



Homelessness, Housing, and Precarious Migration: New Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

This document is the product of a panel discussion held at the [Metropolis 2024 conference](#), organized by the Équipe de recherche sur l'immigration au Québec et ailleurs (ERIQA) and Médecins du Monde Canada.

The panel brought together four speakers. The first three are practitioners working with asylum seekers and people with precarious immigration status in Montreal and Toronto: Eva Gracia-Turgeon (Foyer du Monde), Wayra Pasquis (Médecins du Monde), and Loly Rico (FCJ Refugee Centre). They were accompanied by a researcher on refugee rights and housing, Professor Christina Clark-Kazak (University of Ottawa). These four speakers described the current housing and homelessness challenges faced by asylum seekers and people with precarious immigration status, as well as by those who help them and campaign for better resources and recognition of these issues.

While current political discourse falsely identifies asylum seekers and migrants as being responsible for the current housing crisis across Canada, the housing situation of these vulnerable people continues to worsen. Although housing has always been a problem for asylum seekers and migrants with precarious status, in recent years, there has been an increase in the number of people living in Montreal and Toronto who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The City of Toronto has [indicated](#) that the number of asylum seekers in the city's shelters has increased by 500% between 2021 and 2023.

While it is still difficult to specify such figures for Montreal, the percentage of people who used the services of the Médecins du Monde clinic and reported living in conditions that meet the Canadian [definition](#) of homelessness has risen from 52% to 71% between 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. Centraide has also [reported](#) an increase in the number of homeless migrants in Montreal.

Against a backdrop of inflation and a housing crisis in both cities, this increase in housing insecurity for vulnerable migrants and asylum seekers is a concrete consequence of Canadian migration policies that create precarity. This situation presents new challenges for a social services sector that knows little about this client population, is ill-equipped to help them and is shifting the burden of responsibility onto community services.

The purpose of this document is to provide an overview of the situation in Montreal and Toronto. It begins with a summary of the recommendations made by the panelists, who suggest developing policies on housing and services that meet the needs of migrants with precarious status and asylum seekers.

Christina Clark-Kazak then sheds some much-needed light on the legal and policy environment surrounding the right to housing for asylum seekers in Canada.

The next sections summarize the experience and analysis of each of the other panelists. These speakers highlight the critical needs of asylum seekers and migrants with precarious status in terms of housing and other services essential for preventing homelessness, as well as of the organizations that help them.

Some innovative strategies created by these organizations are also shared in these pages.

We hope that this resource will be useful to the various service providers, and to their advocacy activities, so that the right to housing for everyone, regardless of migration status, becomes a reality throughout Quebec, Ontario, and Canada.

Karine Côté-Boucher
Associate Professor, École de criminologie
Université de Montréal
and ERIQA researcher

Chloé Cébron
Director of Policy Analysis and Advocacy,
Médecins du Monde Canada

RECOMMENDATIONS

SERVICE PROVIDERS :

- Increase collaboration between the homelessness and migration sectors:
 - establishing cross-sectoral communication channels and forums as well as cross-disciplinary training
 - consolidating resource lists
- Broaden the eligibility criteria and processes for accessing accommodation resources and services to ensure that asylum seekers and migrants with precarious status receive the help they need
- Train and equip those working in the homelessness sector to address the specific needs of asylum seekers and migrants with precarious status:
 - Flexibility regarding documentation requested
 - Guaranteed confidentiality for non-status migrants
 - Intercultural sensitivity: multilingual services and adapted attitude
- Training and equipping those working in the immigration sector to deal with the specificities of homelessness:
 - Better knowledge of the issues and resources available to people experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity
 - Raising awareness of the harm reduction approach
 - Adapting services and resources for the most vulnerable families and individuals.

PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS :

- Broaden the criteria for access to subsidized housing for asylum seekers and migrants with precarious statuses.
- The Government of Quebec's PRAIDA and MIFI should modify the eligibility conditions and deadlines for PRAIDA to reflect the realities of asylum seekers and the consequences relating to the extension of the Safe Third Country Agreement.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT :

- Replace the national Interim Housing Assistance Program for asylum seekers with a sustainable, long-term strategy that supports asylum seekers during their first three years in the country and provides them with essential basic services.

BOTH LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT :

- Fund resources for homeless migrant women with children
- Prevent the risk of homelessness among asylum seekers and migrants with precarious status by implementing responsible and sustainable migration policies that guarantee fundamental rights.

*Part One: A researcher's view***OVERVIEW: THE INTERSECTIONS OF PUBLIC POLICIES ON HOUSING AND IMMIGRATION**

**Christina Clark-Kazak, Full Professor,
Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Ottawa**

The right to asylum and the right to housing are protected by Canadian and international law. These rights are universal and interrelated. For example, asylum seekers need an address to receive important legal documents. The rights protected by the Charter apply to everyone physically present in Canada, including non-citizens.

In Canada, the division of responsibilities for immigration and housing at the municipal, provincial/territorial and federal levels creates gaps in policies and programs, leading to homelessness among asylum seekers, non-status migrants and precarious migrants (Kissoon and Hiebert 2010, Paradis et al 2008, Polillo and Sylvestre 2021, Rose 2001). The problem is exacerbated by wider structural issues that have reduced access to affordable and adequate housing across the country. Although asylum seekers are not at the root of these structural problems, some politicians, journalists and the general public blame immigrants for the housing shortage.

The political preference for resettling refugees over welcoming refugees arriving at Canada's borders has consequences for access to social services. Combined with reduced protection for asylum seekers through, for example, the amended Safe Third Country Agreement in 2023, this preference means that provincial governments are reluctant to create a 'pull factor' by systematically funding housing and social assistance for asylum seekers. However, the increased insecurity caused by changes to the Safe Third Country Agreement has actually pushed more people onto the streets and into shelters.

For asylum seekers in particular, the recent announcement of new funding for the Temporary Accommodation Support Program, while welcomed, reflects an ad hoc approach rather than a long-term sustainable strategy. There is no centralized national system for receiving asylum seekers and providing them with basic social services and guidance on how to make a legal claim for refugee status.

Civil society organizations are filling this gap through shelters and outreach programs. A recent study by Matthew House, as well as researchers from Carleton University and the University of Ottawa shows that there is a patchwork of services funded mainly by private donations and volunteers. This situation is inadequate and unsustainable, given the scale and severity of homelessness among newcomers.

For additional information:

Kissoon, Priya, and Dan Hiebert. 2010. (Dis)Advantages of Illegality: The Refugee Claimant Trajectories and Housing Experiences of Non-Status Migrants in Vancouver and Toronto, Working Paper, no. 10-11 (Oct. 2010).

Paradis, Emily, Sylvia Novac, Monica Sarty, and John David Hulchanski. 2008. [Better off in a Shelter?: A Year of Homelessness & Housing among Status Immigrant, Non-Status Migrant, & Canadian-Born Families](#). Toronto, Canada: Centre for Urban and Community Studies, Cities Centre, University of Toronto.

Polillo, Alexia, and John Sylvestre. 2021. "[An Exploratory Study of the Pathways into Homelessness among of Foreign-Born and Canadian-Born Families: A Timeline Mapping Approach](#)." *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness* 30 (1): 6-19.

Rose, Damaris. 2001. "[The Housing Situation of Refugees in Montréal Three Years after Arrival: The Case of Asylum Seekers Who Obtained Permanent Residence](#)." *Journal of International Migration and Integration / Revue de l'integration et de La Migration Internationale* 2 (4): 493-529. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-001-1010-3>.

Part Two: Insights from practitioners

LACK OF HOUSING RESOURCES FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS AND PRECARIOUS STATUS MIGRANTS IN MONTREAL

Eva Gracia-Turgeon, Director, Foyer du Monde, Montréal

The majority of people who seek refuge at Foyer du Monde in Montreal are asylum seekers. Since 1956, PRAIDA has been working with asylum seekers and people in the process of regularising their status. The program aims to help them navigate the immigration process, guide them through government institutions to apply for social assistance, obtain work permits, enroll their children in school, and find housing.

This program is unique in Canada and provides 1,200 beds in its accommodation centre.

Although it receives no public funding, Foyer du Monde is part of this transitional support system, providing beds for 85 people. The organization mainly supports asylum seekers. However, due to cuts in funding since the COVID-19 pandemic, a lack of investment in social housing, and the worsening housing crisis in Quebec, Foyer du Monde is increasingly having to accommodate non-status migrants, international students, and migrant workers.

Alarmingly, if people do not request asylum within 10-12 days after arrival, they are not eligible for PRAIDA and other forms of support. Yet the new version of the Safe Third Country Agreement requires asylum seekers crossing the land border to wait 14 days before making their asylum claim. This increases the likelihood of homelessness.

This worsening in conditions also has other consequences for families. More specifically, there is an increase in referrals to the Centre de protection de l'enfance et de la jeunesse du Québec (Child and Youth Protective Services) due to the rise in homelessness among migrant families with children.

Unfortunately, Foyer du Monde cannot meet the demand for accommodation, resulting in an increasing number of refused housing applications. To address this dangerous gap in accommodation and services, Foyer du Monde has formed a coalition with other homes and shelters for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants with precarious statuses, called the *Regroupement des organismes en hébergement pour personnes migrantes (ROHMI)*. Together, these groups advocate for more housing for precarious or asylum-seeking homeless migrants, share best practices and lessons learned, and raise awareness among local host communities about the realities faced by migrants.



Photo : Foyer du Monde, Montréal, date unavailable.

HOMELESSNESS AMONG PEOPLE WITH PRECARIOUS MIGRATION STATUSES IN MONTREAL

Wayra Pasquis, Outreach worker, Médecins du Monde Canada, Montréal

As outreach workers, we help migrants with precarious administrative statuses by referring them to essential services. These include: healthcare (at the Médecins du Monde clinic or within the healthcare system where possible), access to food banks, legal assistance, emergency accommodation, and a range of other services depending on their individual needs.

Because of their precarious immigration statuses, these people living in Quebec are excluded from essential basic services such as social assistance, health insurance, and social housing. As a result, they are more likely to experience homelessness and housing insecurity, and to see their safety, physical health, and mental health deteriorate.

Those at risk of homelessness have different profiles, migration histories, and administrative statuses. These include asylum seekers who are unable to access transitional accommodation or who have left the program without finding housing; asylum seekers whose applications have been rejected but remain in Canada; temporary workers or international students who are in debt due to the need for vital health services and can no longer pay their rent; non-status workers who hold several precarious jobs but whose income does not allow them to pay rent for accommodation suited to their families' needs.

In Canada, homelessness and housing insecurity among migrants are rarely discussed and often invisible. Even within the migrant community, the problem is swept under the rug.

Migrant homelessness tends to occur over long periods of time and affects entire families, forcing them to live in overcrowded conditions with poor hygiene and safety. In 2023-2024, 71% of people who underwent a social assessment at the Médecins du Monde clinic reported living in unstable, unsanitary, or overcrowded conditions, often without a legally binding lease, and were therefore considered to be homeless.

We also found that a growing number of migrants are ending up in homeless shelters, where support staff are unfamiliar with what it's like to be a migrant. This means that the complexity of their needs and situations (immigration status, difficulties accessing healthcare or government programs) is poorly understood. With this limited knowledge, they rarely receive the help they need to navigate their precarious situation.



Photo: Médecins du Monde, Montréal, 2024.

THE HOUSING AND SUPPORT SITUATION FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS AND MIGRANTS IN TORONTO

Based on the presentation by Loly Rico, Co-Director, FCJ Refugee Centre

The FCJ Refugee Centre welcomes women, children and families, offering access to a primary health clinic and other services. These are people without immigration status, victims of human trafficking, and other categories of migrants. FCJ also offers assistance to those applying for permanent residence.

Unfortunately, the Centre can only provide temporary accommodation for up to two months, and it can be extremely difficult for migrants to secure longer-term shelter afterward. Although efforts are underway to ease this transition, more needs to be done.

At the moment, the number of asylum seekers in Toronto who end up on the streets and in homeless shelters is increasing. It is difficult to obtain exact figures for homeless migrants. However, the City of Toronto has indicated that the number of asylum seekers in Toronto's shelter system has increased by 500% between 2021 and 2023, rising from 530 people per night in September 2021 to more than 2,800 in May 2023.

Although Toronto aims to develop separate systems specifically for homeless asylum seekers, these efforts remain at the level of political rhetoric.

The housing situation is worsened by various administrative and legal obstacles. For example, people crossing the land border must wait 14 days to lodge their asylum claim after arriving in Canada. This waiting period increases their vulnerability, limits their access to services, and raises their risk of ending up on the streets.

At the same time, it is becoming increasingly challenging to provide assistance that matches the growing need. Ontario's legal aid resources are overwhelmed by the number of applicants. Depending on the claim, the process for making an asylum claim from within Canada now takes two or three months. Claimants remain without services during this waiting period.

Looking for solutions, FCJ Refugee Centre has developed an innovative strategy in the context of the housing crisis. It has created a list of landlords willing to rent to asylum seekers and migrants with precarious status. More ideas are crucial to answer the housing needs of this population.



Photo: "Portrait of homeless man lying on side on cardboard", Ron Lach, Pexels, 2021.



Photo: “Homelessness, housing, and precarious migration: new challenges” panel at 26th Metropolis Canada Conference, Montréal, 2024.

From left to right: Karine Côté-Boucher (Université de Montréal), Loly Rico (FCJ Refugee Centre), Christina Clark-Kazak (University of Ottawa), Eva Gracia-Turgeon (Foyer du Monde), Wayra Pasquis (Médecins du Monde)

CONTRIBUTIONS

Editors: Karine Côté-Boucher (Université de Montréal), Alexandra Lamarche (Université de Montréal), and Chloé Cébron (Médecins du Monde)

Layout and translation: Alexandra Lamarche

With written contributions from Christina Clark-Kazak (University of Ottawa)

Eva Gracia-Turgeon (Foyer du Monde), and Wayra Pasquis (Médecins du Monde)

The [Équipe de recherche sur l'immigration au Québec et ailleurs](#) (ÉRIQA) is an inter-university research team of 11 researchers funded by the Fonds de recherche du Québec (FRQ). ÉRIQA proposes a structured dialogue between global realities and those of Quebec, through comparative analyses and case studies that focus on the policies and experiences of migrants. ÉRIQA member Karine Côté-Boucher was responsible for the scientific coordination of the event and the principal writing of this report.

Present in Canada and in 73 countries around the world, [Médecins du Monde](#) (Doctors of the World) is an independent international voluntary movement working at home and abroad. Through innovative medical programs and evidenced-based advocacy, we empower marginalized people and communities to claim their right to health while fighting for universal access to healthcare. Since 2011, Médecins du Monde has operated a clinic in Montreal dedicated entirely to migrants with precarious status who are not covered by the Régie de l'assurance maladie du Québec (Quebec Health Insurance Board) or the Interim Federal Health Program (IFH), and who have neither private insurance nor the financial means to access health care.

Cover photo: “Homeless in Winter in Victoria BC stock photo”, Dave Mantel, iStock by Getty Images, 2022.

