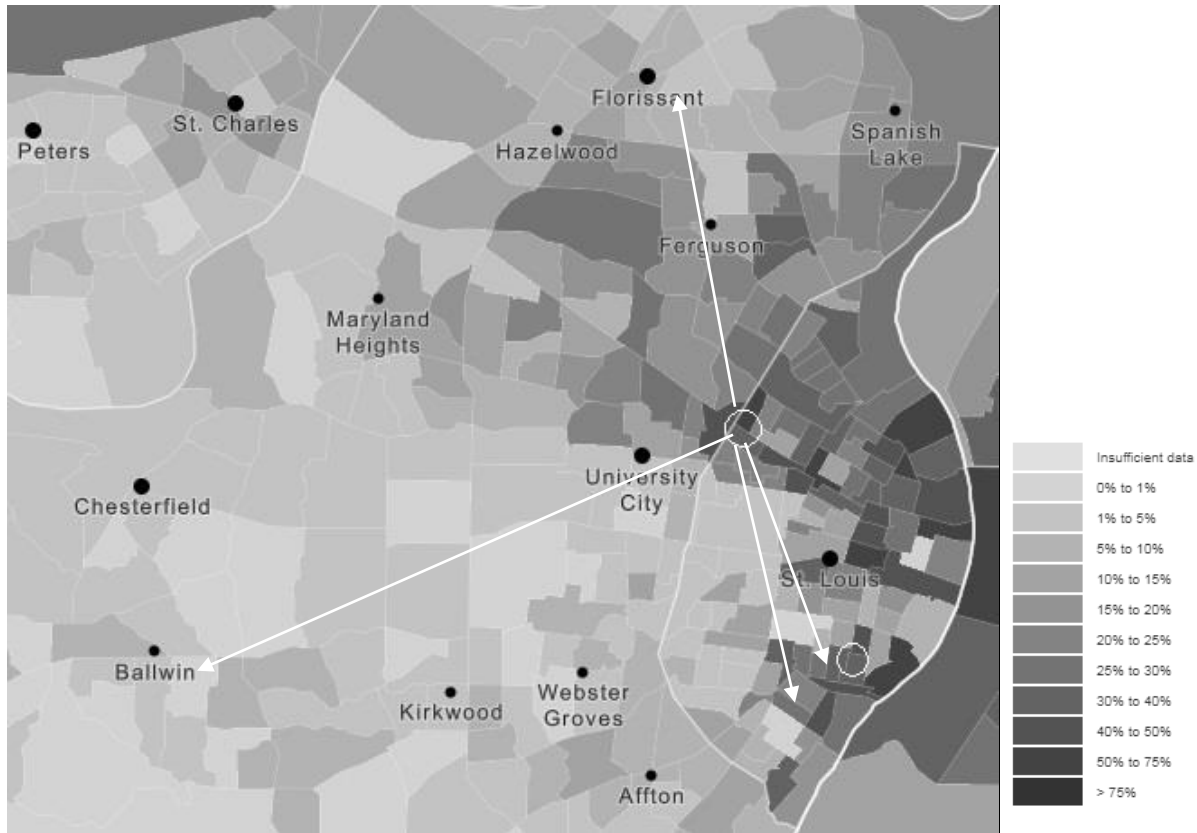
By the time of their interviews most of the respondents and their families had moved to better or somewhat better status neighborhoods in the city or the suburbs. When asked about his family’s new home in the suburbs, Zavier explained: “We do like it. A lot. My brother he sleep in one room, I sleep in one room and my brothers sleep in another room. So we have space.” This satisfaction also extended to the new neighborhood: “Our neighbors, the first time we come here they say ‘Hi! Welcome. You’re the new guys.’ We say ‘Yes, thank you very much.” Quadir (15) whose family also moved to the suburbs contrasted his new neighborhood with his experience at Hodiament where he mostly stayed inside and played with his father: “I can do fun things like play soccer. I play with my brothers and sometimes there is people who come to play and we see each other and say ‘Hi friends’ and we will play together.” Almost all the movers reported that their families had found their new homes through their social networks and connections. These connections were primarily facilitated by mosques and in some cases through non-refugee volunteers.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Although almost all young people in this study reported an overall improvement in their housing and neighborhood experiences over time, their initial experiences also raise important questions for local actors interested in retaining refugee youth and their families in the city. These questions are further amplified by new arrivals from Afghanistan in the context of accelerating housing markets in St. Louis and elsewhere. While fluctuations in annual refugee admissions, the per-capita Reception and Placement grants as well as local housing prices are beyond the control of local actors, policy makers in cities like St. Louis might want to consider supplementing the housing grant for newly arrived refugee families. This would not only expand the options of local resettlement agencies to accommodate new arrivals and allow them to find better quality housing in safer neighborhood environments, but it might also encourage refugee families and their children to remain in the city instead of leaving for the suburbs at the first opportunity. Furthermore, the critical importance of informal networks for refugee families to find better quality housing suggests that service providers might want to think about ways to facilitate connections between refugees and various community-based organizations such as places of worship or neighborhood associations. Local measures like these would make St. Louis more welcoming of newcomers and directly improve the housing experiences of refugee youth.

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Additional information about the study is available upon request from sichlingf@umsl.edu.



Map: Housing Trajectories of Syrian Refugee Families in St. Louis

ⁱ Coley, R. L., T. Leventhal, A. Doyle Lynch, and M. Kull. "Relations between housing characteristics and the well-being of low-income children and adolescents." *Developmental Psychology* 49, no. 9 (2013): 1775.

ⁱⁱ Leventhal, T., and J. Brooks-Gunn. "The neighborhoods they live in: the effects of neighborhood residence on child and adolescent outcomes." *Psychological Bulletin* 126, no. 2 (2000): 309.

ⁱⁱⁱ McWilliams, J. A., and S. W. Bonet. "Continuums of precarity: Refugee youth transitions in American high schools." *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 35, no. 2 (2016): 153-170.

^{iv} Berry, J. W. "Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation." *Applied psychology* 46, no. 1 (1997): 5-34.

^v Fenske, S. 2016. "St. Louis median rents among the nation's cheapest for big cities, study finds." *The Riverfront Times*, July 7, 2016. <https://www.riverfronttimes.com/newsblog/2016/07/07/st-louis-median-rents-among-the-nations-cheapest-for-big-cities-study-finds>

^{vi} U.S. Bureau of the Census. 2016. "American Community Survey 2016, 5 year estimates: Median gross rent by bedrooms. St. Louis City, St. Louis, Missouri."

^{vii} The Pew Research Center defines medium-poverty neighborhoods as those where 5.01% - 24.99% of residents are in poverty line and high-poverty neighborhoods as those where 25% or more of residents are in poverty (Pew Charitable Trusts. 2016. "Neighborhood Poverty and Household Financial Security."

https://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2016/01/chartbook--neighborhood-poverty-and-household-financial-security_v3.pdf

^{viii} All names were changed to protect the identity of the respondents.