

# The housing pathways of new immigrants

Findings  
Informing change

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This research explores the arrival experiences and settlement stories of new immigrants. It focuses on the housing experiences of new immigrants and considers the consequences of their arrival for local housing markets and neighbourhoods.

## The research

By David Robinson, Kesia Reeve and Rionach Casey of the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University. In-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with Liberian, Pakistani, Polish and Somali new immigrants living in Sheffield. All participants had arrived in the UK in the last five years through different immigration pathways (migrant workers, asylum seekers, refugees and people entering the UK on a spouse visa).

## Key points

- The arrival experiences of new immigrants were largely determined by their immigration status, associated legal rights and related opportunities. This led to clear distinctions in the housing situations of different groups. For example, asylum seekers were initially reliant on the National Asylum Support Service for accommodation and subsequently moved into social housing, once granted leave to remain. In contrast, the restricted rights of migrant workers to welfare benefits meant they were reliant on the private rented sector for a place to live.
- New immigrants tended to fill voids in the housing stock left behind or avoided by other households. The result was the concentration of new immigrants in particular sectors of the local housing market and in specific neighbourhoods.
- Most new immigrants moved into temporary accommodation upon first arriving in the UK. Poor living conditions, lack of privacy and concerns about safety and security were often associated with temporary accommodation and were sometimes endured for many months.
- Some new immigrants reported problems of insecurity and poor living conditions in more permanent, long-term accommodation. Basic material needs were often not satisfied and security of tenure proved to be an illusion, with people struggling to maintain, and in some cases losing, their place in the housing system and becoming homeless.
- The new immigrants did not live in isolated ethnic clusters and their residential settlement patterns were rarely the outcome of self-segregating tendencies. They quickly developed an affiliation with the place where they lived, which resulted in many wanting to stay in the neighbourhood where they first settled.
- Where new immigrants live was found to be an important determinant of settlement experiences. Problems, including harassment and abuse, were found to be more extreme in neighbourhoods with little previous history of accommodating diversity and difference.
- Over time, some new immigrants were able to exercise greater choice about where they lived, as they secured new rights and resources. However, exercising housing choice was often dependent upon the support and assistance of friends, relatives and community-led services.

# Background

For all the heated debate about the impacts and consequences of new immigration in the UK, surprisingly little is known about the realities of life for new immigrants. This has not stopped media speculation about the motives of new immigrants, the priorities of statutory agencies and service providers and the consequences for long-standing residents. Much of this increasingly divisive debate has focused on the issue of housing and questions about who gets what and why, and the knock-on effects for local neighbourhoods, in terms of population change, community relations and sustainability.

This study ventures beyond speculation to explore the early settlement stories of new immigrants, with a particular focus on their housing experiences during the first five years of settlement in the UK and the consequences for local housing markets and neighbourhoods.

Attention centres on the sequence of dwellings that new immigrants occupy during the first five years of settlement, and their experiences while living in these different situations. Fieldwork involved in-depth, qualitative interviewing with four groups of new immigrants in the city of Sheffield – Liberian, Pakistani, Polish and Somali – with different identities (ethnicity, religion, nationality and race) and distinct histories of settlement in the city, who have arrived into the UK via different routes and with different packages of associated legal rights.

## Experiences on arrival

The planned or enforced nature of immigration and the rights and opportunities associated with different migration routes were critical determinants of the arrival and settlement experiences of the new immigrants.

At one extreme were asylum seekers. Their migration was usually forced and their personal plans and objectives initially centred on survival and negotiating a degree of safety and stability in a life that had often been in a state of flux for months or even years. The

UK was not necessarily their chosen destination. On arrival they were barred from formal employment and had restricted access to welfare benefits, which were provided through the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). Their immediate social, physical and material context was largely determined by others. They were directed toward Sheffield and placed in specific neighbourhoods and housing situations.

At the other extreme were legal migrant workers, who typically planned their move to the UK and whose primary objective was economic gain. They had been drawn to Sheffield by the possibility of work, and their initial reliance on an employer, friends or relatives for a place to stay had drawn them to particular neighbourhoods. They had restricted rights to welfare benefits, which meant they had to rely on their own resources and look to the private sector for meeting their material needs, including housing. Their right to work and their success in finding a job allowed them to earn the income required to access private rented accommodation.

## Housing experiences

The housing problems that the new immigrants encountered in temporary accommodation – lack of privacy, freedom and control, poor living conditions, insecurity, safety concerns – reflect dominant themes in the extensive literature on experiences of homelessness in the UK. The problems they encountered in more secure, long-term accommodation – restricted choice in the social rented sector, the corrosive effect of racial harassment, problems of insecurity and homelessness, poor conditions in houses in multiple occupation (HMO), and overcrowding in the owner-occupied sector – reflect familiar themes in the extensive evidence base regarding minority ethnic housing experiences in the UK.

The housing circumstances and experiences of the new immigrants interviewed might be familiar, but their opportunity to effect a change was found to be distinct and different from other disadvantaged groups. The system of constraints within which the new immigrants made choices about their housing was complex and tightly bound, and their scope to act to improve their situation was severely limited. In addition to restricted legal rights and limited resources, the new immigrants had arrived in the UK with little understanding of the subtleties of the housing system and were still getting to grips with issues such as how to access different tenures. They were also rarely skilled players of the welfare system.

## Engaging with the housing system

The immigration status and associated rights of new immigrants served to root their early housing careers within particular sectors of the housing system. The migrant workers interviewed were relying on the private rented sector, refugees had entered social housing and new immigrants arriving in the UK on a spouse visa had moved into the housing situation occupied by their spouse (typically owner-occupation).

The settlement patterns of respondents tended to reflect the housing actions and residential mobility of others, with the new immigrants filling voids in the housing stock left behind or avoided by other households. Which particular gap they filled within the local housing market depended upon the particular rights and opportunities at their disposal and the constraints within which choices were made. These included financial constraints in the private sector and the rules governing the allocation of housing in the social rented sector.

Refugees have a right of access to social housing, but have little opportunity to exercise choice in the allocation process. They were typically in immediate and desperate need of accommodation and therefore unable to wait for a tenancy in a preferred location. As a result they tended to move into the most readily available and easily accessible accommodation. In Sheffield this was low-demand or difficult to let housing in unpopular neighbourhoods. Clusters of new immigrants are therefore living on traditional white British working-class estates on the periphery of the city, which have little or no history of accommodating difference or living with difference (new contact zones of immigration).

In the early stages of settlement, migrant workers have no right of access to social housing. The migrant workers interviewed had therefore been drawn to neighbourhoods with a relatively large private rented sector. Limited financial resources restricted choice to HMOs. The result was settlement in neighbourhoods dominated by private renting that played a 'lubricating' role in the local housing market. The presence of Polish migrant workers in these neighbourhoods appeared to have been reinforced by the networks of informal advice and assistance that had generated a local 'accommodation circuit' servicing the needs of the community.

Through time, as new rights were secured and resources accumulated, the new immigrants became more active within the housing system. A frequent motivation for migrant workers to move was the realisation that residence in the UK might not be a temporary situation, but a longer term commitment. At this point, they often became dissatisfied with the accommodation provided by the private rented sector and, in particular, by shared accommodation, and they developed preferences for particular neighbourhoods, which began to inform their residential choices. In contrast, some refugees appeared to be keen on a period of stability, having finally achieved a position of relative security. Their long-term housing objectives were skewed in favour of satisfying immediate priorities including education, employment and family reunion, although harassment had forced some refugee households to look to move.

## The importance of place

The new immigrants had little choice of what housing and which neighbourhoods they lived in during the early years of settlement. Their residential situations were dominated by constraining factors and often bore little relation to the settlement patterns of long-standing residents – for instance, new Somali immigrants were allocated accommodation on estates on the southern periphery of Sheffield, well away from the established Somali population. Where new immigrants were living in clusters this tended to be the consequence of the common constraints they had encountered in the local housing market, reinforced by the problems of abuse and harassment that many new immigrants had encountered living beyond established areas of minority ethnic settlement.

New immigrants quickly developed an affiliation for the neighbourhood where they first settled upon arrival in the city, and this served to tie them to these areas. Some Liberian respondents, for example, remained committed to their local neighbourhood despite problems with racial harassment. Having made an investment in the neighbourhood – becoming familiar with the local environment, services and facilities and developed friendships and associations – they were loathed to 'start again' somewhere new. Somali respondents living in the same neighbourhood, in contrast, were less willing to remain. They were more familiar with other neighbourhoods in the city, having spent months, if not years, in NASS accommodation in various parts of Sheffield, and were able to point to locations where problems with racism and harassment were thought to be less common.

## The housing market consequences of new immigration

The impact of new immigration on the housing market is dependent upon the local market context into which new immigrants arrive. In Sheffield the new immigrants tended to fill the voids in the local housing market vacated or avoided by others. In this context, new immigration can serve to underpin housing demand and neighbourhood sustainability. However, the arrival of new immigrants into a neighbourhood, when unmanaged by mediating agencies, can have an impact on community relations. Resulting tensions and conflicts can undermine the willingness of new immigrants and long-standing residents alike to live in an area and risk undercutting sustainability.

In high demand areas, the opportunities to fill voids in the local housing market left behind by the households moving up and out of particular segments of the market are likely to be few and far between. New immigrants and more established residents both face a struggle securing – and are often portrayed as being in competition for – satisfactory and appropriate housing. The consequence for refugees might include relatively long periods in temporary accommodation waiting for an offer of permanent accommodation, and eventual relocation into unsatisfactory and inappropriate housing, including shorthold tenancies in the private rented sector. New immigrants can then experience the hostility of local residents, who see themselves, their friends or family as losing out to them in the competition for access to the scarce resource that is affordable housing.

Different forms of new immigration can also have very particular consequences for different segments of local housing markets. New immigrants entering the UK on a spouse visa are often subsumed within existing households and can increase levels of overcrowding. Asylum seekers who become homeless after being required to leave NASS accommodation upon being granted leave to remain in the UK have the potential to raise official levels of homelessness and put pressure on temporary accommodation in asylum dispersal areas. The arrival of migrant workers can reinvigorate demand for private rented accommodation, including HMOs, and in tighter market conditions might drive growth in the buy-to-let market.

## About the project

The project team worked in partnership with six community researchers to complete in-depth interviews with 39 new immigrants living in Sheffield during 2006 and 2007. Interviews were conducted with 10 Liberian, 10 Pakistani, 10 Polish and 9 Somali new immigrants.

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## Further information

The full report, **The housing pathways of new immigrants** by David Robinson, Kesia Reeve and Rionach Casey, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk).

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