IN SEARCH OF HOME: HOUSING CRISIS IN OTTAWA AND ITS EFFECTS ON GOVERNMENT-ASSISTED REFUGEES

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A thesis submitted to the University of Ottawa
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the Master of Arts in Anthropology

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September 2025

Abstract

In this thesis, I examine how Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) from different countries, who arrived in Canada under the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP), have resettled in Ottawa amidst an unprecedented housing crisis. Drawing on two bodies of scholarship, political anthropology and Critical Refugee Studies (CRS), and anthropological fieldwork conducted between July 2023 and January 2025, I trace the effects of this crisis on GARs' experience of resettlement.

Drawing upon my participant observation at the Catholic Center for Immigrants (CCI), interviews with GARs, CCI and RAP employees, and community volunteers, I argue that Canada's resettlement process generates new forms of displacement and food precarity by enforcing an unrealistic one-year timeline for independence. The thesis develops this argument across three chapters: the first chapter traces housing and resettlement policies from the perspective of CCI and RAP employees. I examine GARs' experiences from their initial arrival to their move to more permanent housing. By focusing on GARs' agency, I demonstrate how they engage with regulations to find their desired homes. Finally, the last chapter delineates the hidden effects of the housing crisis, including food insecurity.

By following GARs' resettlement process, from their first step at CCI to their permanent housing, I examine policies, welfare programs, benefits, the housing market, and state-led institutions as assemblages. Through this exploration, I document how some GARs manage to find their desired home in Canada, while others experience ongoing displacement and precarity. Additionally, I attempt to shed light on CCI and RAP employees' experiences of working in the midst of a housing crisis and policy ruptures to facilitate GARs' resettlement. Their recommendations and insights are intertwined with GARs' narratives in this thesis's chapters. Finally, I focus on GARs' agency and homemaking strategies among the obstacles that they face from their first day of arrival in Ottawa.

Acknowledgements

First, a heartfelt thank you to my supervisors, Dr. Larisa Kurtovic and Dr. Karine Vanthuyne. Thank you for your support and patience while I wrote this thesis. Gratefully, thank you for consistently encouraging me and expertly helping me navigate the challenging path I experienced as an international student. Thank you for generously dedicating your invaluable time and boundless energy to my transformative thesis journey.

Thank you to my sister and her husband, Mehdi, without whose constant and nurturing emotional support, I could not have tolerated the struggles of my uncharted path. Deeply, thank you for instilling in me the fearless courage to eagerly explore novel experiences in life. Thank you for providing me with the finest opportunities in my enriching educational path.

Thank you to my beloved parents, who taught me that home is not a place but the love that follows you wherever you go.

Warm thanks to Emmy, Nora, and Susan, who tirelessly encouraged me and helped me to write this thesis. Without your generosity and trust, I could not have connected with compassionate individuals who willingly shared their stories with me. You are doing your utmost for those who need your vital support, and it was an honor for me to personally meet you.

Above all, eternal thanks to the inspiring individuals who openly shared their compelling stories with me: Ali, Ahmad, Mahmud, Susan, Anna, Sarah, Arezoo, Sheila, Nina, Fereshteh and her devoted husband, Matin, Mohammad, Melody, and Stephan.

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List of Acronyms/Abbreviations

Government-Assisted Refugees	GARs
Catholic Center for Immigrants	CCI
Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada	IRCC
Resettlement Assistance Program	RAP
Ontario Works welfare	OW
Critical Refugee Studies	CRS
Private Sponsorship Program	PSP
Joint Assistance Sponsorship Program	JASP
English Conversation Circle	ECC
Canadian Center for Housing Rights	CCHR
Goods and Services Tax	GST
Ontario Disability Support Program	ODSP
United Nations	UN
Research Ethics Board	REB
Member of Parliament	MP

Introduction

This thesis is about the difficulties and uncertainties of securing stable housing among Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) in post-pandemic Ottawa. As an international student, I became aware of the challenges of finding a place to live in Canada, the moment my flight landed at Montreal International Airport, long before I could even imagine what lay ahead. After spending a few days in Montreal, I made my way to Ottawa, where temporarily stayed in a room in the house of a pregnant Iranian girl until the lease for a rental in the Alta Vista buildings began. When I moved into this new place, I thought I would be settling in for a long stretch and get to know my new roommates. But after a short time living in those 70-year-old buildings, I realized that my university study room felt more like a home than the living room there. My rapport with my housemates not only failed to bring me any joy but also pushed me to look for a different housing option. So, just three months after arriving in Canada, I packed my half-opened suitcases once again and set out to find a room where I could feel more at ease.

With each house I visited, my hope dwindled further. One option was a room in a two-bedroom house owned by a couple, sharing a bathroom , priced at $750 (these were December 2022 rates). As I descended the back stairs of that house, a woman living downstairs spotted me and asked with concern, “Were they trying to rent out their room?” Her question revealed an important dimension of Ottawa’s housing crisis – landlords subletting rooms without proper authorization, often in violation of their own rental agreements. This woman’s surprised tone suggested the couple upstairs might not have been permitted to rent out space in their unit,

highlighting the hidden, sometimes questionable practices emerging in response to housing scarcity. Another option was a room in the Lees buildings, where about nine people squeezed into a three-bedroom space with just one bathroom. After two weeks of visiting different places every day, I finally found a room in one of the Ottawa Housing Students' buildings. This personal journey sharpened my focus on the idea of home, as a tangible, physical space and a deeply abstract, yet emotional one. In the middle of a housing crisis and post-COVID-19 pandemic inflation, I was not only looking for a room, but starting to ask what was happening for newcomer families who are looking for affordable housing?

My curiosity about the ongoing political debates around Canada's housing crisis and its impact on vulnerable newcomers like GARs led me to undertake the research, which is the basis of this MA thesis. I chose to focus on GARs because, back in Iran, I had ethnographic experience working with Afghan refugees and second- and third-generation migrants, which fueled my desire to initially continue to examine this topic here in Ottawa. This inclination grew stronger just two weeks before my flight to Canada, when I wrote an article for a newspaper about newly arrived Afghan students who had come to Iran after the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. I was eager to speak with Afghan newcomers, whose experiences differed slightly from those of earlier immigrants, to gain deeper insight into this pivotal historical shift in Afghanistan's governance. However, as an Iranian immigrant anthropology student, one of my biggest challenges was undertaking fieldwork and finding people willing to participate in the project. With the help of professors who introduced me to the Catholic Centre for Immigrants (CCI), I was able to connect with a number of GARs in the city of Ottawa. Their situation, how they stood out from other immigrant groups, like refugee claimants, struck me as remarkable, particularly because the government was their primary and initial sponsor for resettlement in Canada. Moreover, these

immigrants received permanent residency the moment they arrived in Canada, right at the airport. In other words, from my perspective, they came to Canada seeking to build a new home with a distinct status (permanent residency), and the Canadian government, by granting them admission, implicitly positioned Canada as a safe and desirable destination for rebuilding their lives. But was this really the case? This very question and curiosity sparked the beginning of my fieldwork in the summer of 2023.

Before starting the fieldwork, I applied for a volunteer position at CCI because I wanted to talk with both GARs and the employees who work with them. After a while, based on my observation of this environment (the relations among the employees, GARs, and the government), my questions turned to a body of anthropological literature: anthropology of policy. I was looking to find out how GARs, particularly Afghan GARs, navigated contradictory policies of Immigration, Refugee, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and their effects on their resettlement process.

The staff at CCI, Maison Sophia, and everywhere else I conducted interviews were all worried about GARs. Their concerns, however, were primarily about navigating the IRCC policies and the constraints of the housing market. Importantly, a lot of resettlement support staff were second-generation immigrants of the same ethnicity as the people they were working with; for example, Afghan employees who could not speak in Farsi fluently, who were the caseworkers of many Afghan GAR families. Or they were themselves former GARs who had received their Canadian Citizenship after some years. They could potentially form strong ties with GARs because they could speak the same language and understand their cultural practices. Newcomers also often felt secure with these members of the staff because of their common backgrounds. However, I

learned through my research that employees' insights into the GARs' resettlement process were sometimes not aligned with GARs' own perspectives and the employees were aware of this.

Research Questions and Argument

This thesis examines the impact of Canada's neoliberal resettlement policies on GARs amidst Ottawa's ongoing housing crisis. Three research questions guide this inquiry: first, how do neoliberal resettlement policies, which prioritize rapid self-sufficiency, affect refugee newcomers amidst an ongoing housing crisis? Second, how do GARs exercise agency through housing strategies and social networks, such as family ties, to construct homes despite institutional constraints? And third, how does the housing crisis drive food insecurity among GARs, and how do foodbanks, as sites of contested deservingness, reflect systemic policy failures?

The central argument is that Canada's resettlement system, driven by neoliberal logic, generates housing and food precarity by enforcing an unrealistic one-year timeline for independence. While GARs creatively find ways to navigate this situation, through their own agency and informal networks, these challenges still highlight the need for policy reforms that prioritize long-term stability.

Anthropology of Policy: Policies as Dynamic Assemblages

This thesis traces anthropology of policy literature, focusing on anthropological approach that redefines policies as dynamic, contested social practices rather than static governance tools (Shore and Wright 1997; Shore, Wright, and Però 2011). I begin with this body of literature because it provides a helpful approach for examining how Canada's resettlement policies,

particularly the RAP, interact with Ottawa's housing crisis to affect GARs' access to affordable housing. Unlike traditional policy studies that treat policies as fixed directives, anthropological approaches view them as cultural texts and classificatory devices embedded in power dynamics, actively shaping social realities while being negotiated by actors like CCI employees and GARs (Shore and Wright 1997, 7–11). In Chapter One, I employ the concept of "policy assemblage" to analyze how resettlement policies, including the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) and the Housing Top-Up benefit, converge with housing regulations and welfare systems like Ontario Works (OW) to form a fluid, heterogeneous network (Shore, Wright, and Però 2011). Unlike the broader anthropology of policy literature that spans the thesis, policy assemblage is a specific tool I use exclusively in this chapter to dissect the interactions and emergent effects of these policies. Drawing on Savage's (2020) emphasis on "relations of exteriority and emergence," I demonstrate how these policies, though designed to support GARs, often misalign, e.g., the Housing Top-Up facilitates initial housing but fails to ensure stability once RAP ends after one year, leaving GARs vulnerable to displacement. This concept illuminates the unintended consequences of policy interactions, setting the stage for understanding their broader impacts.

A central theme threading through all chapters is the neoliberal logic that underpins Canada's resettlement system, a logic I trace back to the anthropology of policy literature (Ong 2003; Besteman 2016). This logic in resettlement policies, emphasizing individual responsibility and minimal state intervention, manifests in the RAP's rigid one-year timeline, which assumes GARs can achieve self-sufficiency despite structural barriers like lack of affordable housing in the Ottawa housing market. In Chapter One, this neoliberal imperative drives the policy assemblage concept, arguing how it affects GARs' access to affordable housing from the employees' perspectives.

In Chapter Two, the concept of "arrival infrastructure" (Meeus et al. 2019) illuminates how GARs leverage family networks and community ties to secure housing, resisting neoliberal expectations of isolated self-reliance. Their ability to take action pushes back against the usual idea of "refugees paradigm" (Malkki 1995), presenting GARs as people who actively shape their resettlement process.

In Chapter Three, the question of who 'deserves' help connects to neoliberal logic, influencing how people see some GARs who are trying to secure their long-term stability through welfare programs. Willen and Cook (2022) suggest that deservingness acts as a way to judge who should get support, often depending on whether someone quickly becomes productive and self-reliant or shows gratitude. In my research, this manifests in some interactions, where GARs must align with these expectations or risk being deemed "undeserving." The anthropology of policy exposes how such perceptions, rooted in neoliberalism, permeate resettlement processes, constraining GARs' agency while highlighting their creative navigation of these moral hierarchies.

Ethnography Fieldwork: Methods and Reflections

I joined CCI in the summer of 2023, bringing five years of volunteering experience from Iran. Before that, I spoke with and got to know Nora, an Afghan employee at CCI, who helped me apply for a volunteer position. She shared her life story, which began in Afghanistan, where she was born. She recounted her family's immigration to Iran, their deportation back to Afghanistan after 17 years, and her educational immigration to the U.S.A. However, after two years, her visa expired, and she could not return to Afghanistan due to the new government. Consequently, she came to Ottawa and applied for refugee claimant status. Nora ultimately became one of my key

interlocutors at CCI, and her story sparked my initial understanding of refugees' lived experiences in Ottawa.

After receiving Research Ethics Board (REB) approval, I began distributing my research posters with Nora and other employees. After a while, Nora introduced me to another remarkable employee, Emmy. She was about to start an English Conversation Circle (ECC) where GARs and other immigrants could join weekly to practice English. The first session she held was at the Days Inn Hotel, located on Rideau Street. Emmy, Jean (the session's facilitator), and I sat there without any interested students. At the second session, Nina joined us, and I later interviewed her. Subsequently, we had to change the circle's location, and we moved to Maison Sophia, one of the temporary accommodations for GARs. The circle attracted the attention of people living there, and by the time I left, more than six people were participating regularly.

At Maison Sophia, I met members of the RAP team, who were also responsible for GARs' resettlement, focusing on finding the most suitable housing for them within 45 days. Their offices were located in the basement and on the first floor, where our English Conversation Circle (ECC) was held. In this old building, some people stayed for more than four months, while others were guests for just two weeks. Consequently, I sometimes became acquainted with people for only two weeks, and other times for more than two months. I participated in these weekly meetings for six months, sometimes as an observer and sometimes as a mediator between students who spoke Persian and Emmy. To familiarize these newcomer students with Ottawa and its environment, we occasionally held our sessions outside the Maison. I also participated in these events as an organizer volunteer.

This participation helped me understand the relationships between those employees who held these events and the GARs. As an Iranian immigrant researcher, my shared cultural and

linguistic background with Afghan GARs facilitated trust and access, yet navigating ethical tensions as both insider and outsider shaped my ethnographic approach. While they were often friendly with me as an Iranian volunteer, in some situations, GARs behaved contrary to the employees' expectations. These situations often stemmed from language barriers, which were usually resolved by me or other volunteers who spoke the GARs' languages. During my attempts to connect with GARs at events outside the Maison, I often wondered about the contradiction in our role as immigrant volunteers and Canadian employees - introducing people to places in Ottawa when they were merely passing through temporary housing on their way to permanent resettlement.

During my one year and four months of fieldwork, I interviewed 14 people: five of them were young (25-35) Afghan GARs, one was a Nigerian refugee through the Private Sponsorship Program (PSP), six were employees working at CCI and the RAP team, one worked at a community center in Ottawa, and the last one was a former foodbank volunteer. Although I participated regularly in the circle, it was challenging to find people interested in my research. Susan, a RAP team member whom I also interviewed, organized meetings with GARs to introduce me to them. Moreover, I participated in CCI meetings where GARs and other newcomers were present, such as a meeting with a Member of Parliament and a Volunteer's Day party. Following these events, I wrote daily notes that later helped me organize this thesis.

When it came to the interviews, I designed two sets of questions: one for employees and another for GARs. I asked employees questions such as "What are the main reasons for the housing crisis in Ottawa from your point of view?" or "If you yourself were able to decide how to solve the housing crisis among newcomers as a policy maker, what would you do?" By asking these questions, I aimed to explore the challenges that these employees faced every day. Additionally, I

sought to understand their ways of addressing policy implementation gaps, as well as their negotiations with both IRCC officials and GARs. Unfortunately, I was not able to participate in the employees' meetings with the officials, but they discussed these meetings in their interviews. I completed these interviews in-person in cafes, Maison of Sophia, and the Days Inn hotel located on Rideau Street.

I also drafted questions in Persian and English for GARs, because most of my interlocutors were Afghans who spoke Persian. I asked them questions like "How is your living situation in Ottawa right now?" or "If you were able to create a proper home in Canada, where and how would it be?" Through these questions, I wanted to understand two key elements in their resettlement journey: home (*khaneh*) and their agency (Eradeh). I conducted these interviews both online and in-person in GARs' houses, cafes, and the Days Inn hotel.

Finally, my last two interviews, one online and one in-person, were with people whom I contacted outside of CCI. In addition to the questions that I similarly asked of the employees, I asked these individuals about GARs' access to food banks and their experiences working with them. Their participation helped me understand different layers of GAR's challenges.

All of these interviews lasted less than 60 minutes, typically between 20-45 minutes. I did not take notes during the interviews because I wanted to make the participants feel comfortable. After completing the consent form, I asked them if I could record their voices, and then I turned on my phone recorder. After each interview, I explained that I would delete these recordings from my phone and that my supervisors and I would be the only people with access to them. After transferring these audio files to my personal laptop, I deleted them from my phone. Finally, after each interview, I transcribed all of them on the same day with the details that I recalled. Before starting the analysis, I translated the Persian transcripts into English. Next, I highlighted topics that

were discussed more than once, either by the participants, such as the Housing Top-Up benefit, or topics I mentioned in my fieldwork notes. After reading these topics and all the answers many times, and reviewing anthropological literature, I developed the first draft plan for each chapter. With my supervisors' guidance, I extracted key concepts aligned with the topics and participants' answers. In order to maintain confidentiality, I used pseudonyms for my interlocutors and participants.

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis unfolds across three chapters, each illuminating a dimension of GARs' resettlement experiences in Ottawa's housing crisis. Chapter one, "Blueprints and Broken Promises: The Architecture of Policy in Practice", employs the concept of policy assemblage to analyze how neoliberal resettlement policies, such as the RAP and the Housing Top-Up benefit, interact with Ottawa's housing market to produce new forms of precarity. This chapter draws on interviews with CCI employees, who share their own frustrations and describe GARs' struggles, to reveal key contradictions of resettlement policies. Chapter two, "Making Home: Housing Strategies and Resistance Among Government-Assisted Refugees in Ottawa," traces GARs' housing trajectories from temporary accommodations to permanent homes, using the concept of arrival infrastructure to showcase their agency through family networks and strategic housing searches, despite neoliberal pressures for rapid self-sufficiency. Chapter three, Hunger's Hidden Rooms: Food Precarity and the Unseen Cracks of Resettlement" explores how housing insecurity drives food precarity, positioning food banks as contested spaces where notions of deservingness govern aid distribution, with ethnographic insights from volunteers and GARs

highlighting systemic policy failures. Together, these chapters argue that Canada's resettlement system, driven by neoliberal logic, undermines GARs' stability, yet their resilience and agency demand policy reforms for sustainable resettlement. Through the voices of GARs like Arezoo and CCI employees like Anna, these chapters weave ethnographic narratives that illuminate the human cost of policy contradictions and GARs' creative strategies of resilience.

Chapter One: Blueprints and Broken Promises: The Architecture of Policy in Practice

It was a crisp April morning in 2024 when I sat down with Anna in a café near Bank and Argyle streets in Ottawa. Having transitioned from working at Maison Sophia reception house to the CCI headquarters, she had witnessed firsthand how housing challenges for GARs had evolved from difficult to nearly impossible to manage. As she settled into discussing these issues, her frustration with the current system was immediately apparent:

> "It's an ongoing crisis, and it's getting worse with time. So…we've actually discussed our concerns about GAR housing with IRCC. Because of the rising prices, they've offered a $500 top-up, but that's about it, and not everyone is eligible. There are requirements, and some might only get $300 or $260. But it's still inadequate…also, this new benefit does not solve everything; it works like a palliative. Take the temporary housing where GARs stay for a limited time, for instance. It's often substandard, and many clients don't even want to live there temporarily… I don't think we need more houses right now; we need more affordable houses. Because GARs' conditions get worse after their first year. When immigration stops funding, they move to Ontario Works, the welfare program, which provides even less. Sometimes our clients become homeless after just one year." [Interview with Anna, 2024]

The café bustled around us, patrons going about their day, unaware of the intricate policy maze that Anna navigated daily as she worked to help newly arrived refugees settle. As I watched her gather her things to leave to go back to her work, I started to wonder: How is it possible that policies designed to support refugee resettlement could fail so spectacularly in practice? Why would an IRCC's Housing Top-Up benefit, intended to secure housing for GARs amidst rising prices, ultimately contribute to their housing instability after only one year? How do these policies, despite originating from a single federal agency, produce such contradictory outcomes when they intersect with provincial welfare programs?

In order to answer these questions, I followed the GARs resettlement path in Ottawa from the first to the last steps. I went to the CCI in Ottawa, the only center working to support and

resettle GARs in this city. CCI and RAP employees welcome GARs at the airport and accompany them to the temporary housing locations. These locations are either the Days Inn hotels or Maison Sophia, the reception house located on 204 Boteler, downtown Ottawa. After this, RAP and CCI resettlement employees are responsible for finding suitable housing for GARs in a limited time; a maximum of 45 days. Thanks to my interlocutors who agreed to introduce me to their clients, I noticed that GARs can also choose to either start searching for their permanent housing by themselves or have the RAP team do it for them. Despite being offered such support, GARs face an uphill battle to secure housing because, in most cases, the living expenses surpass their assistance payments (Rose 2019, Bragg & Hiebert 2022) , especially for singles. Among all the living expenses, it is rent that devours the most significant amount of the payment sum. When I met the RAP team and the CCI employees, they were attempting to create a balance between the rent price and other expenses. But since the priority, according to the resettlement process, is to leave temporary housing as soon as possible, the RAP team inevitably dedicates the major portion of their income to the rent.

In this chapter, I will follow these various policies through different moments of my fieldwork, with a focus on the CCI employees' experiences, as they help GARs navigate specific challenges. I will explore policies which affect GARs' access to affordable housing and their long-term stability, in order to illuminate how some of the challenges are byproducts of contradictory elements of the resettlement process. In other words, because GARs' difficulties are not limited to finding housing, but also making sure they can keep it, I am going to examine the impacts of policies on both of those goals.

I will first explore resettlement policies in relation to the body of literature on anthropology of policy, developing policy assemblage as the key concept through which I analyze how multiple

actors, policies, and market forces intersect in GARs' resettlement experiences. Then, I will examine the complex interactions between refugee resettlement policies and housing regulations, demonstrating how their overlaps, contradictions, and unintended consequences exemplify the concept of policy assemblage – particularly its emphasis on heterogeneous relationships and emergent effects. Finally, I will examine the main barriers to GARs' access to affordable housing and how the new benefits described by Anna actually prevent GARs from having long-term stability in Ottawa.

Anthropological Insights on Refugee Resettlement Policy

Anthropologists have contributed significantly to the study of refugee resettlement. Malkki's (1992) pioneering ethnographic research among Hutu refugees in Tanzania stands as one of the earliest anthropological examinations of methodological nationalism in refugee studies. Her comparative analysis of national identity conceptualization between refugees in Kigoma Township and those in camps opened important theoretical pathways in refugee studies. However, much subsequent anthropological research has focused primarily on refugee camps and camp politics (see, for example, Dunn 2017, Fassin 2012, Ticktin 2011, Agier 2011). These studies critically examine humanitarian practices that tend to reduce refugees to numbers rather than recognizing their full humanity – a hegemonizing process that often results in prolonged camp stays, with "less than 1 percent [being] resettled globally each year" (Sackett et al. 2023, 21). While anthropologists have extensively documented the contradictions between humanitarian policies and refugees' lived experiences in host countries (see, for example, Besteman 2016, Ong 2003, Allen 2014, Ticktin 2011, Sackett and Lareau 2023), there remains limited anthropological engagement with how housing policies specifically affect refugee resettlement. Besteman's (2016) critical analysis of

Somali Bantu resettlement in the United States provides valuable insights for addressing this gap. She argues that refugee resettlement practices often reduce humanitarianism to merely ensuring physical safety, neglecting broader support for refugees to build sustainable futures (136). Furthermore, she demonstrates how resettlement policies, despite being framed as exceptional acts of inclusion, can paradoxically deepen marginalization, particularly in economically challenged communities (136).

Sackett and Lareau (2023) discovered that "when Congolese refugees arrived in the United States, they immediately recognized that the assistance they would receive there was meager, compared to other countries like Canada" (154). However, this discrepancy in resettlement assistance between the two countries does not mean that Canada takes a fundamentally different approach from the one that Besteman (2016) critiques. In fact, Canadian resettlement policy similarly emphasizes that GARs' "self-sufficiency" (104) is typically expected after one year of assistance. While U.S. resettlement provided Somali Bantu refugees with permanent low-income housing in Lewistown – not free but supported through vouchers (154) – GARs in Ottawa are not provided with immediate permanent housing accommodation upon arrival. In fact, while Canada's refugee resettlement system stands out for granting immediate permanent residency to GARs, its emphasis on rapid self-sufficiency mirrors U.S. approaches. The limited duration of economic support often leads to GARs' marginalization, a contradiction now intensified by the housing crisis and post-pandemic inflation.

Building on this comparison, Besteman's analysis of Somali refugee resettlement in the U.S. illuminates how the emphasis on rapid economic independence can lead to impoverishment. Though working within a different administrative framework than Canada's resettlement program, her study reveals a crucial "yawning gap" between promised opportunities and actual barriers to

accessing them, leaving refugees questioning their decision to resettle when faced with persistent poverty (104-108).

Other anthropologists documenting refugee resettlements in the US have noticed similar patterns. For example, Aihwa Ong (2009) shows how professionals and bureaucrats employ social technologies to instill norms of self-reliance and autonomy in refugees, with the goal of transforming them into 'good citizen-subjects.' Her analysis of the experiences of Cambodian refugees in San Francisco reveals how institutional practices aimed at 'empowering' refugees actually serve to discipline them according to neoliberal ideals of independence and economic productivity. Crucially, she demonstrates that these disciplinary practices operate through multiple, overlapping institutional sites, what she terms "concrete assemblages," including refugee camps, welfare offices, nonprofits, courthouses, and religious organizations. This framework is particularly valuable for analyzing Canadian resettlement policies because it illuminates how different institutions and programs – from RAP to Ontario Works to CCI – work together to promote refugee "self-sufficiency," even as their specific practices and requirements sometimes contradict each other. Just as Ong found that Cambodian refugees navigated a complex web of institutional pressures and expectations, GARs in Ottawa must negotiate multiple overlapping systems that push them toward rapid economic independence, regardless of their actual circumstances or needs.

Following Ong (2003) and Besteman's (2016) analysis of immigration policies as emphasizing refugee "self-reliance" and "self-sufficiency" following a neoliberal logic, this chapter analyzes if and how this logic plays out within the Canadian resettlement process. But before I do this, I need to say more about how I am approaching policy as an anthropological object. In the body of work on anthropology of policy, as articulated by Shore et al. (2011), policies

are not merely neutral tools for governance but complex sociocultural phenomena that shape and are shaped by their operational contexts. Shore and his coauthors argue that policies are "inherently and unequivocally anthropological phenomena" that can be read as cultural texts, as classificatory devices with various meanings, as narratives that justify or condemn the present, or as rhetorical devices and discursive formations that empower some while silencing others (8-9). In this sense, policies are neither passive nor static; rather, they are "mutable" (Clarke 2015). These features have led anthropologists to conceptualize policy as a "political process involving many actors, all proposing how people should relate to each other, conduct themselves and be governed" (Shore et al. 2011, 14). Drawing on these insights from the anthropology of policy, I observed that while policies governing access to affordable housing and GARs resettlement policies operate largely independently, they intersect in ways that profoundly affect refugees' lives. The housing crisis shapes how IRCC resettlement practices play out on the ground, as RAP workers and CCI employees struggle to secure housing for newly arrived GARs within increasingly constrained market conditions. Meanwhile, IRCC's resettlement policies, particularly their emphasis on rapid self-sufficiency, affect how GARs can navigate Ottawa's challenging housing market.

To analyze these complex interactions, I employ the concept of "policy assemblage," which reveals how seemingly separate policies come together to create unexpected effects and new social realities, even when they are not explicitly coordinated (Shore et al. 2011, 20). Anthropologically, an assemblage refers to an amalgamation that brings together heterogeneous elements for strategic purposes (Scott 2021, 56). These elements cannot be reduced to a single logic; instead, they denote contingency, instability, partiality, and situational context (Ong and Collier 2005, 12). While this definition of policy assemblage may seem ambiguous, Savage (2020) identifies "three core foundations of policy assemblages in existing literature: a) relations of exteriority and emergence;

b) heterogeneity, relationality, and flux; and c) attention to power, politics, and agency" (321). Building on this understanding, Greenhalgh (2008) argues that policy assemblage is "a collection of heterogeneous, often incommensurate elements that come together for a period of time, sometimes quite fleeting, to produce a policy construct" (13). Drawing on Latour's (2005) concept of "assemblage," she articulates that "to be in the assemblage, items must be connected to other elements, and they must be active: they must do things, affect other actors, produce effects" (13). Therefore, "approaching policies as assemblages implies treating them not as solid or stable entities but as temporary concatenations of heterogeneous entities, always on the verge of becoming something completely different" (Ureta 2015, 12).

The Canadian resettlement policies constitute a policy assemblage for several reasons. First, rather than being simply top-down directives, these policies are actively interpreted and implemented by CCI and RAP employees, who must constantly negotiate between policy requirements and refugees' lived realities. Second, these policies are in a relationship with each other and with other elements such as housing policies and Ontario welfare policy. These relationships are heterogeneous and produce contradictory effects, as I will examine later in this chapter. Third, they strategically aim to promote GARs' self-sufficiency. Fourth, they create specific discourses that affect GARs' experiences in accessing affordable housing in Ottawa. Finally, their interconnections produce emergences that, in this context, manifest as GARs losing their houses and experiencing further displacement. Building on these five key aspects of policy assemblage – implementation through agents, policy relationships, heterogeneity, strategic aims, and emergent effects – the following sections examine how each foundation manifests in CCI and RAP in GARs resettlement. Through this analytical lens, I reveal how policies intended to support GARs can paradoxically contribute to their precarity, particularly as the heterogeneous nature of

these policies leads CCI and RAP employees to question the ultimate impact of their work. The concept of policy assemblage will thus enable me to critically trace – in this chapter and the following ones – how CCI employees mediate these complex policy relationships as they help GARs search for and maintain housing.

Finally, some of the mentioned policies are also reflected in recent Canadian housing literature, which highlights affordability challenges, service provider constraints, and cultural/family-size factors in refugee housing experiences (Murdie 2008; Bhattacharyya et al. 2020; Rose 2019; Bragg & Hiebert 2022; Bachour 2024). My fieldwork in Ottawa confirms these findings while adding new ethnographic depth.

Patchwork policies

One day during my fieldwork, CCI posted an announcement on their online platform about a meeting with Ottawa's downtown Member of Parliament (MP). I decided to attend, primarily to ask about the effects of the ongoing housing crisis on recently arrived refugees. The meeting was held in a small conference room at CCI's main building on Argyle Street. The MP entered the room, shaking hands with each person and asking for their names, making a visible effort to connect with attendees. However, as questions began, he repeatedly reminded everyone: "We do not have magic powers. We are like you, here because of you." When I raised my hand to ask about the government's plans for addressing the housing crisis, he reframed my question. While acknowledging the worsening situation, he pointed to the construction of two new buildings downtown, concluding that they were "doing their best" to build more housing for new immigrants. I could not grasp how constructing luxury downtown buildings would address the

housing crisis, particularly for GARs who mostly cannot afford such accommodation. While the MP framed the crisis as primarily a supply problem, the real issue was not simply a shortage of housing units, but rather their affordability and accessibility. Most people in the room had housing but struggled to afford other necessities like food, having sacrificed all other expenses to pay rent. How would two new luxury apartments solve this situation? The MP's response seemed to indicate the government's reluctance to intervene in the housing market's logic.

In the above vignette, I aim to provide insight into the government's reaction to GARs' lack of access to affordable housing and to the housing crisis in general. The unintelligibility of this reaction mirrors the incoherence of other measures implemented by IRCC and the federal government in response to the ongoing GARs-related housing problems. To further illustrate this claim, I will first detail how GARs are supported in their resettlement process, given that the pivotal distinction between them and other immigrants is that the Canadian government is their sponsor and commits to securing their resettlement process. I will then examine the latest housing policies to argue how an assemblage of neoliberal policies not only fails to halt the housing crisis but potentially places immigrants, including GARs, at risk of further displacement.

By using policy assemblage as a key concept, my goal is to point to the neoliberal character of the recently enacted policies. However, this does not mean that IRCC resettlement policies are purely calculative or even logically consistent. Instead, I will demonstrate how the very incoherence and heterogeneity of these policies have created challenges that CCI employees can no longer resolve. My analysis draws primarily on reports from the Canadian Center for Housing Rights (CCHR), a non-profit organization advocating for housing rights.

Canadian refugee resettlement, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, is inextricably rooted in neoliberal logic, which emphasizes achieving GARs' self-sufficiency within only one year. In

this process, GARs must be resettled as quickly as possible, with government support limited primarily to financial assistance. Rather than providing direct housing accommodation, the government offers monthly payments and expects the RAP team to facilitate rapid settlement. Under this expedited process, if GARs refuse to select their permanent housing from among the three options presented by the RAP team, the team sends an acknowledgment letter to the IRCC office. The IRCC then negotiates with GARs, emphasizing the necessity of making an immediate housing choice. After the housing selection, CCI employees, who maintain connections with private donors and non-governmental organizations, arrange basic furniture for GARs. This assistance is necessary because their monthly payments are insufficient to cover such basic equipment. While GARs can work part-time during their first year, their earnings are capped at $500 monthly; exceeding this amount results in reduced monthly payments. These restrictions lift after the first year. When the RAP ends after one year, GARs are expected to achieve independence. This means securing full-time employment to cover their expenses. In Ottawa, the gap between policy intentions and GARs' resettlement realities becomes most evident after this period, when the significant reduction in support often undermines their stability and self-sufficiency. As Anna explained at the beginning of this chapter, in response to the housing crisis, the IRCC recently introduced the Housing Top-Up benefit, providing up to $500 additional monthly support. While this helps GAR families secure housing initially, many struggle to maintain their housing after RAP ends, as even full-time employment often fails to cover all expenses. For special cases where GAR family members cannot work, they transition from RAP to the Ontario Works (OW) welfare program. This transition significantly reduces their financial assistance (Bachour 2023, 2509): the Housing Top-Up discontinues, immediately reducing their income by $220 monthly.

Furthermore, RAP's individualized child support of approximately $1,135 per month per child is replaced by a much smaller, dependent supplement in the parent's OW payment. However, this welfare program also ends after one year, except in special cases such as GARs who cannot work due to disabilities. While the goal of these policies is to reduce GARs' dependence on welfare and government funding, none of them truly address the problem of unaffordable housing and rising costs of living, which make it difficult for newly arrived refugees to attain long-term financial stability, even when they are able to secure full-time work. The incoherence between policies and goals becomes even more apparent when we look at how the Canadian government has tried to address the housing crisis itself, which has put a strain on many social groups, including GARs. As Savage (2020) argues, such policies are often constituted through "relations of exteriority and emergence," producing both intended and unintended effects for various immigrant groups, including GARs.

For example, the federal Government of Canada has recently introduced several housing policies aimed at regulating property ownership and rental construction, including restrictions on non-Canadian property purchases and tax incentives for building rental housing (Government of Canada 2023). Some of the more specific policies aimed at reducing the housing shortage were the vacant property tax and, notably, the reduction of the number of available visas for international students, who have recently been blamed for housing shortages. More recently, the government also introduced the Blueprint for a Renters' Bill of Rights, which outlines four key principles aimed at improving the rental housing system: ensuring safe and affordable housing, fostering fairness and transparency, addressing inequity and discrimination, and safeguarding the rental system (Government of Canada 2024). This blueprint calls for provincial and territorial governments to take measures to advance renters' rights and report on their progress annually.

In taking a closer look at the above-described policy changes, all of them have only a marginal connection to the barriers that GARs face on the road to permanent resettlement. Many of the above-mentioned policies concern the purchase of real estate property, which is typically not relevant for GARs, who tend to rent their accommodations in their first years after arrival. Forcing owners of "investment" properties to rent their underused housing also does not guarantee that this privately held housing will be affordable for newcomers. What is more, international students, who are mostly young and single, do not share the same housing needs as GARs, who tend to be a part of large families.

GARs are also in a unique position in relation to other refugees, including those arriving through Private Sponsorship. They, like GARs, receive their Permanent Residency documents at the airport, but their sponsors are often family members or community groups. Compared to GARs, these immigrants typically receive stronger financial support (from private and family sources), even though the Canadian government does not commit to providing specific resettlement conditions for them. By contrast, as their chief and only sponsor, the federal government does little to strengthen GARs' access to affordable housing, despite receiving "23,305 GARs in 2023" (Government of Canada) and planning to accept "15,250 GARs each year from 2025 to 2027" (Canadavisa 2024). This said, the root of this problem may not even lie with Canadian immigration policy, but with general attitudes towards subsidized and affordable housing.

The CCHR has criticized the ensemble of these policies, particularly the GST Rental Rebate initiative, arguing that the government's housing strategy disproportionately favors private market development over affordable housing initiatives (CCHR 2024). They note that while $66.3 billion is allocated to developer incentives, tax breaks, and construction deregulation, only $27.1 billion is directed toward affordable housing and homelessness programs.

Regarding the Renters' Bill of Rights, CCHR reports that while it provides an important foundation for renter protections, it lacks enforcement mechanisms for meaningful impact. As Storeys (2024) notes, the implementation process remains unclear, and the federal government has not specified a timeline for its formal introduction (Chai 2024). CCHR's policy manager argues that the blueprint's effectiveness is limited by its lack of federal enforcement power and provincial requirements.

In this context, the recent government policies are incapable of halting the housing crisis and securing GARs' access to affordable housing. These patchwork policies aiming to solve Canada's housing problem not only fail to reach their target but also potentially produce other detrimental effects. The Housing Top-Up benefit, while enabling GARs to secure housing initially, sets them up for instability because it is temporary and misaligned with the lower financial support provided by OW. Once RAP ends after one year, GARs transition to OW, which offers significantly less financial assistance – often reducing their income by at least $220 monthly due to the discontinuation of the Housing Top-Up and providing only a minimal dependent supplement for children compared to RAP's $1,135 per child. This sharp reduction in support makes it difficult for GARs to maintain the housing they secured with the higher RAP payments, especially in Ottawa's rising rental market, where affordable options are scarce. Consequently, the benefit's focus on rapid resettlement within a one-year timeline overlooks the structural barriers, such as limited employment opportunities and high housing costs, that prevent GARs from achieving long-term financial stability, often leading to housing loss or reliance on inadequate welfare support.

As my analysis of the policies and CCHR's critique of their implementation illustrate, government responses to the housing crisis and their impacts on newcomers such as GARs are not well organized; rather, they have a patchwork quality. De Landa (2006) argues that in assemblage

theory, “unlike organic totalities, the parts of an assemblage do not form a seamless whole” (4). In the context of refugee resettlement, this means that housing policies and resettlement policies operate according to different logics and timelines, yet intersect in ways that affect GARs’ lives. For instance, while IRCC’s Housing Top-Up benefit aims to help GARs secure housing, its interaction with welfare policies and market conditions often produces outcomes that undermine long-term stability. These unexpected consequences emerge from the way different policies come together in practice, creating what Savage (2020, 323) calls new “interactions” that affect GARs’ resettlement experiences.

Putting these seemingly disparate policies together, for example, the recent IRCC announcement regarding international students and the two-year ban on non-Canadians purchasing residential property, we are able to discern a shift in public and political discourse that links the housing crisis and immigration together. These new policies reinforce the popular claims that “immigration is making Canada’s housing more expensive” (Canadian Press 2024) and that immigrants are responsible for the housing crisis. It follows that the government’s priority should be reducing the number of immigrants to halt the housing crisis. These policies are part of a more general discourse that is about purported remedies for these problems, but that could, in actuality, deepen anti-immigrant sentiment. Meanwhile, Ottawa’s housing market has become more racialized, and GARs face many barriers in their first days of arrival when trying to find proper housing.

Here is how one CCI employee explained what is going on in the local housing market:

> “We have experienced this multiple times; when we call [the landlords] to rent [a place] for a client, they ask us, “Where is the client from? Are they Afghan? Are they Syrian? Are they Ukrainian?” Then they tell us, “Oh, we actually don’t rent to Syrians and Afghans anymore”. It’s very interesting. There were waves when

> landlords were very accepting before, but now that acceptance is decreasing. They don't like to rent [their places] to newcomers." [Interview with Anna 2024]

Note that Anna describes new types of housing discrimination among landlords, which specifically target Muslim and Middle Eastern newcomers (and seemingly exclude Ukrainians). Although it is difficult to know whether it is racism, Islamophobia, cultural stereotypes and/or past conflicts with tenants that lead to these refusals, the overall climate, Anna seems to be suggesting, is a lot less welcoming, especially as the housing market becomes a lot tighter and more difficult to access. The anti-immigrant sentiment in the housing market affects GARs in particular, forcing them, who typically cannot meet Ottawa's rental requirements, such as having a co-signer or providing credit history. In other words, landlords have no way of knowing whether tenants will be able to pay rent for a year. In this situation, GARs' access to affordable housing has become more challenging than in previous periods. For example, in 2016, when Syrian GARs arrived in Ottawa, CCI employees successfully negotiated with local landlords to secure housing on Donald Street (Ottawa Citizen Miller 2016). According to my interlocutors, they arranged two renovated apartments that met GARs' needs at affordable prices. Car rental companies even provided free services to facilitate GARs' moves from temporary to permanent housing. Anna suggested that the time of such enthusiastic welcome has largely passed.

This dramatic shift in reception likely stems from a combination of economic pressures and social-political changes. The post-pandemic period has seen unprecedented increases in housing costs, with landlords facing higher mortgage rates and maintenance expenses. This economic strain appears to have made property owners more risk-averse and less inclined toward charitable considerations. When resources become scarce and competition for housing intensifies, the willingness to accommodate newcomers who lack traditional rental credentials seems to

diminish. Simultaneously, Canada has experienced a rise in public discourse questioning immigration levels and their impact on housing availability. This rhetoric, which sometimes frames newcomers as contributing to housing scarcity, may be influencing landlords' attitudes and decisions. While it is difficult to definitively separate economic motivations from growing xenophobic sentiments, the intersection of these factors has created a markedly less welcoming environment for GARs seeking housing.

Through the concept of policy assemblage, I conclude that different policies, while incoherent and heterogeneous, come together to create unexpected and often detrimental outcomes in the current housing crisis. The Canadian resettlement model reveals a fundamental contradiction: it attempts to offload costs and risks onto individuals – whether private sponsors or refugees themselves – precisely when skyrocketing housing costs make this approach increasingly untenable. In the context where neither housing policies nor resettlement policies effectively address the housing crisis or provide secure long-term stability for GARs, these policy interactions produce compounding challenges. Consider IRCC's approach: it demands rapid GAR self-sufficiency while providing inadequate long-term budgets and resources to achieve this goal. This governing logic persists despite clear evidence of its failure, as seen in both the experiences of CCI employees and their clients.

The root of this crisis extends beyond simple policy contradictions to a more fundamental problem: the severe lack of affordable and social housing investment. The MP's response tonew luxury buildings exemplifies how the government's market-oriented approach fails to address the actual needs of vulnerable populations like GARs. Rather than developing robust social housing programs that would provide stable, affordable options for newcomers, current policies leave GARs dependent on an increasingly competitive and sometimes discriminatory private rental

market. This reliance on market solutions, combined with diminishing support timelines and rising housing costs, makes sustainable resettlement an increasingly distant goal for many GARs.

From Promise to Precarity

At the CCI headquarters, I encountered Hana, a Syrian refugee I had met during the English conversation circles at Maison Sophia. Her family had successfully resettled from temporary housing to a home in Barrhaven last summer, but now, a year later, she was back at CCI in crisis.

Sarah, my interlocutor at CCI, explained the situation: Hana planned to leave school to help pay her family's rent since their resettlement assistance was ending and her father could not secure full-time employment. The family faced imminent housing loss. Sarah was trying to contact private donors to help buy a used car so the father could work for Uber. Frustrated by the situation, Sarah said, "That's why I don't agree with Housing Top-Up." This was my first chance to see firsthand the consequences of the policies Anna also critiques at the beginning of this chapter. After one year, when the benefit ends, families must pay all living expenses themselves. This means they need full-time work. But what happens if they cannot secure employment? According to the RAP team, rental prices in Ottawa rise every six months. When families cannot afford their current rent, they won't even be able to rent new places comparable to their current homes. How is it possible that there is no guarantee for GARs to keep their housing after one year? Why do they end up moving from a promising future to financially struggle just to meet their basic needs?

The Housing Top-Up benefit was enacted in December 2022 by IRCC in response to concerns about GARs' resettlement challenges. CCI employees had raised concerns during meetings with IRCC officials about GARs staying in temporary accommodation longer than the expected 45-day period, primarily due to difficulties securing affordable permanent housing. However, lack of adequate budget is only one of the reasons that they usually stay longer. As Nora, one of my first interlocutors at CCI, explains, there are other barriers as well:

> "The reason is that your credit history must be checked by the landlords to rent you a house. But when refugees (GARs) enter Canada, they do not have a bank account like other immigrants. Or they must have someone as a co-signer, but they often do not know anyone [who could serve in that role]." [interview with Nora, 2023]

Although the CCI and RAP teams are responsible for helping GARs find housing, they do not have the authority to be the GAR's co-signer. So, they created a network of landlords who are willing to rent their houses in several neighborhoods and try to accommodate GARs in these places. But there are also other issues with finding proper housing with enough bedrooms and furnishings for them. The regular monthly payment that GARs receive, plus the new benefit (if they are eligible to receive it), is not adequate to cover the rent price for two specific groups of GARs: the large families of more than six people (Rose 2019, Bhattacharyya et al. 2020), and single-person GARs. The first group usually cannot find affordable housing, because the rent price of a house with enough bedrooms in Ottawa is out of reach. Conversely, the single GARs can only afford to rent a room with their meager monthly payment.

Therefore, Housing Top-Up, which was meant to facilitate the path from the temporary location to their permanent houses, is still not adequate for all GARs. This new policy not only

does not work as a "palliative" measure, but it is misaligned with the Ontario Work welfare benefit, placing GARs' long-term stability in jeopardy. As one of the CCI employees argued:

> "I don't really understand what the government is thinking…The decision by IRCC to implement a housing top-up is, in my opinion, very misguided, because our clients can't afford to maintain their homes when the RAP funds run out. It's very frustrating that people could fail since no one benefits from that. The family suffers, and so does Canada. With more and more new arrivals each year, I fear that an increasing proportion of them will fall below the poverty line. This could lead to similar problems as those faced by European countries. In Canada, we've done a good job at integrating newcomers *because we set them up for success*. However, if we continue to have high levels of poverty among newcomers, some Canadian citizens might wonder whether we should keep admitting them." [Interview with Sarah, 2024, emphasis mine]

Sarah's comment highlights a critical issue: the Housing Top-Up benefit actually creates problems for GARs after their first-year RAP funding ends. The disconnect between this new benefit and the pre-existing OW welfare system often results in GARs losing their housing. This occurs because GARs initially secure housing they cannot afford to maintain once they transition from RAP to the lower OW payments. The root of this policy contradiction lies in IRCC's prioritization of quick exits from emergency housing over long-term stability. By pressuring CCI to move GARs out of temporary accommodation as quickly as possible, IRCC simply postpones the housing problem, rather than solving it. The higher initial benefit enables GARs to secure housing they ultimately cannot maintain, effectively pushing the problem of housing instability into the future when support levels drop dramatically.

However, Sarah's claim about the previous successful resettlement of newcomers also echoes the neoliberal logics of self-sufficiency. For immigrants, particularly GARs who sometimes spend many years in refugee camps, it is not easy to become "a successful refugee" within one year. This expectation exists because "worthy citizens" are those who can be

"autonomous, responsible, choice-making subjects who can serve the nation best by becoming entrepreneurs of the self" (Ong 2003, 9). As Ong argues, "[e]conomistic methods [that] infiltrate areas of social life [which are] not primarily economic, [are aimed at] regulating behavior to maximize activities that are profitable and marginalize those that are not." This process of making GARs "successful" is rooted in a neoliberal calculation that ignores their differences, abilities, and uniquely vulnerable backgrounds.

This neoliberal calculation is most evident in both Canadian welfare programs for GARs: RAP and OW. Having examined the RAP process in the previous subsection, I now analyze OW[1] to demonstrate how these welfare programs are guided by neoliberal logic.

According to OW policy, "convention refugees – including GARs, Private Sponsorship Refugee Program participants, and Joint Assistance Sponsorship Program participants – are not eligible for Ontario Works during the period in which they are eligible for RAP, PSR, or JAS programs" (Ontario Works Policy Directives 2022). However, "when the sponsorship/eligibility period for RAP expires or the private sponsorship concludes or breaks down, a convention refugee may be eligible for Ontario Works" (Ontario Works Policy Directives 2022). This means that only certain GARs are eligible for OW assistance.

Additionally, there are two specific audit requirements that determine eligibility. First, "the amount of assistance issued must reflect an applicant or participant's budgetary needs as determined by spousal or co-residence status." Second, "the amount of assistance issued must reflect an applicant or recipient's budgetary needs as determined by their residential arrangements" (Ontario Works Policy Directives 2022).

[1] Policy available at: https://www.ontario.ca/document/ontario-works-policy-directives/32-residential-arrangements

These audit requirements indicate that if, in a GAR family with six children (which, according to my interlocutors, is the average family size among GARs), only one person works, the family is no longer eligible for OW assistance. Additionally, this assistance is structured to primarily cover housing expenses. This last audit requirement explains why the amount GARs receive from this welfare program is meager compared to RAP. In other words, except for rent, the welfare program does not plan to cover other expenses such as food. This is significant because even during RAP, many GARs struggle to purchase enough food to feed their family, as we will see in more detail in the next chapter. These welfare programs, especially OW, expect GARs to meet all their needs after just one year, although this time is often insufficient to find stable, full-time employment or learn a new language in a new country. This expectation becomes even more problematic given that OW support also ends after one year.

Concerning the dominant neoliberal logic in GARs resettlement, the concept of policy assemblage provides useful insights intn how this logic could be analyzed. As Allen (2011) argues, policy assemblages hold together while remaining fundamentally heterogeneous. It means that there is no essence to define an assemblage, but it is the contingent relation between heterogeneous components of an assemblage that creates its apparent coherency, even if unstable (Savage 2020, 325). In other words, a "precise policy assemblage analysis requires looking not only at how multiple component parts are brought together into coherent wholes or assembled, but at the many ways that policies are subject to forms of disruption and change (*disassembled or reassembled*)" (326).

In conclusion, the analysis of Housing Top-Up through the concept of policy assemblage reveals how seemingly coherent policies can produce unexpected and often problematic outcomes through their heterogeneous relations and constant flux. As demonstrated through Sarah and

Nora's arguments, what appears as a straightforward solution to immediate housing challenges becomes entangled in a complex web of institutional practices, market conditions, and welfare policies. The policy's transformation from a promising intervention to a potentially destabilizing force for GAR families like Hana's illustrates the mutable nature of policy. This understanding of policies as dynamic, heterogeneous components rather than fixed instruments helps explain why well-intentioned interventions can lead to unintended outcomes, particularly when policies move across different temporal phases and institutional contexts. The case of Housing Top-Up thus demonstrates how the success of refugee resettlement policies depends not just on individual policy measures, but on understanding and addressing the complex ways in which different policies interact, transform, and impact the lives of those they aim to serve.

Averting the Collapse: Reimagining Refugee Resettlement Policies

As I articulated earlier, literature on policy assemblage centers on three cornerstones. I examine the third cornerstone by analyzing how frontline workers navigate and attempt to improve resettlement policies. These efforts at policy improvement primarily emerge from employees who work with both GARs and IRCC officials. Their work can be seen as a form of mediation between these groups. I foreground the experiences of CCI employees because they are at the frontlines of implementation of these policies, policies of which they were often very critical. Yet, they were still trying to build something better. As one of them thoroughly explained:

> "I feel very bad about it. I initially took this job thinking it would help refugees and immigrants, since my parents were refugees. [This issue] holds a special place in my heart. However… I feel bad for [my clients] because it's not their fault that this is happening. They didn't come here for a better life; they just wanted to escape war or persecution. Sometimes they even told me they wished they could go back

> on the plane. They'd rather be refugees in another country... some clients tell me that they regret coming here. They say it's not worth it; it's unpleasant, and I feel bad for them. As an employee, I can only repeat this over and over again: "I am sorry." Sometimes I get too involved in a way that I burn out. The clients…need answers…If I would be able to change something in policy decisions, I would meet with the clients directly to find out about their complaints. There's a disconnect between the government and the people it serves; the government writes up all these forms and figures without ever meeting those who need help. It's our job to talk to them and find out what their needs really are, whether it's not enough money for food, rent or other expenses. If they took part in the process, they might realize that they don't have enough, and then they could ask for an adjustment to their payments based on current market conditions." [Interview with Susan, 2024]

Ruptures or disconnects, as Susan once again elaborated, permeate the resettlement policies. Her description of apologizing repeatedly to clients while being unable to actually address their needs reveals what initially appears as a breakdown in the system. However, approaching these ruptures through the concept of policy assemblage reveals how they function as integral components of Canada's approach to GAR's resettlement. These apparent ruptures – the disconnect between resettlement policies and refugee realities, the inadequate payments that don't match market conditions, the burden placed on the RAP team to mediate these gaps – are not accidental. They are features of a system that positions frontline employees as mediators of policy contradictions while pursuing rapid refugee self-sufficiency.

When Susan described how "it's our job to talk to them and find out what their needs really are," she was actually articulating her role within what Law (1994) calls a "mode of ordering." Her position, and that of other RAP team members, becomes strategic – they must translate between policy requirements and GARs' needs, managing the inherent contradictions of a system that prioritizes rapid economic independence over sustainable resettlement. This arrangement allows IRCC to maintain its resettlement program while limiting its engagement with the actual challenges of implementation.

Drawing on Savage's (2020) conceptualization of assemblage as components "strategically arranged with the view to forming an apparatus for governing" (325), I argue that the positioning of frontline employees within the resettlement system serves specific governmental aims. The allocation of responsibility to employees to mediate between IRCC's strict timeline, GARs' access to affordable housing, and the housing crisis appears, at first glance, to reflect institutional incompetence. However, this arrangement accomplishes something crucial: it allows IRCC to pursue its goal of rapid refugee self-sufficiency while distancing itself from the direct consequences of this approach. By making CCI and RAP employees the sole direct point of contact for GARs' struggles, IRCC can maintain its emphasis on quick independence without having to directly confront how this timeline affects GARs' lives. The persistent gaps between policy and realities, and the reliance on the CCI and RAP team to manage these gaps, reflect a broader pattern in Canadian resettlement policies: the emphasis on rapid economic independence regardless of GARs' circumstances or readiness. Even seemingly supportive measures like the Housing Top-Up benefit ultimately reinforce this logic, while providing temporary assistance, they maintain the rigid timeline for achieving self-sufficiency without addressing the structural barriers GARs face. These policies consistently prioritize quick independence while delegating the management of their contradictions to frontline workers.

The current resettlement program resembles a gear wheel spinning at dangerously high speeds, where even the power meant to drive it forward ultimately contributes to its breakdown. While IRCC's recent policies, particularly the Housing Top-Up, appear to acknowledge current Canadian realities by moving beyond purely calculative logic, Mahmud offers a different perspective on why gaps persist between policy and reality:

> "We know that the RAP program has a gap with the current housing crisis, and that it is very difficult for us to make our clients comfortable. We are trying our best to bridge this gap, but it doesn't seem like the IRCC is following up on the actual housing crisis; they just end up with more money while our GARs remain uncomfortable…They [the government] believe that more money will solve the problem. But money isn't everything: It's not a home. Yes, it may make finding housing easier, but what happens if someone can't find a job after one year? How are they supposed to keep their house? As a policymaker, I would try to encourage businesses to hire GARs. Also, I would create a list of GARs' skills before their arrival so that we can find the best fit for them. These people came here looking for a better life, but they end up working for Uber or picking potatoes instead. Do they have to spend their entire lives like this? At the very least, I would try to attract companies like Amazon and Home Depot to the area." [Interview with Mahmud, 2024]

Like Susan, Mahmud identified a fundamental gap between the Canadian resettlement program and Ottawa's socio-economic and housing market realities. As discussed earlier in this chapter, reducing GARs' challenges to merely increasing their first-year financial support has detrimental effects on their long-term stability. However, Mahmud highlighted another crucial component: employment opportunities directly affect GARs' access to affordable housing, not just increasing their RAP payment. However, there is no new regulation about GARs' employment.

The lack of employment support in GARs' resettlement illustrates a crucial aspect of policy assemblage, as a concept: how components beyond direct governmental control significantly shape policy outcomes. While IRCC manages certain aspects of resettlement through programs like RAP and Housing Top-Up, employment remains largely external to their direct influence, yet critically affects resettlement success. As Mahmud astutely observed, simply providing more money through benefits like Housing Top-Up cannot solve the fundamental challenges GARs face. His critique reveals how the current approach fails to address the complex relationship between housing stability and employment prospects.

This relationship exemplifies what Savage (2020) describes as the distributed nature of power in policy assemblages, where outcomes are shaped not just by official policies but by their interaction with broader economic and social systems. The Canadian job market, while outside IRCC's direct control, powerfully influences GARs' ability to maintain housing and achieve the self-sufficiency that IRCC policies demand. Yet paradoxically, IRCC's rigid timeline for achieving self-sufficiency remains unchanged despite these external constraints. This timeline operates alongside, but doesn't account for, the realities of Canada's current job market – where even employed refugees often cannot afford market-rate housing on minimal wages.

Drawing on Ong's (2003) analysis of neoliberal refugee governance, I argue that IRCC resettlement policies are destined to fail in providing stable homes for all GARs even before implementation. Rather than addressing structural barriers to employment or providing targeted job support, the current system places the burden of becoming "worthy citizens" entirely on refugees themselves. The absence of comprehensive employment support is not simply an oversight – it reflects a broader neoliberal logic that expects refugees to navigate the job market independently, regardless of their circumstances or market conditions. This expectation persists even as housing costs rise, and employment opportunities become more precarious.

This analysis reveals how "policy assemblage" involves more than just government policies. It includes the market forces, institutional practices, and economic conditions that shape policy outcomes. In Ottawa's case, the interaction between access to affordable housing, resettlement timelines, and labor market realities creates a situation where even GARs who follow all official directives may still struggle to achieve stable housing. The Housing Top-Up benefit, while providing temporary relief, cannot address these deeper structural challenges. As Mahmud

suggests, what's needed is not just more money, but a crucial reconsideration of how employment and housing stability are integrated into the RAP.

Beyond Policy Fragments: Neoliberal Logic and the Future of GAR Resettlement

The apparent failure of Canadian resettlement policies to support GARs effectively stems not from simple implementation problems but from their underlying neoliberal logic. This logic prioritizes rapid self-sufficiency over sustainable resettlement, creating a system where policies that appear supportive in the short term ultimately undermine long-term stability. The Housing Top-Up benefit exemplifies this paradox – while providing immediate housing access, it enables GARs to secure accommodations they cannot maintain after their first year when RAP funding ends and OW provides significantly less support. These contradictory outcomes occur because federal and provincial welfare programs, though originating from different agencies, share the same neoliberal emphasis on minimal government support and rapid independence, regardless of refugees' actual circumstances or needs.

The Canadian resettlement program constitutes a policy assemblage through several key features. First, its components – including RAP regulations and the Housing Top-Up benefit – maintain relations of exteriority, functioning independently while creating emergent effects through their interactions. Second, these policies exhibit heterogeneity in their immediate aims while sharing an underlying strategic orientation toward rapid refugee self-sufficiency. Finally, power flows through this assemblage not through direct control but through the strategic arrangement of policies, timelines, and support mechanisms that channel GARs toward particular outcomes.

Each section of this analysis revealed different aspects of how this assemblage operates. The "Patchwork Policies" section demonstrated how seemingly disconnected housing and resettlement policies collectively shape GARs' experiences in accessing affordable housing. "From Promise to Precarity" illustrated the heterogeneous yet strategically aligned nature of federal and provincial welfare programs. The "Averting the Collapse" section exposed how power operates through frontline workers who must constantly mediate between policy requirements and refugee realities.

While this chapter explored resettlement policies and the employees' perspectives on them, the next chapter demonstrates how GARs themselves engage with these policies and their effects. By tracing their resettlement path from their first day of arrival in Ottawa to their permanent homes, I argue that their experiences are diversely affected by the resettlement policies. However, as I will elaborate, GARs create their own path to tackle challenges, including the housing crisis, building new homes through what scholars call "arrival infrastructure" (Meeus et al. 2019).

Chapter Two: Making Home: Housing Strategies and Resistance Among Government-Assisted Refugees in Ottawa

On a cold, cloudy February afternoon, I met Arezoo at a small café near Ottawa's ByWard Market. Steam rose from her untouched coffee as she shared her family's journey, one marked by multiple displacements and an ongoing search for home. "We came here hoping to have a house where I could live with my mother, sister, and brother. A place big enough and suitable for us that we could call a home, not just a room," she explained. "But unfortunately, after three months, we're still living in a hotel, where we cannot even cook."

Like many GARs, Arezoo's path to Ottawa had been circuitous. After the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan, she and her brother fled to France, where they struggled to secure even a small room in a student dormitory in Paris. The inability to create a stable home where their family could gather under one roof had prompted them to apply for refugee status through the UN, hoping to join their sister in Ottawa. After two and a half years of waiting, their case was finally accepted.

But arrival in Ottawa had not meant an end to housing precarity. Arezoo explained that she and her sister, who had been living in Ottawa for two years, had decided to search for housing themselves rather than rely on CCI and the RAP team. When I asked why, her response echoed some of the same tensions between institutional timelines and lived realities described in the previous chapter:

> "For them [the employees who work in the RAP team], the only important thing is getting us settled as quickly as possible, but for us, the condition of the house matters too. It's important that the house is clean, without cockroaches and bedbugs. We asked others who came here like us, and they said the houses usually recommended aren't suitable. So, we decided to search ourselves, but every day, CCI officials tell us we need to leave the hotel soon. They say they're under pressure from above. But what can we do? So far, I've found three good, suitable houses. But of those, two landlords refused us when they learned we were immigrants! They said they don't rent to immigrants. We liked the third one and

> are waiting for the landlord's response, though it's very far from here, near Barrhaven." [Interview with Arezoo, 2024]

A few weeks later, Arezoo's Instagram story showed an empty house, and the third landlord had accepted them. When we met again at a café, the physical distance of their new home became apparent; it had taken her an hour and a half to reach me. But securing housing had not ended their challenges. Arezoo's brother was refusing charitable organizations' offers to provide furniture and household items, rejecting what he saw as markers of refugeehood. Their monthly government assistance barely stretched to cover essentials, two-thirds for rent, one-third for food, leaving nothing for furnishing their new home. Stirring her coffee, she said:

> "I just want to go back to studying and university. In Afghanistan, I really wanted to do my master's degree, but couldn't. In France, I needed to be completely fluent in French, so I couldn't study there either, but I worked as a dental assistant. Here, I want to return to university if possible. But first, I need to find a job, so my mother won't have to pack her suitcases again." [Interview with Arezoo, 2024]

Her words reveal a fundamental contradiction in Canada's resettlement program: while promising to end displacement, its emphasis on rapid self-sufficiency and rigid timelines often produces new forms of housing precarity. For Arezoo and her family, the search for home unfolded in distinct yet interconnected stages – from temporary hotel accommodation where basic needs like cooking were impossible to meet, to the challenging search for permanent housing, through to the ongoing struggle to transform a physical space into a genuine home. Each stage revealed how institutional pressures and structural constraints shape GARs' experiences: from the inadequacy of initial reception facilities to discrimination in the rental market, through to the looming anxiety about housing security after RAP support ends. The pressure to vacate temporary

accommodations quickly often forces GARs to accept housing with unsuitable conditions, creating a cycle where institutional timelines, rather than habitability standards, dictate housing choices.

This chapter traces GARs' housing trajectories from their initial arrival through to their long-term resettlement, examining how they navigate each stage of the process. Building on the previous chapter's argument, it follows the neoliberal logic of resettlement policies as they unfold in GARs' lived experiences, shaping their encounters from the first moments in Ottawa's temporary accommodations to the uncertainties of post-resettlement life, where the push towards rapid self-sufficiency looms over all CCI-provided support. Drawing on literature in CRS, the analysis that follows also reframes refugees as active agents rather than passive subjects (Espiritu et al. 2022, 20). By foregrounding refugee agency, I illuminate how GARs' strategies, like Arezoo's independent housing search, address gaps in the RAP that CCI employees also previously noted, revealing a disconnect between policy design and GARs' real housing needs, both temporary and permanent.

In other words, the emphasis on "self-sufficiency" in GARs resettlement puts this highly vulnerable immigrant group in an impossible situation: either achieve designated markers of "success" within one year, or face displacement and lose essential resources, including housing. As a result, many GARs express a desire to return to their countries of origin precisely because their lived experience in Canada diverges so dramatically from what they had imagined. This gap between GARs' hopes for life in Canada and their actual experiences reveals how neoliberal policies can create new forms of "displacement" even after physical resettlement. Ramsay (2020) approaches this phenomenon as a form of temporal displacement, an existential condition where individuals cannot reconcile their present reality with their imagined futures. For GARs, this manifests as an inability to project themselves forward in time beyond immediate survival needs.

According to Ramsay, displacement occurs when "a person cannot reconcile the contemporary circumstances of their life with their aspirations for, and sense of, the future" (387), creating a profound disruption in their life trajectory. What makes this particularly damaging for GARs is that they have already experienced geographical displacement, only to find themselves temporally displaced within their place of supposed refuge.

However, as Arezoo's story demonstrates, GARs are not passive recipients of resettlement policies' effects. They develop strategic responses at each stage of their housing journey – from navigating temporary accommodation, to searching for permanent housing, through to securing long-term stability. In other words, they actively engage with these effects and try to illuminate their agency in different ways. One common strategy I observed, particularly among Afghan GARs, is leveraging family networks in Ottawa, especially when their kin have been established in the city for longer. These networks serve multiple functions: providing crucial information about housing options, offering temporary support during the search process, and creating a sense of community that helps transform houses into homes. For several GARs I interviewed, these social networks were not just a factor in their migration decision, but the primary reason for choosing Canada, staying, and building new lives together. In this sense, these networks function as more than just a strategy. They can rather be understood as a form of "resistance" against harsh neoliberal resettlement policies.

This chapter traces GARs' housing trajectories from their initial arrival to their long-term resettlement, examining how newcomers navigate each stage of this process. In my subsequent ethnographic analysis, I mobilize the concept of "arrival infrastructure," along with considerations of the role of social networks and class analysis, to make sense of the complex dimensions of GARs' housing experiences in Ottawa. Then, I explore their encounters with temporary

accommodations, hotels and reception centers, revealing how these spaces, while necessary, often fail to fulfill fundamental needs for shelter and stability. Next, I examine how family networks function as crucial arrival infrastructure, reshaping the formal resettlement process through strategic mediations and supports. Finally, I analyze GARs' post-resettlement experiences, illuminating how they transform physical houses into meaningful homes despite numerous constraints. Throughout these sections, I demonstrate how GARs assert their agency within a system that often fails to recognize their diverse backgrounds and aspirations, creating pathways to belonging that honor both their past identities and future hopes.

Theorizing Arrival: Infrastructure, Networks, and Class in Refugee Resettlement

While anthropologists have extensively documented refugee experiences in camp settings and post-resettlement life (e.g., Malkki 1992, Besteman 2016, Ong 2003, Dunn 2018, Ticktin 2011), less attention has been paid to how GARs actively shape their initial resettlement through formal (e.g., CCI, RAP) and informal (e.g., family network) channels. These channels encompass both state-sanctioned resettlement services like CCI and RAP programs on the formal side, and family networks, community connections, and improvised support systems on the informal side (Meeus et al. 2019). The gap in anthropology literature is particularly evident in understanding how GARs utilize social networks and family ties to reshape seemingly rigid resettlement policies. Rather than viewing refugees as passive recipients of resettlement services, I aim to illuminate how GARs actively construct and navigate what scholars term "arrival infrastructure" – the complex assemblage of material and social systems that shape newcomers' initial settlement experiences (Meeus et al. 2019).

This relative oversight in anthropology sets the stage for a closer look at how GARs engage with their new surroundings, blending formal support with informal ingenuity. While Malkki's (1995) camp studies or Besteman's (2016) post-resettlement narratives capture broader refugee experiences, they leave uncharted the fleeting yet formative moments of arrival, moments where GARs confront Canada's resettlement machinery head-on. In Ottawa, this machinery includes CCI's hotel rooms and RAP's timelines, hinting at a framework beyond traditional aid. Arrival infrastructure, as a concept, bridges this gap, offering a lens to see how these dual systems, state and family network, intertwine to shape GARs' first steps in Canada. This approach helps me to understand experiences like Arezoo's, described at the beginning of this chapter.

Arezoo's experience vividly illustrates key elements of what Bovo et al (2024) call "in/formal infrastructures." While the resettlement program provided her family with temporary hotel accommodation through CCI and the RAP team, it was her sister's experience in Ottawa that enabled them to navigate the housing search independently. Their decision to bypass CCI's housing recommendations, informed by community warnings about unsuitable conditions, shows how GARs actively combine formal support with informal knowledge systems to shape their resettlement trajectories.

This understanding of GARs' strategic agency within the arrival infrastructures approach also reflects a deeper shift in governance, where neoliberal rationality reconfigures the role of refugee families within resettlement programs. Ong's (2003) analysis of Cambodian refugees in America shows how the market-driven logic shapes resettlement processes, encouraging the forms of neoliberal governmentality that privilege self-management over state support. In Canada's resettlement program, this manifests as a reliance on family networks to absorb responsibilities, housing searches, and long-term stability that the state might otherwise provide.

Examining how GARs navigate the available arrival infrastructure reveals critical insights about the resettlement process. As they move through temporary accommodations to permanent housing, their experiences illuminate how abstract policies materialize in everyday life. Housing is not merely a physical need within arrival infrastructure, but a concrete site where GARs deliberately negotiate their place within broader systems of governance. Scholarship on refugee studies has often reproduced what Malkki (1992) terms the "refugee paradigm," an assumption that refugees constitute a universally destitute and desperate category (498). However, this paradigm obscures how refugees come from diverse class backgrounds and carry distinct social and professional aspirations. Drawing on CRS, which departs from objectifying refugees to center their own "worlds and epistemologies" (Espiritu et al. 2022, 20), my analysis explores how resettlement policies construct visions of refugeehood that conflict with GARs' lived experiences.

Balakian (2025) powerfully extends this critique by demonstrating how humanitarian logics of care are "implicated in the same regimes that they also desire to overcome" (4), creating a contradictory approach where refugees are simultaneously objects of care and subjects of suspicion. This contradiction materializes concretely in GARs' access to affordable housing, where "the gap between institutional assumptions about refugee needs and refugees' actual class positions becomes particularly evident" (4). As Balakian argues, "humanitarian work in Africa is premised on racializing hierarchies" (25) that construct refugees as either ideal victims or potential frauds, categories that persist in Canadian contexts, as I aim to elaborate in the next chapter, and leave little room for the complex realities of people like Arezoo. Her refusal of substandard housing reflects not entitlement but rather legitimate expectations about basic habitability that the system misrecognizes as excessive demands.

The neoliberal rationality shaping GARs resettlement is evident in how the IRCC administers programs like the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR). Refugees seeking resettlement in Canada are evaluated based on their capacity to "establish themselves successfully," a criterion that hinges on factors such as having relatives or sponsors in Canada, proficiency or potential to learn English or French, and employability or resourcefulness (Government of Canada 2024). This approach mirrors the U.S. Refugee Family Reunification Program, a component of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, which enables refugees and asylees already in the U.S. to reunite with immediate family members, spouses, parents, and unmarried children under 21, to restore family unity disrupted by displacement. What renders this rationality neoliberal is not merely the emphasis on rapid resettlement or exit from temporary support, but the strategic devolution of state responsibility onto private networks, families, sponsors, and communities, as a cost-saving governance mechanism (Cooper 2017, 16). As Frazier and van Riemsdijk (2021) argue, U.S. resettlement prioritizes economic self-sufficiency within 90 days, relying on resettlement agencies and Refugee Third Sector Organizations (RTSOs) to "plug gaps" left by limited state support, a dynamic exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic when digital barriers further strained access to services (Fritzsche 2024, 7). While these policies tacitly recognize the importance of social bonds, counting on kin and community networks to aid integration, they do so within a neoliberal framework that views such "resourcefulness" as a prerequisite for survival, shifting burdens from the state to non-state actors (Frazier & van Riemsdijk 2021, 3123). This aligns with Cooper's (2017) analysis of neoliberalism's reinvention of the family as a privatized welfare alternative, where familial and community support becomes a tool to offset state withdrawal (21). Consequently, selection criteria privileging refugees with social and cultural capital, language skills, employability, or pre-existing networks reflect

neoliberal governance's reliance on these assets, often obscuring the diverse class backgrounds of GARs and reinforcing inequalities under the guise of efficiency.

Drawing on insights from CRS, particularly the emerging literature on arrival infrastructure, this chapter traces the housing trajectories of GARs. This approach offers a nuanced perspective on how GARs navigate and reshape resettlement policies by strategically engaging with both institutional structures and social networks, moving beyond the binary of formal and informal systems. Importantly, it highlights how class backgrounds and professional aspirations, often overlooked within the "refugee paradigm," significantly shape GARs' housing strategies and experiences. The pressure for rapid self-sufficiency, a key feature of current resettlement policies, intersects with GARs' diverse class positions, creating constraints and opportunities they must navigate. In the following sections, I apply these critical insights to explore GARs' experiences across different stages of their housing journey, from temporary accommodations to permanent housing searches and post-resettlement life. I reveal broader patterns that play out in their everyday struggles and strategies for making a home in Ottawa.

First Stop: Temporary Accommodations and Initial Challenges

After landing in Ottawa, GARs' first encounter with Canada's resettlement system occurs through two main sites of temporary accommodation: Maison Sophia and two Days Inn hotels in Ottawa. For six months, I visited Maison Sophia every Thursday, and I likewise made several visits to one of the Days Inn hotels located on Rideau Street. Maison Sophia is situated near a shelter, at the intersection of Butler and King Edward streets. At the time of my first visit, I was unsure which of the several doorbells at the entrance I should ring. Fortunately, a young man exited

the building, allowing me to enter. Opposite the entrance was a small desk where another young man sat, with whom I would later become better acquainted. His eyes fixed on his mobile phone, he asked me, without looking up, to write my name and arrival time on a list and sign it.

Next to the desk was an extremely narrow staircase, leading down to the ground floor on one side and up to the first floor on the other. I later learned that the ground floor contained numerous offices for CCI and RAP staff, along with a kitchen. The first floor housed classrooms for GARs, while the upper floors were where GARs resided. Due to the lack of basic amenities, including television, Wi-Fi, kitchen facilities, and cooking spaces, along with strict rules for entry and exit, such as no visitors to residents' rooms after 9 PM and no entry or exit for those residents themselves after 11 PM, it was not a popular or attractive place for GARs. For some, including Matin and his family, it was shocking:

> "When we first arrived at the reception house, my little brother was crying, he was shocked and asking where the TV was? What should I do here?" [Interview with Matin, 2024]

When I first went to the first floor to attend an English Conversation Circle (ECC), the pungent smell of chlorine and alcohol reminded me of a hospital. Even the light blue and white walls contributed to this initial impression. However, maintenance issues and the building's age made GARs reluctant to stay there. The conditions at the Days Inn hotel were only marginally better than those at the Maison Sophia. According to one staff member's account, at one time, bedbugs had spread throughout the hotel; fortunately, the issue was subsequently resolved, but the incident highlighted some of the structural problems with this kind of accommodation. The duplicate entry and exit regulations were applied in the Maison Sophia, but with added confusion and insecurity compared to the other center. During my few visits there, I witnessed people

injecting drugs in front of the hotel's door. This scene was deeply troubling not just for me but also for people like Arezoo's mother, who could not help but wonder if this represented a possible fate for those who might fall through the cracks of Canada's resettlement program.

These physical spaces represent more than mere shelter; they are the material manifestations of Canada's resettlement infrastructure, where policy abstractions become lived realities for newly arrived GARs. The institutional logic embedded in these spaces, from the hospital-like sterility to the rigid entry/exit rules, reveals how the state envisions refugee reception. These spaces also incorporate mechanisms like health surveillance to address contagion fears, security protocols to ensure safety, and regimented daily schedules, all of which underscore the state's emphasis on risk management and control in the resettlement program. However, understanding temporary accommodation requires moving beyond spatial descriptions to examine how GARs actually experience and navigate these environments. Their narratives illuminate these spaces' emotional and psychological dimensions, revealing tensions between institutional timelines and refugees' needs for dignified housing.

For this reason, many GARs, including Arezoo's mother, preferred to spend their days at the homes of their relatives who were already settled in Ottawa, returning to the hotel[2] only at night. However, it was not just staying in these temporary accommodations that could impact GARs' initial experience in Ottawa. The stress and anxiety about finding housing and leaving temporary accommodation also affected this experience. Sheila, a single Iranian GAR woman who

[2] GARs generally need to stay in temporary accommodations (like hotels) initially because it's an integral part of Canada's resettlement process, designed to provide immediate support and administrative assistance (providing insurance, distribution of start-up financial assistance, including monthly checks).

had been a refugee in Turkey for six years before coming to Ottawa, still talks about her experience of those days, staying in the hotel many years after:

> "Those were very difficult days, especially for people like me who were alone without family… They [the resettlement employees] constantly told us we needed to find housing quickly and leave, or we would end up in a shelter. They frightened me and many others like me to the point where finding a place to stay became a nightmare. CCI staff only showed me two housing options, which I refused. One was a room in a downtown house where my roommates would have been five men. The other was a unit in one of the buildings near St. Laurent. When I went to view it, I saw that the Afghan family was still living there. They told me, 'Just leave, we're escaping too. This house is full of bedbugs and cockroaches.' The conditions were terrible. When I refused these two places, they showed me I was terrified… I thought I wouldn't be able to find another housing option. But I managed to find this house after extensive searching. My landlord reduced the original rent by about $700 and accepted my circumstances. However, my caseworker didn't allow me to move here because she was worried about my remaining expenses, saying that with this rent, nothing would be left for grocery shopping. I told her, 'Let me leave this place [temporary housing], it's okay if I go hungry. I guarantee I can survive." [Interview with Sheila, 2025]

Although Sheila, like Arezoo, had found their own housing, there were families whom CCI managed to help directly, including Fereshteh and her husband, whose home I visited. Nevertheless, the concern about finding housing, due to the short period GARs can officially stay in hotels or Maison Sophia, coupled with the unfavorable conditions in these places, creates a stark gap between their imagined resettlement and their lived experience. Through conversations with CCI and RAP team staff, I learned that the government's approach to temporary accommodation reflects a calculated strategy: rather than investing in improving these facilities, IRCC channels resources into the RAP. This policy choice appears designed to incentivize quick exits from temporary housing, the logic being that GARs will be more motivated to accept available permanent housing options if their temporary accommodations are minimally furnished and strictly regulated. As mentioned in the previous chapter, even the staff themselves consider this

rapid and pressured system of transfer from temporary to permanent housing deeply problematic, and they too face pressure from IRCC when families' stays in temporary accommodation exceed the designated timeline.

Moreover, I noticed that RAP team employees frequently referred to GARs' "high expectations" as one of the main reasons they stay longer in temporary accommodation such as Maison Sophia. These employees argued that some GARs' housing aspirations were shaped by media representations of North American lifestyles on platforms like Netflix and images of large houses with spacious yards and suburban amenities. However, this institutional narrative fundamentally misrecognizes the class-based nature of GARs' housing requirements. When Arezoo insisted on pest-free housing or Matin sought proximity to educational opportunities, they were not expressing media-influenced fantasies but attempting to maintain continuity with their previous middle-class positions and professional identities. The employees' framing of basic habitability standards as "high expectations" reveals how the resettlement system often fails to recognize GARs' diverse class backgrounds and legitimate aspirations for maintaining their social status.

These class dynamics are further illuminated by examining broader patterns in GAR admissions. A closer examination of GAR admission patterns reveals a complex interplay between class background and resettlement opportunities. According to statistics, of the 141,025 GARs resettled in Canada between January 2015 and December 2024, the majority are vulnerable in terms of educational background: 75,470 individuals held Secondary or Lower qualifications, and 35,645 had no formal educational credentials. However, a small yet significant segment held post-secondary credentials: 5,010 individuals with bachelor's degrees, 835 with Master's degrees, and 85 with PhDs, totaling 5,930 individuals, or just 4.2% of the GAR population. While this fraction

is indeed tiny, especially given that the overall number includes children and the elderly who may lack formal education, it highlights the inclusion of refugees with diverse educational and professional backgrounds within Canada's GAR program. Far from indicating a systemic privilege for those with higher education, this distribution reflects the UNHCR's focus on vulnerability, yet still accommodates individuals like Arezoo, a former dental assistant with university aspirations, or Matin, who hoped to continue his education. The presence of educated GARs, though limited, suggests that employees' dismissal of "high expectations" overlooks how these expectations often stem from GARs' prior class positions and professional identities, rather than media influences alone.

This class-based tension becomes particularly visible in cases where GARs lack family networks to help maintain their social position. Sheila's solitary struggle in temporary spaces exemplifies how the absence of family support compounds the challenge of preserving middle-class respectability within a system that treats such aspirations as unreasonable. Unlike Arezoo, who could leverage her sister's knowledge to find suitable housing, or Matin, whose uncle helped navigate the rental market, Sheila faced CCI's timelines alone. Her rejection of a bug-infested unit, met with warnings of shelter placement rather than assistance, reflects not mere pickiness but a struggle to maintain dignity and class position in a system that fails to recognize such concerns as legitimate. This isolation reveals how the resettlement policies' demands for self-sufficiency intersect with class background and social capital, creating uneven pathways where those without family networks face greater challenges in maintaining their previous social status.

Temporary accommodations thus function as contested sites where the analytical perspectives on arrival infrastructure and refugee agency discussed earlier materialize in GARs' everyday lives. These spaces reveal the limitations of formal arrival infrastructure when designed

primarily to process rather than welcome newcomers. The strategic responses GARs develop, whether leveraging family networks like Arezoo or asserting housing standards like Sheila, demonstrate how they actively reshape these infrastructures rather than passively receiving them. These initial housing experiences set crucial patterns for GARs' subsequent resettlement trajectories, often determining whether they can maintain continuity with their previous social positions or face further displacement within Canada's resettlement program. As I will elaborate in the next section, family networks emerge as particularly powerful resources for navigating these challenges, forming alternative infrastructures that both complement and contest official resettlement pathways.

Family Networks as Arrival Infrastructure: Reshaping Refugee Resettlement Through Informal Ties

On a hot summer day, I met Mohammad at a Tim Hortons branch on Alta Vista Street. When I called him for the interview, I suggested going to a café near his residence. When he entered the café with his companions, I initially thought there had been a mistake, as he was accompanied by two boys and a man about his own age. He explained that the man was his cousin and currently lived in the same building with him, and that one of the boys was his own child, while the other was his cousin's child. When I began explaining my research, his cousin paid more attention than Mohammad himself, carefully listening to my explanation and reading both the Persian and English consent forms. After approving, he handed the paper to Mohammad to sign, telling him, "It's fine, you can sign it."

This was not the first time I had found myself in such a situation. Previously, when I went to Fereshteh's house to talk with her, her husband read the consent form instead of her and asked if it was possible not to record their voices. As their guest in their home, I felt caught in a delicate

position. While I fully respected their right to decline recording, the cultural expectations of Afghan hospitality made discussing research protocols feel particularly challenging. The situation became more complex as I attempted to navigate between my role as a guest and my position as a researcher in their home space. However, because of our shared Persian language, I tried in both situations to give a complete explanation about how the audio files would be stored and deleted.

At the Tim Horton's that day, Mohammad laughed cheerfully in response to all my questions and expressed unwavering satisfaction. His only comment was, "I came here for my children's future, and I have no problems. Everything is good, especially since my cousin is here." This striking positivity immediately evokes the "model refugee" concept, a construct closely related to the "model minority" stereotype, where refugees are expected to embody gratitude, resilience, and seamless integration into the host society by refraining from complaints or highlighting difficulties (Espiritu et al. 2022; Suzuki 2002). Mohammad's emphasis on his children's future and his reliance on familial ties, specifically his cousin's role in securing their shared living space, aligns with this idealized narrative of the refugee as hardworking, family-oriented, and appreciative of the host country's opportunities. However, beneath this cheerful facade, complexities emerged after the formal interview. Mohammad inquired about health insurance, and his cousin, a new father to a baby girl, raised concerns about delayed child benefits despite having completed the necessary forms. These practical challenges reveal a tension between the public performance of the "model refugee," inextricably tied to the expectation of gratitude, and the private realities of adaptation, where family support becomes a critical yet often overlooked resource.

My encounter with Mohammad revealed a broader pattern in how family networks mediate GARs' resettlement experiences. Family members act not just as passive supporters but as active

interpreters and navigators of institutional requirements, from consent forms to housing searches. This dynamic became even more apparent through my subsequent interviews with other GARs.Until my online interview with Matin, I had not understood why Mohammad, unlike other GARs I had spoken with, was so happy about being close to his cousin. During that interview, Matin, a young man and the eldest child in a family of six, explained to me:

> *"*We came here, Ottawa, because of my uncle, my cousins. They helped us a lot, for example, to open our bank account, so we're happy that they are here."

However, Matin's experience of searching for affordable housing was slightly different:

> "I contacted approximately twenty to thirty potential landlords. Many explicitly refused to rent to us because we lacked credit history as newcomers. They required either a credit score or a guarantor – someone already established in Ottawa with stable employment and good income who could serve as a reference. About ten landlords directly cited our lack of credit history as the reason for rejection, while the remaining twenty never even responded to my message." [Interview with Matin, 2024]

Matin's experience highlights how formal barriers in Ottawa's housing market – such as credit history requirements and guarantor demand – create obstacles that even family networks cannot always directly overcome. His uncle could not act as a guarantor because he lacked the substantial income level that landlords required from guarantors, which is typically three to four times the monthly rent. However, these networks prove crucial in helping GARs navigate around such barriers, whether through sharing knowledge about alternative options or providing emotional support during extended housing searches.

Eventually, with CCI's help, Matin and his family secured permanent housing within forty days, considerably faster than many GARs. However, Matin's expectations of life in Canada diverged significantly from his lived experience. As he explained, he yearned for his homeland, and the physical dwelling they obtained through CCI support could not fully reconcile the

disconnect between their past life and present reality. Yet his contentment with living in Ottawa stemmed primarily from his uncle and cousins' presence, as evidenced by his animated recollections of spending evenings with them at Maison Sophia until midnight. This familial support network paralleled Mohammad's experience, highlighting how the family network shaped their resettlement trajectories. Both Matin and Mohammad remained committed to their new lives not because they had forgotten their original homes, but because their extended family networks enabled them to construct new meanings of home in Ottawa, even as Matin continued to experience nostalgia for his homeland.

Mohammad and Matin's experiences unveil how family networks function as crucial components of arrival infrastructure, mediating between formal institutional requirements and refugees' practical needs. To better understand this mediating role, Bovo's (2024) analytical framework offers four key lenses through which I can approach how informal networks interact with formal resettlement systems. Mohammad's cousin acted as both a "broker" when finding their shared housing and formed an "unusual alliance" when navigating institutional requirements like consent forms. Matin's uncle engaged in "boundary spanning" by helping with banking and offering crucial emotional support when rental market barriers emerged. These family-mediated strategies demonstrate how GARs actively transform institutional constraints into possibilities through what Bovo (2024) terms "structured workarounds" within arrival infrastructures.

However, it is important to note that these adaptive strategies extend beyond the GAR community. During my fieldwork in Ottawa, I observed similar "structured workarounds" across different migrant groups navigating the housing crisis. For instance, I encountered cases of seven Indian students sharing a three-bedroom unit to manage high rental costs, while Fereshteh's husband described how Afghan men often temporarily shared two-bedroom houses:

> "When I first arrived in Ottawa, I lived in a house shared with several other Afghan men who were in similar situations. The high cost of housing and the challenges of house-hunting made it difficult for me to find suitable accommodation for my wife and myself at that time." [Interview with Fereshteh's husband, 2024]

Though these arrangements were precarious and potentially violated occupancy regulations, they represented more than just coping mechanisms. Such informal practices demonstrate how marginalized groups actively participate in constructing arrival infrastructures, strategically combining formal housing arrangements with informal social networks to create viable living situations. These practices, while born of necessity, reveal how GARs transform institutional constraints into opportunities for collective support and resource sharing.

Family networks thus function as more than support systems; they constitute essential components of arrival infrastructure that reshape how resettlement policies operate in practice. By mediating between formal institutions and GARs' lived realities, these networks create possibilities for belonging that official resettlement structures alone cannot provide. They compensate for gaps in state support while enabling GARs to maintain cultural continuity and social status in ways that purely institutional relationships cannot facilitate. Yet, as I will argue in the following section, even as family networks provide crucial support during initial settlement, the transition to post-resettlement life introduces new challenges that require additional strategies for creating genuine homes rather than mere housing arrangements.

From House to Home: GARs in Ottawa's Post-Resettlement Landscape

While family networks provide crucial support during initial resettlement, the transition to permanent housing introduces new challenges in creating genuine homes rather than mere dwelling spaces. As GARs move beyond temporary accommodations, they begin the more profound work of place-making, transforming physical structures into meaningful spaces that

support their identities and aspirations. This process reveals tensions between the material conditions of their new housing, their memories of previous homes, and their visions for future belonging in Canada.

In February 2024, my interlocutor connected me with Fereshteh, a young Afghan woman who had recently moved from temporary hotel accommodation into permanent housing in Ottawa. When I arrived at their building lobby, I encountered an unexpected situation: I was greeted in Farsi by a man who introduced himself as Fereshteh's husband, a detail my interlocutor had not mentioned. Upon entering their one-bedroom apartment, I noticed the living room remained completely empty, despite them having lived there for several months. They guided me to their bedroom – the only furnished space in the unit – which contained just a double bed, a carpet, and a small couch. This sparse but intentional arrangement represented a crucial milestone in their journey – one made possible through both official resettlement channels and informal support networks. As our conversation unfolded in their bedroom, Fereshteh's husband took the lead in explaining how they found their current house:

> "Mrs. (…), who works at CCI, told me she would help search for housing, but encouraged me to look independently as well. I began searching, though it proved quite challenging. Because my English wasn't proficient enough to communicate effectively with landlords. Nevertheless, with my limited language skills, I could find several potential places, though they were all prohibitively expensive. After three months, Mrs. (…) finally found this house for us, and I was very pleased with it." [Interview with Fereshteh's husband, 2024]

Unlike her husband, Fereshteh was quiet and reflective when answering my questions. In Afghanistan, she had found joy and purpose in working as a seamstress from home. Though not her primary occupation, it had been a cherished hobby that filled her days with creative activity. Now in Ottawa, without even the basic equipment to continue this pastime, she found her daily

routine reduced to online English classes, which she wished were in-person. The absence of even this simple pleasure contributed to her sense of displacement, as her days stretched out with little meaningful occupation. The long hours in a new country often felt empty and isolating. When I asked if she considered this place truly her home, her response revealed a complex relationship with her new surroundings:

> "*Khaneh* (home) is where you have friends, and you can live comfortably…hopefully everyone can find a friend. We have some great friends here. As you know, there are many Afghans and Iranians here who are good friends with each other. One of the reasons we came to this city was because of other Afghans and our friends, whom we knew from Afghanistan. I followed them on Instagram and talked to them about coming here…But it's true – nowhere feels like home the way Afghanistan does. Yet home is really home only when you can find work there and build your life." [Interview with Fereshteh, 2024]

Fereshteh's emphasis on friendship and community as essential elements of "home" reflects a broader pattern I observed among GARs – one where the meaning of home extends far beyond physical shelter. For many, like Matin's family, who spent evenings with relatives at Maison Sophia until midnight, or Mohammad, who chose his apartment near his cousin, these social connections transformed mere housing into meaningful spaces of belonging. When I asked different GARs what "home" meant to them, their answers often revealed complex feelings about their homeland. Yet some, while missing Afghanistan, like Matin, were focused on building new lives in Ottawa through their family networks and community relationships. These GARs, whom I interviewed after they had secured permanent housing, seemed more oriented toward future-building than dwelling on past losses.

Home could be constructed as Fereshteh described, but was this truly the home they desired? Matin and Arezoo had imagined continuing their education, but given their new circumstances, both decided to seek employment instead. These new circumstances emerged from

a fear, the fear of displacement once again. The resettlement policies not only created this fear of housing and settlement instability but also managed to produce a deep gap between what some GARs imagined when coming to Canada and the challenging days that would follow after their RAP welfare ended. As Abdullah explains:

> "Afghan people are used to being displaced; they all want to come out of Afghanistan, but when they arrive, they find out that their destination is not the one they dreamed of! Now I'm here, but I miss so much the weather, the fruits, ... of my region... I wish I could go back in time..." [Interview with Abdullah, 2024]

The particular vulnerability of GARs who arrive without family networks becomes starkly evident after RAP support ends. While GARs with family connections find ways to rebuild community through family networks, those without such support face more profound challenges in creating home-like spaces after initial resettlement support ends. Nina's experience, though she arrived through PSP rather than the RAP, illuminates the precarious circumstances faced by those navigating resettlement alone. When her marriage ended after a year in Canada, Nina found herself without housing or family support. She crafted an alternative arrangement with her landlord: in exchange for domestic labor, cleaning his residence and preparing meals, she received reduced rent. The landlord, mourning his mother's recent death, came to view Nina as a maternal figure:

> "I don't have a job, so I can't rent a room or house – I have no money. I submitted a request to the government for housing; they said it would take 4 years. I submitted the request in 2022... The prices for food are very high. The owner helps me – he buys milk and cheese for me every week. My income from the government is $733... But still, I prefer living here in Ottawa. I cannot return to my country because of the inflation there, and I have no job there either... Here, at least I receive a small amount from the government; in Tunisia, it's not like this..." [Interview with Nina, 2024]

Nina's experience reveals how the absence of family networks profoundly shapes GARs' ability to create stable homes after formal support ends. Her improvised housing arrangement with her landlord represents what Bovo (2024) terms a "structured workaround" within arrival infrastructure – an adaptive strategy that emerges when formal resettlement support proves insufficient. This arrangement, where domestic labor is exchanged for reduced rent, demonstrates how arrival infrastructures extend beyond official frameworks to include creative solutions born of necessity. Nina's strategic response to these constraints, cultivating a quasi-familial relationship with her landlord, exemplifies how refugees actively create alternative pathways to stability when formal channels prove inaccessible. Yet her situation also reveals the limitations of such informal solutions, highlighting how resettlement policies continue to assume refugees can achieve self-sufficiency regardless of their access to social networks or cultural capital. Unlike GARs with family connections who can pool resources and knowledge, those without such support must often sacrifice personal aspirations for basic security, reshaping their very understanding of what 'home' (*Khaneh*) can mean in their new context.

The post-resettlement landscape thus reveals the enduring impact of class positions and social capital on GARs' ability to create meaningful homes in Canada. The forced prioritization of survival over aspiration, whether through abandoning creative pursuits like Fereshteh's seamstress work or exchanging domestic labor for housing security like Nina's, demonstrates how neoliberal resettlement frameworks construct narrow pathways to belonging. Yet GARs continue to assert their agency, creating alternative meanings of home through community connections, strategic compromises, and imaginative reconfigurations of limited resources. These practices illustrate how arrival infrastructures continue to shape GARs' lives beyond their initial reception,

influencing their capacity to transform houses into homes that honor past identities and future aspirations.

When Time Runs Out: Future Uncertainties and Survival Strategies

In tracing the housing trajectories of GARs in Ottawa, this chapter unveils the complex interplay of agency, constraint, and resilience as individuals navigate the precarious terrain of resettlement. Far from being mere beneficiaries of state-led programs, GARs emerge as active participants who rework the systems they encounter, be it the RAP, temporary accommodations, or the broader housing market, into spaces that reflect their own aspirations and histories. Their experiences challenge reductive narratives of refugeehood, revealing instead how class distinctions, emotional labor, and strategic engagements with both formal bureaucracies and informal networks shape refugees' quest for permanent housing. Through these efforts, GARs transform the abstract notion of "arrival infrastructures" into lived practices, crafting homes that bridge the ruptures of displacement while confronting the uncertainties of an imposed timeline.

A pivotal thread in this ethnographic account is the centrality of family and social networks, which serve as more than pragmatic lifelines. They are the very sinews of belonging and continuity. For many GARs, family ties provide a buffer against the impersonal rhythms of neoliberal resettlement policies, offering material support and a means to sustain cultural identities and assert agency in the face of exclusionary housing markets. These networks become dynamic infrastructures of their own, filling the gaps left by RAP's rigid framework and enabling refugees to negotiate their place in Ottawa's social fabric. Yet, this reliance on social capital lays bare a stark disparity: those without such ties face heightened vulnerability, their struggles underscoring how resettlement is not a uniform process but one deeply contoured by relational resources and their absence.

The shadow of neoliberal governance looms large over these narratives, its insistence on rapid self-sufficiency casting a temporal urgency that often misaligns with the realities of GARs' lives. Policies designed to foster independence within a year, through limited financial aid and a push toward labor market integration, clash with the structural obstacles of discrimination, scarcity, and bureaucratic inertia. This mismatch engenders a persistent sense of instability, where the promise of a secure future remains elusive, particularly for those navigating these challenges alone. The resulting tension highlights a critical disjuncture: while GARs strive to forge homes that honor their past and present, the state's temporal demands can perpetuate a form of displacement, rendering home-making an act of defiance as much as adaptation.

In the end, this chapter illuminates resettlement as an unfolding process, one that transcends the mere acquisition of shelter to encompass the weaving of social, emotional, and cultural threads into a semblance of belonging. For GARs in Ottawa, creating a home is an act of resilience, a refusal to be defined solely by the precarity of their circumstances. It is in their quiet negotiations, their reliance on family networks, and their resistance to reductive policies that we glimpse the profound humanity of resettlement. These stories compel a reconsideration of how arrival is understood, not as a bureaucratic endpoint, but as a lived, relational journey shaped by the interplay of individual will and systemic forces. Thus, the experiences of GARs stand as both a critique of current frameworks and a testament to the enduring capacity to build a new one, even when time seems to run out.

While in this chapter I have illuminated how GARs struggle to make their own homes in the midst of a housing crisis, in the next chapter I will examine how hidden aspects of this crisis further affect them. Ottawa foodbank branches are under pressure due to shortages, according to volunteers, and food precarity is another prevalent crisis among immigrants who rely on welfare

programs such as OW or RAP, including GARs. The third chapter will shed light on this acute situation by tracing the perspectives of volunteers and employees.

Chapter Three: Hunger's Hidden Rooms: Food Precarity and the Unseen Cracks of Resettlement

On a cool spring morning, I saw my Syrian neighbor Hassan waving at me from the end of the street. When I reached him, we walked together for a bit and started talking. He was a father of two children – one of whom had a mobility disorder – and had recently lost his job. We were chatting about Iran and Syria when we reached a street where he had to cross to the other side, and I had to wait for the bus. I told him we should talk more someday, and he said: "Now that I'm unemployed and my wife's income goes to rent, I go to our local foodbank every two or three weeks on Thursdays temporarily. If you want, come with me one day – we can talk more there, and you can get free food too." Until then, I thought foodbanks were only at universities and for students. Months passed after that conversation until I met Stephan, a foodbank volunteer who explained that foodbanks had been active in Canada for more than thirty years. But since the summer of 2024, the situation had changed dramatically. It was during this time that I met Stephan, who had recently left one of the branches after years of service, citing the physical energy it demanded. He noted a significant increase in new clients – Canadians and immigrants alike – during his final days there. He also observed a cultural shift: where once clients hid their reliance on foodbanks, now it is accepted as a norm across diverse groups, though some still avoided eye contact with him in public, hinting at lingering stigma. He shared:

> "I've seen how tough it's gotten with housing. Rents keep climbing higher, and there just aren't enough places for people to live, so newcomers end up crammed into motels or squeezing multiple families under one roof. That's driving more people to the foodbank – even the ones with jobs or the refugees who thought Canada would be a fresh start. I used to think *the government should step in, make it so people don't need foodbanks at all, but I've changed my tune – they can't keep up*. [emphasis by me] The demand's too huge, and it's really down to businesses, churches, or just regular people pitching in with donations to keep this going. And the way people look at you, it's different now, too. Before, they'd duck their heads, ashamed – like that lady from church I spotted but didn't call out – but now it's not

> such a guilty secret. It's just life, with students and workers lining up right alongside everyone else. It's tough figuring out who needs what when everyone's got their own mess to wrestle with. With the budget shortages hitting the foodbank hard, people couldn't swing by every three weeks like they used to – now it's stretched to four or five, and you can see it grinding some of them down. I'd spot people hanging outside the foodbank site with their [heavy] bags, and I couldn't tell – were they waiting for a ride, or was whoever's picking them up stuck working late, maybe till seven or eight? So, they'd be just sitting with their groceries till someone showed, or they'd finally give up and start hoofing it home. I really feel sorry for the refugees that have come to Canada expecting lots, and they end up living in motels and having to go to foodbanks. I don't think this is what they really expected when they arrived here…" [Interview with Stephan, 2025]

Stephan's experience of lengthening foodbank lines and shrinking supplies, coupled with Hassan's reliance on foodbanks to feed his family, encouraged me to consider how the housing crisis reshapes GARs' access to food and their daily survival strategies**.** How do soaring rents and limited incomes force GARs to prioritize housing over nutrition, and what role do foodbanks play in this situation? What do these charitable spaces reveal about the intersections of food and housing insecurity within Canada's resettlement system? More broadly, how does the normalization of foodbank use, as Stephan noted, reflect a growing acceptance of precarity as a feature of life for newcomers?

These questions, grounded in interviews with individuals like Stephan, Susan, Melody, and Ahmad, people who work closely with GARs and other immigrants, guide this chapter's exploration of how food insecurity compounds the challenges of resettlement. This chapter argues that Ottawa's housing crisis exacerbates food insecurity among GARs, transforming foodbanks into contested spaces where notions of deservingness and precarity intersect, thereby exposing the limits of Canada's neoliberal resettlement policies. While limited ethnographic access to GARs' direct experiences at foodbanks constrains this analysis, the perspectives of those who work with

GARs reveal how neoliberal policies that prioritize rapid self-sufficiency create conditions where housing costs force difficult trade-offs with food security.

In this chapter, I will first examine food insecurity in Canada, drawing on key studies to establish its dimensions and disproportionate impact on recent immigrants, including GARs. Next, I explore foodbanks as contested spaces, using Williams et al. (2016) to highlight how interactions between volunteers, clients, and welfare systems shape hierarchies of deservingness. I then delve into the lived experiences of precarity, connecting GARs' housing struggles to their reliance on foodbanks through the interviews with volunteers and anthropological insights like Cabot's (2019) concept of "internal displacement." Finally, I reflect on proposed policy reforms, such as those suggested by Ahmad, to consider how current systems could better support GARs' long-term stability. Through this analysis, the chapter more largely reveals how foodbanks, as microcosms of broader resettlement challenges, expose the limits of charitable solutions in addressing systemic inequities.

Foodbanks as Contested Spaces: Precarity and Deservingness in Refugee Resettlement

Hassan was not the only person I knew who relied on a foodbank due to high rent and other family expenses. Susan, one of the RAP team members, explained this situation to me:

> "Because housing and food costs have risen significantly, once GARs cover their housing expenses, they're left asking, 'What are we going to eat?' Is $800 enough for food? Is $1,000 enough? I don't know the answers to those questions. Many GARs shop for imported foods they're accustomed to, often only available at specific stores. I don't know the cost of those foods, and what can you do? Some turn to foodbanks. I recently visited a client who uses foodbanks, but the food available there, like sugar-filled pantry staples, isn't always the healthiest. What are you supposed to do? I'm still searching for ways to help them, and I don't know much about what happens to them afterward… ." [Interview with Susan, 2024]

Foodbanks are more than just places to pick up groceries; they are windows into the cracks of Canada's resettlement system, where GARs like Hassan grapple with hunger and housing stress. Stephan put it bluntly: "The lines keep getting longer. Rents are up, grocery prices are through the roof, and our budget hasn't budged. We're giving out less food to more people." His words echo Susan's confusion about how GARs are supposed to eat after paying rent, pointing to a deeper issue: a system that leaves newcomers vulnerable to both food and housing insecurity. To make sense of this, I draw on anthropological insights to argue that foodbanks are not neutral charities but complex spaces where precarity, characterized by unstable and uncertain living conditions, and deservingness, which determines who receives help and why, intersect. These concepts help me to trace how neoliberal policies, like those pushing rapid self-sufficiency, trap GARs in a cycle of dependence and struggle.

This kind of precarity, where one expense (housing) squeezes out another (food), is not unique to GARs. Cabot's (2019) work in Greece during its economic and refugee crises showcases a similar trend. She describes how austerity, characterized by government cuts to welfare and services, forced both citizens and refugees into a shared state of vulnerability, competing for essentials like medicine or food at grassroots clinics (747–748). In Ottawa, foodbanks mirror these clinics: places where GARs, low-income locals, and others line up, their lives shaped by the same pressures – skyrocketing rents, stagnant welfare like Ontario Works (OW), and grocery inflation. Cabot calls this phenomenon a kind of "internal displacement," where economic hardship uproots people's stability, even if they are not crossing borders (753).

This precarity is not accidental; in the case of GARs, it is baked into Canada's resettlement policies. Like the Housing Top-Up benefit described in the first chapter, which helps GARs afford rent but leaves them stranded when it ends, programs like OW assume newcomers can quickly

become self-sufficient. But as Tarasuk et al. (2017) show, recent immigrants face food insecurity at higher rates (19.6%) than others (41%), especially when relying on welfare (Vahabi et al. 2011, 929-930). Cabot's (2019) lens reveals foodbanks as sites where neoliberal cuts and rapid self-sufficiency demands collide, leaving GARs like Hassan caught in a system that promises stability but delivers uncertainty.

To understand the complex interplay of food insecurity, housing precarity, and the role of foodbanks in GARs' resettlement, I begin by defining a central concept in food studies: food insecurity. According to the 1996 World Food Summit, "food security" is defined as a condition in which all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (Tarasuk et al. 2017). In this context, "food insecurity" applies to situations where individuals or households lack adequate physical, social, or economic access to food as defined. Tarasuk et al. (2017) define "food security" through four dimensions: availability, access, utilization, and stability (40). Availability focuses on producing and supplying sufficient quality food at global, national, household, and individual levels, while access encompasses both physical proximity and economic affordability, with Canada's accessibility linked to purchasing power and income-related food insecurity (40). Utilization involves making healthy food choices and using food to meet dietary needs, requiring clean water, sanitation, and health care, alongside considerations such as food safety and dietary diversity (40). Stability ensures these dimensions are consistently maintained, safeguarding access to nutritious food during economic crises or disasters (40). They further note that "in 2011–2012, nearly 1.1 million Canadian households faced food insecurity, with recent immigrants experiencing a higher rate (19.6%) than non-recent immigrants (11.8%) and those born in Canada (12.4%)" (41). Similarly, Vahabi et al. (2011) argue that "food insecurity

was more prevalent in households receiving social assistance (60%) than those with other main sources of income" (929–930). Their research highlights that recent Latin American immigrant households experience food insecurity in Toronto (934). They also observe that households with children faced higher food insecurity (63%) than those without (47%), with children more likely to experience moderate food insecurity (40% versus 33% for adults) but less likely to face severe food insecurity compared to adults (934). However, Tarasuk and Vogt (2009) demonstrate that "[d]espite the extraordinary vulnerability of households on social assistance to food insecurity, it is important to recognize that most food-insecure households in Ontario rely on salaries or wages" (187). Their analysis indicates a direct correlation between declining household income and heightened food insecurity prevalence.

Additionally, Williams et al (2016) argue that foodbank organizations are "contested space." In other words, foodbanks consist of diverse groups – middle-class volunteers, clients (including marginalized populations), and welfare professionals – producing dynamic and contradictory political sensibilities (2292). These interactions can reinforce existing social hierarchies (e.g., through voucher systems distinguishing "deserving" from "undeserving" clients) or challenge them when volunteers and clients engage in dialogue that disrupts stereotypes (2303).

Williams et al. (2016) further illuminate foodbanks as contested spaces through their political entanglements, revealing how they navigate a fraught landscape shaped by state policies, public discourse, and grassroots agency. Politically, foodbanks, like the Trussell Trust in the UK, oscillate between being celebrated as emblems of community resilience and being vilified as enablers of welfare dependency (2297–2300), a dynamic that mirrors the contradictions of Canada's refugee resettlement system I explored in my first chapter. In Ottawa, foodbanks face a similar tension: while they fill gaps left by inadequate government support for GARs, they risk

complicity in normalizing a system where charity substitutes for structural solutions. These dynamics position foodbanks as microcosms of broader policy assemblages, where resettlement policies, welfare systems, and charitable practices intersect to produce uneven outcomes for GARs. To understand how these policies manifest in GARs' daily lives, the next section examines the structural cracks of housing precarity, where soaring rents and inadequate welfare force refugees to rely on foodbanks for survival.

Structural Cracks: Housing Precarity and Food Insecurity Among GARs

On a bitter winter night in early 2025, a man in his sixties – someone familiar to Melody, a frontline worker at a community center that provides services for all residents in Ottawa, including GARs – perished outdoors, overtaken by the chill after losing his home to rising costs. Shortly after, another devastating event unfolded: an individual, weakened by a neglected infection, was hurried from the community's entrance to medical care, only to pass away despite attempts to intervene. Melody, who had seen these struggles intensify, carried a quiet sorrow in her voice as she spoke of them. These losses were not standalone incidents, according to Melody, but symptoms of a deeper breakdown, where the lack of stable shelter had spiraled into a fight for basic survival, eroding safeguards against starvation and sickness.

> "When I first started two years ago, I stepped into a role managing our stockpile, a space where we kept essentials flowing from various suppliers…Back then, we could order what we truly needed from wholesalers, even with a tight budget, and local markets sent us goods nearing their end, like meat we'd freeze right away or items expiring that day. Places with higher demand, like ours with a hundred people, could request 14 bread packs or 8 milk sets, while smaller spots got less. We'd sort everything: what we could cook went to the kitchen, and extras like noodles stayed out for anyone to take. Now, though, they've told us supplies will drop to once a month in 2025: just one meat crate and two egg batches. The need

has tripled, but support hasn't budged, and it's breaking the system." [Interview with Melody, 2025]

Melody's journey at the community center, where warm meals are provided for people who experience homelessness, had begun two years prior as a prep aide, but she then quickly rose to overseer within three months. When I met her, her position included orchestrating provisions from distributors, bulk suppliers like Cisco, and donations from stores like Whole Foods, managing a system that once hummed with possibility. Initially, their storage area, a cool, rack-lined corner, was stocked with ground beef, dairy, and eggs, bolstered by surplus from events or last-minute market rescues. On designated days, people lined up, signed in, and collected their shares, four items when stocks were plentiful, one when they dwindled. During school breaks, extra bread and milk lined hallway tables, a fleeting abundance offered freely. By 2025, however, this stream had slowed to a trickle. Deliveries shrank to monthly drops, with meat reduced to a single crate and eggs to two batches, barely a quarter of previous levels. The center, once feeding 50 daily with hot meals, now served 180 at noon and 180 at dusk, its small staff stretched across two shifts to meet the rising tide of need.

This change lays bare a harsh truth: the community center, a vital lifeline for all residents in downtown Ottawa, including GARs, now reflects scarcity, its shelves sparse as donations fail to keep pace with demand. People wait longer, receive less, and carry home items, sometimes spoiled or past their prime, that echo their own strained circumstances. The center's allocation system, distributing 14 loaves of bread and 8 cartons of milk for a 100-person site and fewer for smaller ones, reveals a rationing approach that cannot meet the growing hunger it aims to address.

Melody's words linger, heavy with the weight of a system stretched beyond its limits. Her account of dwindling supplies paints a stark picture of scarcity at the community center. This shortage represents more than just fewer boxes of food arriving; it reveals how people, including

GARs, are forced to line up for scraps, their hopes for stability in Canada eroded by a housing crisis that leaves no room for meeting basic needs like food. As Melody mentioned, parents skip meals so their children can eat, and the fridge, once brimming, stands nearly empty, its sparse contents a mirror of the fragile lives it serves. This unraveling, as Melody's weary voice reveals, ties directly to housing shortages that drain GARs' budgets, forcing them to choose between rent and groceries.

Sharryn Kasmir's (2018) concept of precarity offers a lens to understand this crisis, framing it as a condition of "vulnerability, displacement, and insecurity" rooted in capitalism's uneven distribution of resources (1). For GARs who go regularly to community fridges, precarity manifests in the relentless pressure of rent, which consumes most of their income, leaving little for food. Kasmir argues that neoliberal policies, like austerity and reduced public welfare, deepen this vulnerability by concentrating wealth and eroding support systems (1). Melody's observation that "support hasn't budged" despite tripled need reflects this neoliberal retreat, where funding for food aid stagnates while housing and groceries costs soar. The elderly man who froze, evicted after decades in his home, and the infected man, whose untreated wounds signaled an unhoused life, embody what Kasmir, drawing on Judith Butler, calls the "injury" and "violence" of precarious existence (2). Their deaths are not isolated tragedies but endpoints of a system where housing instability strips away the means to survive. For GARs, this precarity is not new but an extension of the "wagelessness" Kasmir describes, where survival hinges on informal strategies like queuing for food or relying on charity, yet still falls short (6). As Melody's clients navigate these constraints, their struggle echoes Kasmir's argument that capitalism's "permanent outsiders," like GARs, are excluded by design, caught in a cycle where systemic neglect amplifies their hardship (5).

This cycle of precarity is deepened by what Nina Gren and colleagues (2024) term "bureaucratic violence," where administrative inaction inflicts harm through "delays" and "rituals" (3). At the community center, the rationing of food, tied to site capacity rather than actual need, mirrors this violence. Melody's account of supplies dropping to a single monthly crate illustrates how underfunded food aid fails to match the hunger it is supposed to address, leaving GARs to decipher a system that promises resettlement but delivers scarcity. Gren et al. argue that such bureaucratic practices, rooted in the state's control over marginalized groups, create a "power imbalance" where refugees bear the burden of interpreting opaque processes (9). For instance, the center's allocation system, distributing fewer resources to smaller sites, forces GARs to compete for dwindling aid, a process that Gren et al. liken to "structural violence" embedded in policy inaction (4). This resonates with the center's strained efforts to feed 360 daily meals with a skeleton crew, a frantic attempt to patch a system fraying under neglect.

Melody's account reveals struggles that belie Canada's resettlement promises, etched in the weary faces of her clients as they queue for dwindling provisions at the community center. The surge in demand, two and a half times higher, unmet by stagnant funding, reveals a system creaking under its own weight, where GARs' hopes for stability in Canada are undermined by a housing crisis that leaves no room for basic nourishment. Yet, beyond this precarity, a subtler dynamic emerges: the question of who is deemed worthy of aid. As Melody sorts sparse donations, deciding what goes to the kitchen and what sits on open tables, her choices reflect an unspoken moral calculus, prioritizing families, the visibly desperate, or those who seem most grateful. This hints at the concept of deservingness, which, as explored in the following subsection, shapes how GARs navigate foodbanks not just as sites of survival but as spaces where their access to food and affordable housing is at the mercy of moral judgments by those supporting them.

Deservingness in Ottawa's Resettlement Landscape

Ahmad, a former GAR from Turkey who now works at one of the foodbank branches in Ottawa, suggested a unique perspective shaped by his experiences on both sides of the resettlement process. Having navigated the GAR challenges himself before transitioning to supporting other newcomers through his work at the foodbank, Ahmad possessed insider knowledge that informed his critical view of current policies. I saw him for the first time, sitting in a café located on Industrial Avenue. When I asked him what he would do as a policymaker, his response was significantly different from others:

> "The first thing I would do is close all government employment centers specifically for newcomers that merely compile job listings without providing actual placement…there's no need for another large organization that receives substantial government funding while not doing anything special. Secondly, I would provide RAP support during your first year in Canada, whether you work or not and eliminate taxes for two years to encourage employment and self-sufficiency… About housing, I would make newcomers pay 30% of whatever they earn as rent while the government covered 70% of rent for a decent period, creating a more equitable system than the current permanent housing model. Finally, I would reform the welfare policies in a way that they support those who are *deserving*…we've had cases where someone deliberately failed three terms in government language classes to qualify for learning disability benefits, while simultaneously hiring private tutors to learn the language. I believe that some GARs who are applying for ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program), under which they receive monthly payments and also get social or government housing, are not really eligible or deserving. I know some of these GARs pay therapists who work in Toronto to write documents where these specific GARs are recognized as people struggling with mental health issues. In some cases, these GARs pretend that they're homeless or have suicidal thoughts. I mean, some people really are homeless, while some GARs are thinking about how they can bypass the government and taxes to live more easily. However, since I'm in touch with these GARs, I know that some of them feel depressed since they don't work and don't make friends outside of their community. So, I guess they are not really integrated into their new home, where they are supposed to be free and happy. I'm a GAR and I've paid all my taxes since my first year in Canada because I could find a related full-time job. The government even received my flight ticket price and the extra RAP payments that I received while I was working full-time. Sometimes I feel that

> if I were like those specific GARs who just rely on welfare payments instead of working hard to be independent, life would be easier (laugh).

Ahmad's voice carried the weight of his journey as a former GAR and current foodbank volunteer, where he witnessed the daily struggles of other GARs like Hassan, whose income was stretched thin by Ottawa's relentless rental market. His approach to government employment centers, criticized for offering little more than job listings without addressing barriers like limited Canadian work experience, could be similar to what I argued in the first chapter on CCI and RAP employees' evaluation of IRCC policies' effects. Ahmad saw GARs queue for expired meats and cans at the foodbank, a reality that exposed the hollowness of the resettlement promises. Dhaliwal and Forkert (2016) argue that state-led interventions such as employment centers often devalue immigrants by providing superficial support that reinforces their marginality rather than enabling economic stability (50). Their argument resonates with Ahmad's perspective: these centers, by failing to tackle structural obstacles, deepen GARs' precarity, leaving them to navigate a system where opportunity remains elusive. More precisely, Dhaliwal and Forkert's (2016) study illuminates why Ahmad's critique strikes at the heart of neoliberal resettlement logic. They contend that state discourses construct a "fantasy citizenship," where immigrants have to prove their legitimacy through immediate economic productivity, a standard that marginalizes those unable to meet it (51–53). Similarly, Ahmad perceives employment centers as aligned with the "fantasy citizenship" concept, offering tokenistic listings that demand GARs demonstrate hyper productivity while ignoring systemic barriers like language barriers or the lack of local networks.

Additionally, Dhaliwal and Forkert (2016) elaborate that immigrants often internalize these narratives, distancing themselves from "undeserving" others to assert their own worth (52–53).

Ahmad's distinction between those who deserve social housing and those who do not reflects this argument of the internalization of deservingness discourses as moral judgment.

Willen and Cook (2022) frame deservingness as a "vernacular moral register" that evaluates worth based on context-specific notions of vulnerability and compliance, often misinterpreting survival strategies as deceit (71, 81). Ahmad's argument aligns with this meaning of deservingness: his moral stance defines certain GARs as exploiting the system, yet it overlooks how such actions, like getting approval of mental health disorders from therapists, may constitute desperate responses to a resettlement process that offers inadequate support. Willen and Cook (2022) illuminate that these misreadings stem from policies that demand conformity to an idealized refugee narrative. The latter must be grateful, hardworking, and self-reliant, marginalizing those who navigate constraints unconventionally (81). Ahmad's perspective, shaped by his friendship with a specific community of GARs, reflects this internalized hierarchy, where only those who align with neoliberal ideals are deemed worthy. His attitude reverberates the tensions at CCI, where some caseworkers who were once GARs themselves, and who therefore shared cultural ties with GARs, sometimes judged their clients' agency (their refusal of proposed houses) as noncompliance.

Nicole Hoellerer (2022) examines what she terms "the politics of deservingness," defining it as the ongoing process that creates boundaries between those included and excluded through determinations of who merits support, resources, or community membership (279). According to her argument, these judgments constitute a moral framework for allocating rights and resources, deeply influenced by specific historical circumstances, political environments, and social contexts (279). She uses this concept at the "microlevel of small, social networks, such as a refugee community itself" (279). In this vein, Ahmad's approach to those who are deserving could be

understood as a tool of access to affordable housing for those he believes are "deserving" and those who are "undeserving." Similarly, Dhaliwal and Forkert (2016) illuminate that people from marginalized backgrounds frequently distance themselves from other excluded groups, positioning themselves as more legitimate. Their study shows how those experiencing devaluation through mainstream discourse may adopt and reinforce similar classifications, creating divisions within communities that mirror wider social judgments about who deserves resources and recognition. When Ahmad criticizes a specific group of GARs for supposedly gaming the system to get disability support, this trend is evident. His dual identity as a former GAR now working at a foodbank shows how he has absorbed what Dhaliwal and Forkert (2016) call "good citizenship" values that measure worth through productivity. Yet Ahmad also observes that these same GARs experience depression and isolation, highlighting the very contradiction Hoellerer (2022) identifies within deservingness politics, where essential coping strategies are frequently misunderstood as deception. His approach captures an essential conflict: criticizing other GARs while also recognizing the structural failures affecting them. This nuanced stance demonstrates how individuals navigating precarity participate in what Dhaliwal and Forkert (2016) describe as "bids for recognition" (50), distancing themselves from marginalized identities while still recognizing the shared challenges created by institutional inadequacies. This reveals how deservingness hierarchies do not just exist in official policies but become recreated and challenged within refugee communities themselves, all while the resettlement system continues failing to meet basic housing and food needs.

However, it was not the first time that I encountered Ahmad's approach to deservingness. During my interview with Ali, one of the RAP team members who was once a GAR himself, he elaborated on this notion of deservingness from a different perspective:

> Clients are challenged, too. You know what's better for them, to incentivize them to take certain units. We cannot force them, but [we know] it's better for them. One of the issues right now we have [is] when they come to orientation, we let them know that we will show clean, safe, affordable [places] within their budget. If the landlord rejects them, that's fine. But some clients [GARs] will say, 'Oh, I don't want this unit', [we ask] why? [They say] 'Because I want to live close to my friends in Hunt Club'. So, they will say, 'I don't want to live in that area. I want to live in this area.' It becomes a really big issue when the clients [focus on] something that [we know] is not important for them. Sometimes they reject the house because they have a friend who lives in Gloucester, so they don't want to live in the area that we show them. But we say this is within your budget, [but] the school circles they still don't accept. We have a letter of acknowledgement. So, we pull out that letter from the IRCC. Clients will acknowledge that other than safety, cleanliness, and budget, they cannot say, 'I don't want this neighborhood because my friends don't live here.' Otherwise, we will be stuck here forever. That's the challenge. They need to sign that letter once two houses, two units, they've refused for no reason…So, once they've refused two houses for no apparent reason, no reasonable reason, then we send them to immigration (IRCC). The immigration officer will talk to them. (Interview with Ali, 2024)

Ali's argument reveals how deservingness operates as a disciplinary mechanism within Canada's resettlement system. When he dismisses GARs' preferences to live near friends or community as "not important," he positions himself as an arbiter of legitimate needs, reinforcing an institutional hierarchy that privileges economic pragmatism over social connection. The letter of acknowledgment functions as what Gren et al. (2024) might term a "bureaucratic ritual" that formalizes this hierarchy, requiring GARs to justify their housing preferences within narrowly defined parameters of "reasonable" refusal.

This bureaucratic gatekeeping reflects the syncretic nature of deservingness assessments where "professional expertise, 'common sense' and personal beliefs" (Willen and Cook 2022, 72) converge to determine who merits accommodation. Ali's approach as a former GAR himself reveals precisely what Dhaliwal and Forkert (2016) identify in their study: how "'good citizenship' is seen to be embodied within certain behaviors, while other behaviors are seen as marking one as unfit for being a responsible citizen" (56). The process he describes, where GARs must accept

housing options based solely on safety, cleanliness, and budget, with no consideration for community proximity, represents what Sales (2002) identifies as policies that "force [refugees] to rely on interim government support" (2) while simultaneously constructing them as burdens when they express legitimate social needs. By dismissing proximity to community as an "unreasonable" housing preference, Ali's opinion aligns with what Hoellerer (2022) describes as "the active process of creating and maintaining inclusion and exclusion 'Othering'" (279) at the microlevel of refugee communities themselves. This creates a paradoxical situation where former GARs like Ali become enforcers of the very system that once constrained them, embodying the contradiction Dhaliwal and Forkert (2016) identify within the neoliberal resettlement system, where "there is no necessary connection between neoliberal regimes that value productivity and commodification and the socially conservative values" that define worthiness (57). GARs who prefer closeness to their community risk being labeled as ungrateful, reflecting what Willen and Cook (2022) explore as "politics of blame" that leads stakeholders to "deem migrants undeserving" (75). The threat of referral to immigration officers after two "unreasonable" refusals weaponizes deservingness as a disciplinary mechanism, reinforcing institutional power while diminishing refugees' agency in creating their desired homes. This reveals how deeply embedded these moral hierarchies become, as Ali has internalized a system that privileges economic pragmatism over what Skeggs (2014) calls "values beyond (exchange) value," such as relating to others "with attentiveness and compassion, beyond exchange" (13).

This interplay ultimately reveals the contradictions within Canada's resettlement system, which promises integration while simultaneously undermining the social connections that facilitate it. The bureaucratic enforcement of housing pragmatism over community cohesion demonstrates how deservingness operates not merely as an assessment but as a governance technology that

shapes GARs' possibilities for belonging. What makes this system particularly powerful is how these moral hierarchies become internalized and reproduced within GAR communities themselves, as former GARs like Ali adopt and enforce the same approach that once constrained them. This creates a cycle where deservingness becomes embedded at multiple levels, constraining GARs' agency while rendering them responsible for navigating a system structured to prioritize institutional efficiency over their social flourishing.

The bureaucratic gatekeeping of deservingness, as Ali's narrative illustrates, constrains GARs' agency, casting their social needs as unreasonable. Yet, these moral hierarchies extend beyond official institutions and initial resettlement, permeating community dynamics and shaping how GARs navigate food insecurity in the long term. Even as GARs resist these frameworks in various ways, the internalized notions of "deserving" versus "undeserving" continue to influence access to resources and support networks. The next section delves into these lasting echoes, exploring how foodbanks become enduring lifelines for GARs facing persistent precarity after RAP support ends, and how these spaces further reinforce or challenge established hierarchies of deservingness.

Hunger's Lasting Echoes: Navigating Precarity in Ottawa's Resettlement Landscape

In the quiet hum of Ottawa's foodbanks, where shelves groan under the weight of scarcity and volunteers like Stephan tally the faces of newcomers and locals alike, a multi-layered story unfolds of interwoven support systems and resettlement promises unfulfilled. For GARs like Hassan, foodbanks are not mere stopgaps but sites of negotiation where the housing crisis and neoliberal resettlement policies collide, reshaping survival into a daily act of negotiation. These spaces, as this chapter has shown, are contested not only by the scarcity of resources but by the

moral calculus of deservingness, where GARs must perform vulnerability or gratitude to access aid. Yet, in their quiet resilience, carrying heavy bags from foodbank to the motel, or sharing stories with neighbors like Susan, GARs reveal a profound agency, transforming these sites of precarity into spaces of community and resistance.

The interplay of food and housing insecurity, illuminated through the voices of Stephan, Melody, Ahmad, and Ali, exposes the structural contradictions in Canada's resettlement system. Foodbanks, as contested spaces, reflect the heterogeneity of policy assemblages, where RAP's rigid timelines and Ontario Works' meager support intersect with soaring rents to produce emergent effects: families prioritizing shelter over nourishment, and communities leaning on charity to fill gaps left by policy failures. The notion of deservingness, as Willen and Cook (2022) articulate, operates as a governance technology, sorting GARs into hierarchies of worth that mirror the broader neoliberal demand for rapid self-sufficiency This pattern is particularly evident in how former GARs themselves, like Ahmad and Ali, have internalized and reproduced these moral judgements, judging others' survival strategies through concepts of worthiness and compliance rather than recognizing them as responses to systemic constraints.

This chapter's journey through Ottawa's foodbanks underscores a critical paradox: while intended as temporary aid, these spaces have become enduring fixtures of resettlement, their lengthening lines a testament to the housing crisis's ripple effects. The normalization of foodbank use, as Stephan observed, signals not merely a cultural shift but a deeper institutionalization of precarity as an accepted feature of newcomer life. This reality betrays Canada's promise as a refuge, revealing how resettlement policies that emphasize rapid self-sufficiency without addressing structural barriers inevitably produce food insecurity. The experiences at the

community center, where supplies dwindle while demand triples, illustrate how policy failures materialize in empty shelves and hungry families.

What emerges most powerfully from these ethnographic accounts is a pervasive contradiction governing all state-led institutions serving GARs and other refugees. Foodbanks strain under overcrowded queues while employment centers engage in bureaucratic performances, compiling reports to secure funding for what they label as "employment services" but which, as Ahmad incisively noted, amount to little more than distributing job listings without addressing structural barriers GARs face. For me, the most striking moment was Stephan's frank recognition, echoed by other employees, that "the government can't keep up anymore," a devastating reality for frontline workers like Susan who entered this field with aspirations to improve the system but now find themselves bearing witness to its systemic failures. The community center's refrigerator, operating independently from foodbank networks through direct community donations, provides a powerful metaphor for this broader collapse, its shelves growing emptier while demand surges compared to just one year prior.

Through these intersecting narratives, I have attempted to illuminate how the housing crisis radiates outward, producing food precarity and complex moral evaluations of deservingness. In the end, Ottawa's foodbanks stand as both mirrors and battlegrounds, reflecting the unfulfilled promise of resettlement while hosting the quiet defiance of those who refuse to be defined by scarcity. For GARs, lining up for food, like making a home, becomes a testament to resilience, not solely the neoliberal resilience that places responsibility on individuals to overcome structural barriers, but also a collective resilience forged through shared struggle and mutual support. Their persistent presence in these spaces challenges the moral hierarchies of deservingness that permeate resettlement discourse, demanding recognition not as grateful recipients of charity but as rights-

bearing individuals whose dignified survival should not depend on performative vulnerability or gratitude. As these stories reverberate beyond foodbank walls, they compel us to reimagine resettlement as a shared commitment to justice rather than a conditional offer of minimal support.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the intricate interplay between Canada's neoliberal resettlement policies and the housing crisis in Ottawa, focusing on the lived experiences of GARs as they navigate housing and food precarity. Through an anthropological lens informed by critical refugee studies and the anthropology of policy, I have addressed three central research questions: First, how do neoliberal resettlement policies, emphasizing rapid self-sufficiency, interact with Ottawa's housing market to create precarity for GARs? Second, how do GARs exercise agency through housing strategies and social networks to construct homes within institutional constraints? Third, how does the housing crisis drive food insecurity among GARs, and how do foodbanks, as sites of contested deservingness, reflect systemic policy failures? The main argument posited is that Canada's resettlement system, driven by neoliberal logic, generates housing and food precarity by enforcing an unrealistic one-year timeline for independence, yet GARs demonstrate resilience through agency and informal networks, underscoring the urgent need for policy reforms that prioritize long-term stability. Each chapter of this thesis has contributed to substantiating this argument by illuminating distinct facets of GARs' resettlement experiences, from policy contradictions, home-making strategies, to foodbank dynamics, while collectively highlighting the systemic barriers and creative resistances that define their journeys.

Chapter One, "Blueprints and Broken Promises: The Architecture of Policy in Practice," employed the concept of policy assemblage to dissect how neoliberal resettlement policies, such as the RAP and the Housing Top-Up benefit, interact with Ottawa's housing market to produce precarity. Through ethnographic insights from CCI's employees like Anna and GARs' struggles, this chapter revealed the contradictions inherent in policies that prioritize rapid exits from temporary housing over long-term stability. The policy assemblage framework illuminated how

heterogeneous elements, IRCC's resettlement mandates, OW welfare constraints, and a discriminatory rental market, converge to undermine GARs' housing security, particularly after RAP support ends. Anna's frustration with the inadequacy of the Housing Top-Up benefit, which fails to bridge the gap to OW's meager support, underscores the systemic failure to address rising rental costs and landlord biases, as evidenced by refusals to rent to Afghan and Syrian GARs. This chapter directly addressed the first research question, demonstrating that neoliberal policies exacerbate precarity by misaligning short-term interventions with the structural realities of Ottawa's housing crisis, laying the foundation for the exploration of how GARs exercise agency within these constraints in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two, "Making Home: Housing Strategies and Resistance Among Government-Assisted Refugees in Ottawa," traced GARs' housing trajectories from temporary accommodations to permanent homes, using the concept of arrival infrastructure to showcase their agency. Through stories like Arezoo's independent housing search and Mohammad's reliance on family networks, this chapter demonstrated how GARs leverage both formal (CCI, RAP) and informal (family network) channels to navigate institutional constraints. The emphasis on family networks as arrival infrastructure, as conceptualized by Meeus et al. (2019), highlighted how GARs transform neoliberal pressures for rapid self-sufficiency into opportunities for belonging, challenging the refugee paradigm that casts them as passive victims (Malkki 1992). This chapter addressed the second research question by illustrating GARs' strategic agency, whether rejecting substandard housing or pooling resources with kin, while also revealing the limitations faced by those without networks, like Sheila. By centering GARs' voices, this chapter underscored their refusal to be defined by precarity, advocating for policies that recognize their diverse backgrounds and aspirations.

Chapter Three, “Hunger’s Hidden Rooms: Food Precarity and the Unseen Cracks of Resettlement,” extended this analysis by examining how GARs navigate the food precarity produced by housing insecurity. Drawing on the narratives of volunteers like Stephan and GARs like Hassan, this chapter highlighted how the high cost of rent forces GARs to prioritize shelter over food, relying on foodbanks that impose moral hierarchies. The concept of deservingness, as articulated by Willen and Cook (2022), revealed how foodbank practices mirror resettlement policies that favor self-reliant refugees, marginalizing those who navigate systemic barriers unconventionally. Ali’s bureaucratic enforcement of housing choices, dismissing GARs’ social preferences as unreasonable, further illustrated how deservingness operates as a governance technology, constraining agency. This chapter answered the third research question by showing that housing-driven food insecurity is a direct consequence of policy failures, with foodbanks reflecting and reinforcing the structural violence embedded in neoliberal resettlement. The ethnographic focus on GARs’ resilience, such as sharing resources with neighbors, also highlighted the agency explored in the second chapter.

To address these systemic contradictions and foster sustainable resettlement, a fundamental overhaul of Canada’s welfare policies is essential. The welfare policies governing GAR resettlement require fundamental reconceptualization. Current approaches reflect a disciplinary neoliberal logic that measures success solely through economic self-sufficiency, ignoring the complex challenges refugees face. The rigid one-year timeline for transitioning from RAP to reduced OW support creates artificial pressure that often leads to housing instability and economic precarity. Rather than implementing temporary financial supports that mask structural issues, policy reforms must prioritize sustainable resettlement over quick independence. This requires extending support periods, developing targeted employment programs that recognize refugees’

diverse skills and challenges, and addressing systemic barriers in housing access. Most critically, policymakers must abandon the notion that all refugees can or should become "entrepreneurs of self" within an arbitrary timeline. Instead, resettlement policies should provide flexible, long-term support that acknowledges the diverse circumstances, traumas, and capabilities of different refugee populations. Only through such fundamental reforms can Canada move beyond the current system's contradictions to create truly supportive resettlement pathways for GARs.

Building on this call for comprehensive policy reform, the pervasive issue of food precarity further underscores the need for targeted interventions that address the ripple effects of housing insecurity. To move beyond these echoes of empty shelves, Canada's resettlement system demands a reckoning. The neoliberal logic that measures success by rapid independence must give way to policies that honor the complex realities of refugee lives. Extending RAP support beyond one year, increasing funding for foodbanks and a community center, and integrating employment programs that recognize GARs' diverse skills, proposals echoed by Ahmad and Mahmud, could begin to bridge the gap between promise and reality. More fundamentally, policymakers must recognize foodbanks not as solutions but as symptoms of a system that leaves GARs to bear the weight of structural failures. By centering GAR voices, as Susan urged, reforms can shift from patchwork fixes to transformative support, ensuring that resettlement becomes a journey toward stability, not a cycle of hunger and displacement.

Collectively, these chapters substantiate the thesis's central argument: Canada's neoliberal resettlement system, with its one-year timeline, generates precarity by failing to address structural barriers in housing and food security, yet GARs' agency and networks offer pathways to resilience that demand policy reform. The policy assemblage framework revealed the unintended consequences of fragmented policies, while critical refugee studies reframed GARs as active

agents, challenging humanitarian narratives that obscure systemic violence (Espiritu et al. 2022). The ethnographic narratives, from Anna's policy critiques to Arezoo's home-making, wove a tapestry of human resilience against a backdrop of institutional failure, emphasizing the need for reforms that extend RAP support, invest in affordable housing, and integrate GARs' social networks into resettlement processes.

Looking forward, this research opens several avenues for future inquiry. First, a comparative study of GARs' experiences in smaller Canadian towns and rural communities, where housing markets may differ significantly from major urban centers, could illuminate how varying settlement contexts shape precarity and agency differently, potentially revealing alternative pathways to stability outside high-pressure metropolitan housing markets. Second, longitudinal research tracking GARs beyond their first year could provide deeper insights into the long-term impacts of neoliberal policies and the sustainability of their housing strategies. Third, exploring the role of second-generation immigrant caseworkers, who often share cultural ties with GARs, could reveal how their positionalities influence resettlement dynamics, particularly in navigating cultural misunderstandings or policy constraints. Finally, investigating the intersection of gender and resettlement could uncover how women GARs, like Sheila, face unique challenges in accessing housing and food resources, especially when isolated from family networks.

In conclusion, this thesis underscores the urgent need to reimagine Canada's resettlement system as a shared commitment to long-term stability, rather than a race to self-sufficiency that leaves GARs vulnerable. The stories of Arezoo, Mohammad, and others are not merely tales of survival but powerful critiques of a system that promises refuge yet delivers precarity. Their resilience, forged through agency and community, compels policymakers to listen to GARs' voices, invest in affordable housing, and extend support beyond arbitrary timelines. As Ottawa's

foodbanks and temporary hotels stand as mirrors of unfulfilled promises, GARs' refusal to surrender hope, whether lining up for food or building homes with kin, testifies to their enduring humanity. This work calls for a new resettlement approach that honors their aspirations, ensuring that Canada becomes not just a destination, but a true home where no one is left to navigate precarity alone.

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