



‘Our home, your home?’ The precarious housing pathways of asylum seekers in Catalonia

Olatz Ribera-Almandoz^a , Carlos Delclós^b  and Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas^a 

^aCIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs), Barcelona, Spain; ^bInstitute for Government and Public Policy (IGOP), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the multi-layered barriers asylum seekers face in accessing secure and adequate housing in a host society through the case of Catalonia (Spain). While the existing literature mainly focuses on the effects of micro-level factors, we argue that these need to be analysed in combination with meso-level actors and macro-structural phenomena. Drawing on an exploratory survey of 300 international protection applicants and 60 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders and asylum seekers, we analyse their exposure to different dimensions of housing precariousness. Our research finds that, although certain individual characteristics such as age, sex and origin remain relevant in explaining housing pathways, these factors are strongly mediated by the role of NGOs and support networks, and by the structural features of the asylum system and housing market. We conclude that the complex interactions of these factors result in deeply unstable and fragmented housing trajectories that contribute to high levels of disorientation, precariousness, and exclusion among those seeking accommodation.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 November 2020
Accepted 19 October 2022


KEYWORDS

Asylum seekers; refugees; housing precariousness; homelessness; housing exclusion

Introduction

In the fields of migration and refugee studies and housing research, it is well documented that access to appropriate housing is an essential vector of settlement and socioeconomic integration (see, for example, Kissoon, 2010; Phillips, 2006; Rose, 2001). Evidence from recent research in Europe and beyond suggests that individual characteristics, such as limited linguistic and educational resources, lack of support networks in host societies, and insufficient or precarious employment, often translate into complex and non-linear accommodation trajectories that negatively impact the everyday lives of asylum seekers and refugees (Murdie, 2008; Teixeira, 2008; Shier *et al*, 2016).

CONTACT Olatz Ribera-Almandoz  oribera@cidob.org  CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs), Carrer Elisabets, 12, 08001, Barcelona, Spain.

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2022.2141202>

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

While existing literature has generally focused on understanding the effect of individual factors on the housing outcomes of asylum seekers, there is currently little understanding of how these are mediated by key actors, such as community networks, NGOs, and private landlords, as well as structural phenomena, including housing markets and asylum reception systems. Yet these actors and structures have the potential to exacerbate the effects of individual characteristics or reduce their influence on the experience of asylum seekers. For instance, support from NGOs may help close the gap between those with and without prior knowledge of the local language, whereas housing market conditions may exacerbate the problems faced by those with precarious jobs. A full understanding of what determines the housing outcomes of refugees thus requires analyses that go beyond the individual characteristics of those being accommodated.

As a step forward, our paper explores the multi-layered barriers asylum seekers face in accessing secure and adequate housing in a host society, through the case of Catalonia (Spain). Drawing from the fields of critical migration and housing studies, it brings the discussion of asylum seekers' accommodation into conversation with a recent body of work examining the notion of housing precariousness (Baban *et al*, 2017; Clair *et al*, 2019). We use a multi-dimensional account of precariousness that includes housing insecurity, inadequacy, and rough sleeping to produce a fine-grained account of the variegated challenges facing asylum seekers. Our research is informed by three main research questions: (1) Under what conditions do asylum seekers experience different dimensions of housing precariousness; (2) what are the individual and structural factors and actors that influence their housing trajectories at the early stages of their settlement; and (3) how do they perceive their housing experiences?

This paper therefore uses the case of Catalonia to further our understanding of the housing integration experiences of asylum seekers globally and how these are affected by individual characteristics, actors and structural barriers. The term 'asylum seekers' here refers to forced migrants who have formalised an application for international protection and are waiting for a decision on their case from the Spanish authorities (UNHCR, 2021). In the context of the European Union, member states have the obligation to 'provide an adequate standard of living for applicants, which guarantees their subsistence and protects their physical and mental health' (Article 17.2, Directive 2013/33/EU).

The case of Catalonia was chosen because it exhibits both an exponential increase in asylum applications alongside structural issues such as a highly insecure and fragmented housing market. In the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, applications rose at the national level from 14,887 in 2015 to 118,446 in 2019, while the region of Catalonia saw a rise from 1,302 to 13,278 (OAR, 2020). During this period, Barcelona and Catalonia more generally made a concerted effort to cultivate an international reputation for welcoming refugees and asylum seekers. Through a range of mass mobilisations and civil society initiatives, such as the *Casa Nostra, Casa Vostra* [Our Home, Your Home] campaign, the Spanish government was placed under significant pressure to meet its unfulfilled relocation commitments. However, efforts to accommodate refugees are taking place in a problematic context. Following the housing crash of the late 2000s, the housing market has suffered a generalised

shortage of affordable and adequate housing that mainly affects low-income households. Similar to trends observed in other European countries, the combination of both tendencies has frequently resulted in extended stays in emergency shelters, reception centres and collective accommodation facilities, as well as a growing transfer of responsibilities for procuring accommodation from the state to local authorities, non-state actors and asylum seekers themselves (Darling, 2016; Garcés-Mascreñas and Ribera-Almandoz, 2020).

We use a mixed methods approach to examine this case study, which includes new data from the CASASIL Survey on Refugee Housing Conditions as well as semi-structured interviews with stakeholders and asylum seekers. The survey was conducted in 2019 and represents the first of its kind, offering a broad view of the housing trajectories and conditions of asylum seekers and refugees in Catalonia (see also Ribera-Almandoz, Delclós and Garcés-Mascreñas, 2020). It is then combined with in-depth interviews, which offer a more robust understanding of the experiences of those involved in the asylum reception system.

The paper proceeds in five sections. Section one reflects on approaches to the housing integration of refugees and asylum seekers within critical migration and housing studies. We argue that it is the interplay between individual factors, actors and structural barriers that shapes the housing outcomes of asylum seekers and modulates their exposure to different dimensions of housing precariousness. Sections two and three describe the research design adopted for this study, situating the analysis in the context of the Catalan housing market and Spain's asylum reception system. The fourth section discusses our empirical findings. In the conclusion, we reflect upon the key implications of our empirical findings and succinctly position them within the recent literature on border assemblages.

Bringing together the micro, the meso and the macro

Securing safe, adequate and affordable accommodation, particularly in the initial stages of settlement, is central to the development of a sense of safety and belonging, and the strength of family and community ties (Rose, 2001; Phillips, 2006). It is also crucial for people's physical and emotional wellbeing, with direct implications for their access to education, employment and welfare services (Kissoon, 2010; Marsh *et al.*, 2000). The first, and most widespread, strand of research on refugee accommodation focuses on the micro level, investigating how housing outcomes are affected by asylum seekers' material and cognitive resources, frequently placing their level of education and language skills at the centre of analysis. It also examines the effect of their legal status, place of origin, and previous acquaintances in the host society (Murdie, 2008; Teixeira, 2008).

While we recognise the importance of these micro characteristics, an exclusive focus on them ignores the role of actors and structural barriers in the accommodation of asylum claimants. A more recent research stream has paid greater attention to actors, social networks and intermediaries as facilitators or obstacles in the access to housing. Key among these are social and community networks and NGOs, which have been found to be important in providing access or alternatives to increasingly expensive and saturated housing markets (Aigner, 2019). Other relevant actors include

private landlords and real estate agencies, who act as gatekeepers to housing and may practice discrimination towards certain groups (Teixeira, 2008).

Coming mainly from the field of critical migration studies, recent research has also identified structural barriers to housing migrants and refugees. This literature points to the function of the housing market and its relationship with the state as crucial structural determinants of social segregation, displacement and residential marginalisation (Arbaci, 2008). In the case of asylum seekers, these are additionally triggered by the reception system itself and changes to it. Recent work on austerity urbanism (Peck, 2012) has shown how decreases in public spending and increased privatisation following the 2008 financial crisis have led to the externalisation of public services, thus transferring the responsibilities for procuring accommodation from the state to asylum seekers and other vulnerable populations (Darling, 2016; Soederberg, 2019). Because these structural factors restrict access not only to housing but also to other social and civil rights, scholars often conceptualise them as internal borders operating within national territories (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; see also Hamann and El-Kayed, 2018).

Although there has been research engaging separately with the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of analysis, our research aims to bring new light to the interplay between them. Specifically, we are interested in how these levels combine at different stages of individual migration and housing trajectories to modulate the exposure of asylum seekers to different types of housing precariousness, and how these exposures are subjectively interpreted. By examining the relationship between the lived housing experiences of asylum seekers, the Spanish asylum system, and the Catalan housing market, our study seeks to understand the interplay between these multiple levels of analysis unlike previous research.

Housing precariousness among asylum seekers

The significant challenges involved in the individual, actor and structural levels described above occur over several stages, often preventing asylum seekers from accessing safe, stable, and appropriate housing. To further our analysis on their dynamic housing trajectories, we draw on two key concepts from the field of housing studies. The first is the analytical concept of housing pathways, which Clapham (2005) defines as patterns of interaction or practices concerning house and home, over time and space. Because it foregrounds both the meanings of home and housing and the interactions that shape practices around them as dynamic in nature, this approach is germane to the experiences of asylum seekers, given their unique attachment to state intervention and the centrality of such notions as ‘integration’ and ‘belonging’ within those experiences. Moreover, the housing pathways approach provides a compelling lens through which to compare the linear temporality that characterises the notions of integration and autonomy at the heart of Spain’s asylum and integration policies with the complex patterns of residential mobility commonly experienced by immigrants (Balampanidis, 2020).

The second concept we draw on is ‘housing precariousness’, which in a recent and comprehensive account, Clair *et al.* (2019, p. 4) define as a ‘state of uncertainty which increases a person’s real or perceived likelihood of experiencing an adverse

event, caused (at least in part) by their relationship with their housing provider, the physical qualities, affordability, security of their home, and access to essential services'. Recent years have seen considerable growth in scholarly attention to housing precariousness (Carr *et al.*, 2018; Lombard, 2021; Waldron, 2021; Caroz-Armayones *et al.*, 2022). Conceptually, it is connected with the broader literature on the related notion of precarity (for a review, see Han, 2018), which is often associated with the transformation of labour and the welfare state under globalization and encompasses employment conditions (Standing 2011), access to healthcare and education, or legal status (Baban *et al.*, 2017; Beer *et al.*, 2016), among other key aspects of lived experience. Given that those seeking asylum commonly confront uncertainty across a range of these areas – from their difficulties in securing formal and secure employment, to the unknown resolution of their asylum claims, to the barriers separating them from the housing market – precariousness is pervasive in and inscribed into their everyday lives. Yet despite permeating so many aspects of life, precariousness is not necessarily stable or permanent, but can be (at least in part) altered and negotiated (Baban *et al.*, 2017).

Definitions of housing precariousness commonly identify two broad dimensions: housing insecurity and housing inadequacy. The first of these, housing insecurity, refers to the instabilities and uncertainties of a person's housing situation and their control over it (Clair *et al.*, 2019). In the case of asylum seekers and other vulnerable groups, it often includes frequent moves between accommodations, unreliable tenant's contracts and/or state support, and unstable tenures and dwelling types. The second, housing inadequacy, sometimes labelled as housing deprivation, refers to the material conditions of accommodation and how they are perceived by their occupants (Borg, 2015; Marsh *et al.*, 2000). These include unaffordability, poor quality (i.e. structural damages, inadequate lighting and heating, exposure to environmental hazards), problems of overcrowding and shortage of space, and deficient access to basic services. These dimensions of precariousness can occur with various degrees of severity, with housing exclusion and homelessness at the most extreme end.

It is empirically well-established that, throughout their often complex and non-linear trajectories, asylum seekers experience overlapping forms of housing precariousness (Beer *et al.*, 2016; Filandri and Olagnero, 2014; Phillips, 2006). These often involve different levels of homelessness, whether this means living in hostels and emergency shelters, staying temporarily with friends and family, rough sleeping, or some combination of these. Housing precariousness therefore refers to an overall pathway or set of pathways which may include moments and experiences of rough sleeping, however short-lived. Analysing the barriers asylum seekers confront at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels allows us to investigate the complex and changing forms of housing precariousness they face in the early stages of their settlement.

Research design

The findings in this paper are based on the CASASIL Survey on Refugee Housing Conditions, an exploratory survey of 300 international protection applicants that provides detailed information about their current housing status and past trajectories. To increase the response rate and comprehension, the questionnaire was distributed

in hard copy (PAPI format: Pencil and Paper Interviewing) and translated into Spanish, English, French, Russian, and Arabic.

Our research combines the quantitative methods enabled by the CASASIL survey with semi-structured interviews of both asylum seekers and stakeholders. These interviews allowed us to triangulate with our survey results, analyse the housing trajectories of asylum seekers in greater depth, and contrast the perspectives of the beneficiaries of the asylum system with those of its stakeholders. We interviewed 40 individuals applying for international protection and covered a range of topics including their accommodation careers, experience in the reception programme, job and family situation, future expectations and possibilities for improving the current system. These interviews were drawn from our survey tool, which asked respondents if they were willing to take part in a longer interview. We then selected subjects using quotas for age, gender, country of origin, area of residence and family composition. The final interview sample consisted of 26 men and 14 women originating from 12 different countries and residing in 14 cities and towns within the provinces of Barcelona and Girona. These and other details on the research design have been provided as [supplementary material](#). Finally, the stakeholder interviews included 20 informants who belonged to two main categories, namely members of NGOs and policymakers at the local, regional and national levels.

The survey sample

All 300 survey participants had made asylum claims in Spain in the previous 3 years or were waiting for the formalisation of their claims. Two main problems confronted access to our target population: a lack of access to cross-tabulated figures specifying the geographic distribution of asylum seekers and their basic characteristics, and approaching and effectively surveying such a highly mobile and difficult-to-reach target population. However, the goal here was not to achieve a representative sample of asylum seekers in Catalonia but to analyse their accommodation experiences and living conditions.

To address both difficulties, our sampling frame was provided by lists of people who had attended NGOs responsible for accommodation, as well as the local social services most likely to provide aid for people excluded from the reception programme. We employed a two-stage cluster sampling method with the NGOs and social services as the primary sampling units and the individual attendees as the secondary sampling units. The latter were stratified by sex to examine any possible gendered differences in accommodation experiences.

In terms of geographical location, the individuals in our sample resided in 35 municipalities within the provinces of Barcelona and Girona. We selected these two provinces because they had received 95% of the asylum claims in Catalonia during the 3 years prior to the survey (89.5% and 5.5%, respectively). The majority of our respondents lived in the city of Barcelona (56.7%), as it has the largest population – with 1,664,182 inhabitants and a density of 16,420 inh./km² – and is home to most NGOs and social services making up our primary sampling units. A smaller percentage of respondents (12%) resided in 12 municipalities in the Barcelona Metropolitan Area, a compact urban structure surrounding Barcelona with a

population of 1,575,155 and a density of 2,946 inh./km.² Another relevant section of the sample (21.7%) resided in the rest of the Barcelona province, an area made up of medium- and small-sized cities and rural areas, with a population of 2,504,065 and an average density of 353 inh./km.² The remainder of the sample lived in the province of Girona, which can be separated into the conurbation Girona-Salt (3.7%), a small-sized urban area with a population of 135,507 and a density of 2,965 inh./km.² and the rest of the Girona province (4%), an intermediate urban-rural area with a population of 646,281 and 110.3 inh./km.²

The questionnaire itself provides a cross-sectional snapshot of the socio-demographic characteristics, household and family composition, legal status, labour market participation, and housing and living conditions of asylum seekers in Catalonia. Survey items drew from a range of existing surveys on housing and living conditions (European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions, EU-SILC), refugee accommodation (UK Survey of New Refugees) and international migration (the National Immigrant Survey administered by the Spanish National Institute of Statistics). [Table 1](#) summarises the main characteristics of the sample.

The Spanish asylum reception system

Over the past decade, Spain has seen a considerable growth in asylum claims. While in 2015 there were 14,887 asylum applications in Spain, of which 1,302 were in Catalonia, in 2019 these rose to 118,446 in Spain and 13,278 in Catalonia. A state reception programme is available to asylum claimants who lack financial means to 'satisfy their basic needs in dignified conditions' (Article 30.1 of the Asylum Law). According to the Spanish Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migrations, the central goal of this programme is to progressively provide asylum seekers with the capacity to live autonomously, and to socially and economically integrate into the host society (interview with the Deputy Director of International Protection Programmes, 26th September 2019).

Despite an important rise in budget and accommodation places in recent years,¹ the exponential growth in claims shown in [Table 2](#) has often led to long delays of up to six months before applications are formalised (interview with the manager of a municipal programme for refugees and asylum seekers, Barcelona 30th October 2018). During this waiting time, no assistance is provided and many asylum seekers resort to rough sleeping or using emergency shelters for the homeless. Once the asylum application is submitted, the Office of Asylum and Refuge (OAR) has to decide on its admissibility. Although this process is supposed to last no more than 30 days, in practice it often takes several months, during which the most vulnerable are accommodated in hotels, hostels or shelters (interview with an NGO coordinator in Barcelona, 6th November 2019). In 2019, there were 3,801 accommodation places for this pre-entry phase (Phase 0) in Spain, of which 642 were in Catalonia. Some municipalities provide additional places, such as the Barcelona City Council, which offers 92 through its Nausica Programme. In spite of this, there are still too few places for the number of claimants, and most asylum seekers are left out.

Table 1. Characteristics of the survey sample.

Characteristics	Total (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Age group			
18–34	152 (50.5%)	91 (54.5%)	60 (45.1%)
35–49	107 (35.6%)	54 (32.3%)	53 (39.9%)
≥50	31 (10.3%)	15 (9.0%)	16 (12.0%)
N.R.	11 (3.7%)	7 (4.2%)	4 (3.0%)
Region of origin			
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	52 (17.3%)	23 (13.7%)	29 (21.8%)
Sub-Saharan Africa	43 (14.3%)	31 (18.6%)	10 (7.5%)
Central America	40 (13.3%)	17 (10.2%)	23 (17.3%)
Venezuela	66 (22.0%)	27 (16.2%)	39 (29.3%)
Colombia	39 (13.0%)	18 (10.8%)	21 (15.8%)
Middle East & North Africa (MENA region)	46 (15.3%)	39 (23.4%)	9 (6.8%)
Other	14 (4.7%)	12 (7.2%)	2 (1.5%)
Region of residence			
City of Barcelona	170 (56.7%)	104 (62.3%)	66 (49.6%)
Barcelona Metropolitan Area	36 (12.0%)	15 (9.0%)	21 (15.8%)
Rest of Barcelona province	65 (21.7%)	31 (18.6%)	34 (25.6%)
Conurbation of Girona-Salt	11 (3.7%)	7 (4.2%)	4 (3.0%)
Rest of Girona province	12 (4.0%)	6 (3.6%)	6 (4.5%)
N.R.	6 (2.0%)	4 (2.4%)	2 (1.5%)
Household composition			
Single person	153 (51.0%)	103 (61.7%)	50 (37.6%)
Couple without children	35 (11.7%)	20 (12.0%)	15 (11.3%)
Lone parent	32 (10.7%)	7 (4.2%)	25 (18.8%)
Couple with children	73 (24.3%)	33 (19.8%)	40 (30.1%)
N.R.	7 (2.3%)	4 (2.4%)	3 (2.3%)
Previous contact in Spain?			
Yes	137 (45.7%)	65 (38.9%)	72 (54.1%)
Education level			
Pre-primary and primary	43 (14.3%)	25 (15.0%)	18 (13.5%)
Lower secondary	63 (21.0%)	39 (23.4%)	24 (18.1%)
Upper secondary	61 (20.3%)	38 (22.8%)	33 (17.3%)
Higher	128 (42.7%)	63 (37.7%)	65 (48.9%)
N.R.	5 (1.7%)	2 (1.2%)	3 (2.3%)
Phase of the reception programme			
Phase 0: Not (yet) in state programme	59 (19.7%)	38 (22.8%)	21 (15.8%)
Phase 1: In collective accommodation	88 (29.3%)	46 (27.5%)	42 (31.6%)
Phase 2: Living independently but receiving financial support	132 (44.0%)	71 (42.5%)	61 (45.9%)
Phase 2 temporarily interrupted due to paid employment	19 (6.3%)	10 (6.0%)	9 (6.8%)
N.R.	2 (0.7%)	2 (1.2%)	0 (0.0%)
Total	300 (100%)	167 (100%)	133 (100%)

Table 2. Number of applicants for international protection in Catalonia, 2006-2019.

Year	Number of applicants
2006	206
2007	268
2008	235
2009	214
2010	213
2011	267
2012	206
2013	484
2014	786
2015	1,302
2016	1,834
2017	3,926
2018	8,034
2019	13,278

Source: OAR (2020).

Once an asylum claim is admitted, individuals officially access the system. They first move to the ‘reception’ phase (Phase 1), in which they are housed for up to six months (or nine, if they are particularly vulnerable) in collective accommodation, while they receive language and employability courses and social and psychological assistance. Accommodations available include refugee reception centres managed by the government, and centres or flats managed by NGOs with public funding. In 2019, there were 9,129 accommodation places for this phase in Spain, of which 1,106 were in Catalonia (Pasetti, 2020). While there is no formal dispersal policy (as is the case in the UK, Germany, and elsewhere), asylum claimants are allocated accommodation depending on availability, which means they are often housed in provinces different from where they lived in Phase 0.

This is followed by the ‘preparation for autonomy’ phase (Phase 2), in which claimants live independently in rented accommodation but receive financial support, with the amount depending on household composition. This lasts up to twelve months (or eighteen for vulnerable cases), during which they continue to receive courses and assistance. Although Phase 2 should coincide with the issuing of work permits, which allow asylum seekers to find employment and engage in specialised professional training, this is not always the case (interview with an NGO worker in Barcelona, 12th November 2018). Furthermore, when paid work is found, asylum seekers’ financial aid is suspended for the length of their employment.

In this last phase, asylum seekers have to enter a highly segmented housing market, where according to the 2017 EU-SILC, social housing only represents 2% of the stock, 71.9% of households are owner-occupiers, and 21.6% rent at market price. Furthermore, a decade of crisis in the housing sector in Catalonia, which started with the bursting of the housing bubble in 2008, has led to a significant shortage of affordable housing. Between 2015 and 2019, housing rental prices have increased by 7.1% annually, while people’s income levels have only risen by 2.2% (Ribera-Almandoz, Delclós and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2020; INE, 2020). There are also important territorial differences, with rent in Barcelona costing on average 978.81€/per month in 2019, compared to the Catalan average of 735.36€. As a result, tenants in Catalonia spend on average 34.9% of their household income on rent, and this increases to 46.4% in the case of households headed by non-European nationals (INE, 2020). All of this amounts to a housing market which is highly inhospitable for asylum claimants moving into Phase 2, and even more for those who leave the reception system and no longer receive financial assistance.

Housing precariousness of asylum seekers in Catalonia

Housing insecurity

In examining the housing trajectories and outcomes of asylum seekers, the first dimension of precariousness analysed is housing insecurity, defined as the instabilities and uncertainties of one’s housing situation and their control over it. Our data on the distribution of dwelling type by region of origin, displayed in [Figure 1](#), shows that, while shared housing is the most common situation, institutional housing is most prevalent among respondents from Sub-Saharan Africa (40.9%), followed by

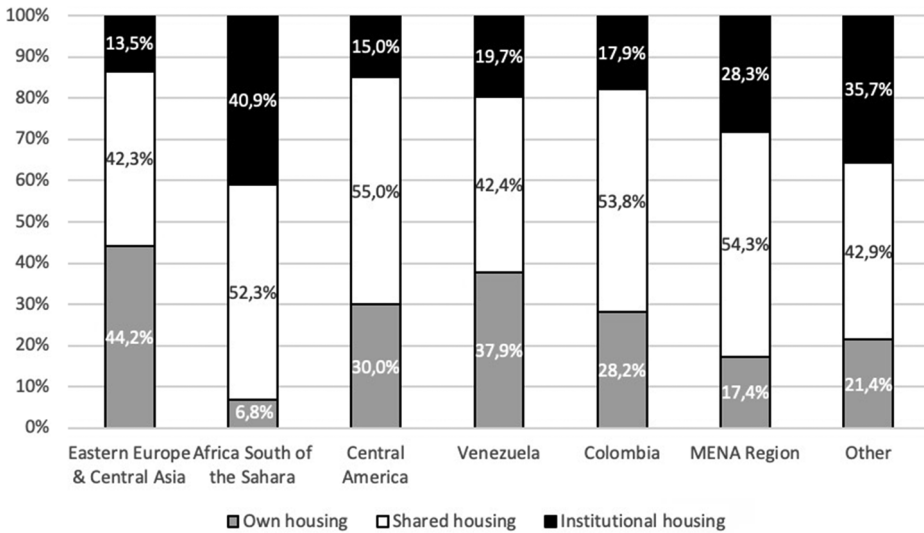


Figure 1. Housing type by region of origin of asylum seekers in Catalonia [n = 300].

those from the more heterogeneous ‘Other’ group (35.7%) and those from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (28.3%). Among these groups, the least common situation is living in their own housing unit. In contrast, institutional housing is substantially less common among asylum seekers from Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Latin America.

Important differences in the distribution of the sample across dwelling types were also observed by age and sex.² Institutional housing was most frequent among respondents between the ages of 18 and 34 (26.3%), while those between ages 35 and 49 were most commonly in their own housing unit (43.9%) and a majority of those over 50 were in shared housing (51.6%). In terms of the respondents’ sex, shared housing was the most frequent situation among both men and women (52.7% and 44.4%, respectively). However, a much larger proportion of women were in their own housing unit (36.1% vs 21.6%), while men were more likely to be in institutional housing (25.8% vs 19.6%).

The interviewees often stressed the discomfort of living in shared accommodation, particularly in institutional housing, where they experienced problems of lack of privacy and managing relationships with fellow occupants. As two interviewees explain, ‘coexistence [at a reception centre] was difficult because some people don’t speak your language’ (Colombian man, Granollers), and ‘life [at an emergency shelter] was very hard; we were 20 people in one room, all with different cultures and from different countries; ... coexistence wasn’t good, I wasn’t comfortable’ (Pakistani man, Badalona).

Regarding the second component of housing insecurity, [Table 3](#) displays the duration of current housing arrangements by selected characteristics of the sample. We consider the absence of a contract or the lack of knowledge of its duration to be an important indicator of insecurity. This situation was the most common in our sample (35.6%), especially among older respondents, those from non-Spanish


Table 3. Duration of contract and residential mobility by selected characteristics of asylum seekers in Catalonia.

Characteristic	Houses per year				Municipalities per year				
	<1 year	≥1 years	Don't know/ No contract	Mean	Median	SD	Mean	Median	SD
Age group									
18–34	41.45	25	33.55	3.59	2.80	3.52	2.56	2.13	2.38
35–49	27.1	40.19	32.71	2.87	2.60	1.64	1.90	1.63	1.35
≥50	19.35	32.26	48.39	2.00	1.74	1.10	1.29	1.00	0.96
N.R.	36.36	9.09	54.55	3.30	3.33	0.60	2.21	2.36	0.70
Sex									
Male	31.74	28.74	39.52	3.19	2.66	2.67	2.36	2.12	2.20
Female	36.84	33.08	30.08	3.12	2.67	2.90	1.98	1.64	1.60
Region									
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	19.23	34.62	46.15	2.63	2.38	1.29	1.59	1.36	0.93
Sub-Saharan Africa	45.45	11.36	43.18	3.61	2.68	4.44	3.10	2.60	3.65
Central America	40	35	25	3.55	2.53	4.49	2.07	1.51	1.76
Venezuela	33.33	48.48	18.18	3.30	3.10	1.84	2.15	1.94	1.61
Colombia	38.46	17.95	43.59	3.11	2.49	2.31	2.28	1.83	1.70
MENA Region	32.61	28.26	39.13	2.72	2.31	1.89	2.05	1.49	1.57
Other	28.57	21.43	50	3.25	3.21	1.47	2.22	2.53	0.95
Municipality size									
<50,000	51.52	27.27	21.21	3.27	2.63	1.97	2.52	2.38	1.58
50,000–200,000	75.00	6.25	18.75	3.63	2.74	4.38	2.55	1.77	3.67
200,001–500,000	33.33	14.29	52.38	3.17	2.72	1.80	2.19	2.01	1.35
>500,000	50.59	9.41	40.00	3.07	2.65	2.84	2.04	1.45	1.68
N.R.	66.67	16.67	16.67	2.82	2.68	1.61	2.09	1.54	1.53
How did you access current home?									
Real estate market	53.41	30.68	15.91	2.68	2.32	1.43	1.73	1.49	1.20
Social assistance, NGO	44.44	3.70	51.85	3.94	3.08	3.82	2.81	2.30	2.57
Personal network	65.08	7.94	26.98	2.50	2.34	1.30	1.66	1.51	0.93
N.R.	60.00	0.00	40.00	2.21	2.19	1.38	2.02	1.49	1.71
Previous contact in Spain?									
No	35.85	22.64	41.51	3.16	2.71	2.77	2.22	2.10	1.53
Yes	32.85	38.69	28.47	3.18	2.53	2.82	2.13	1.63	2.35
Phase of the reception programme									
Phase 0/Not (yet) in plan	17.74	20.97	61.29	2.31	2.16	1.59	1.40	1.00	1.25
Phase 1	48.86	5.68	45.45	4.49	3.40	4.38	3.26	2.60	2.88
Phase 2	34.09	46.21	19.7	2.77	2.65	1.41	1.94	1.85	1.19
Phase 2 interrupted	15.79	68.42	15.79	2.54	2.09	1.28	1.66	1.71	0.98
Total	33.89	30.56	35.55	3.15	2.66	2.77	2.18	1.81	1.95

Percentages [n = 300].

speaking countries (except Colombia), and those in the earlier phases of the reception programme or who have yet to access it.

For those with an adequate knowledge of their contract duration, a housing contract of less than a year's duration was the most common situation. Interviews with asylum seekers revealed that, in many cases, short-term rental contracts were the result of informal agreements between asylum seeking tenants and landlords or sublessors. According to our survey data, contracts of this length were especially common among respondents under the age of 35, those from Sub-Saharan Africa, those in Phase 1, and those who found their current accommodation through personal networks. This contrasts quite dramatically with those who reported contracts of more than one year's duration, who were most frequently between the ages of 35 and 49, in an accommodation found in the real estate market, in Phase 2 and from Eastern Europe, Central Asia or Venezuela. Among those with no previous contacts in Spain and those living in cities with populations over 200,000, an inadequate knowledge about or lack of a housing contract was the most common situation.

It is safe to say, then, that the housing experience of most respondents is one of uncertainty and instability. This can produce significant distress and anxiety, which undermine the processes of social inclusion and psychological recovery initiated since their arrival. As one interviewee explained:

We only have a one-year contract, and we don't know whether they are going to renew it. ... Sometimes I don't sleep thinking about it, because so far I haven't been able to find a stable job. I am aware that the economic assistance is temporary and we will eventually stop receiving it. Where am I going to go, with my daughters? (Honduran man, Barcelona).

The third factor analysed is residential mobility, as measured by the number of houses and the number of municipalities lived in per year, with those having lived in Spain for less than one year and in only one home or municipality coded as 1. Moves between municipalities were typically within the same province after entering Phase 1, as there is an obligation to remain in one province for the length of the reception programme. However, before entering this phase, moves may be between provinces or even Autonomous Communities. Although family relationships and health needs are meant to be taken into account when allocating reception places, our NGO interviews suggest this is limited in practice due to availability, especially in big cities (interview with an NGO's Coordinator of Legal Services in Barcelona, 5th November 2019).

Our findings show an alarmingly high residential mobility, with an average of 3.15 different dwellings and 2.18 different municipalities lived in per year, and medians of 2.66 and 1.81, respectively. These figures varied considerably with respondent characteristics, most notably the phase of the reception programme they were in and who helped them find their current accommodation. Indeed, the number of moves was considerably higher among those in Phase 1 and those who accessed housing through social assistance.

With regards to sociodemographic characteristics, residential mobility was especially high among asylum seekers aged 18 to 34, and those hailing from Sub-Saharan

Africa, Central America, and Venezuela. While the number of houses per year was only slightly higher for men than women, the number of municipalities per year was substantially higher.³ These high rates of residential mobility are not surprising given Barcelona's stressed private rental market, elevated costs, and the short duration of the housing contracts observed above. Furthermore, those with no previous contact in Spain more frequently reported a higher median number of municipalities per year and a shorter duration, lack of knowledge about or absence of a housing contract.

These frequent, and often forced, changes in housing and geographical locations can disrupt social, labour and community integration processes, and have a severe impact on the schooling trajectories of children. The latter concern was voiced in several qualitative interviews, including one with the head of social analysis for an NGO in Barcelona (18th January 2019). One Venezuelan couple who reported five neighbourhood or municipal changes during Phase 0 described the uncertainty evoked by a change of phase:

It was a bit uncomfortable because the children were studying and we were fearful about where they'd send us, because everything revolved around the children's school... Then, in Phase 1, they sent us to Galicia. So, we went to Galicia. And when we got to Galicia, another migratory process started. I cried when I left, it was like migrating all over again. The children already had friends at school, it was very hard. (Venezuelan woman, Barcelona).

As previous studies have indicated, uncertain and unstable residential trajectories trigger feelings of loneliness, social detachment, and depression in a population that commonly has past experiences of trauma (Phillips, 2006). Indeed, the following story was common:

I arrived from Algeria to Barcelona. I didn't know anyone ... The first week I stayed in a hostel in Barcelona. Then I moved to a room ... A few times I had to sleep on the street and it was hard, especially in winter. Later I went to an emergency shelter; I was there for about two months. And then I entered the program, and went to Mataró ... Mataró is fine, but a bit isolated ... I don't really know my neighbours, although sometimes I try to talk to people on the beach (Algerian man, Mataró).

Housing inadequacy

The second key dimension of housing precariousness examined is housing inadequacy -i.e. the material conditions of accommodation and how they are perceived by their occupants. Of the five measures used, which are presented in Table 4, two are mostly objective: overcrowding and material housing quality. Following Blake *et al.* (2007), we define overcrowding as having more than two people per bedroom. For material problems, we consider poor quality as having two or more of the following issues: presence of leaks or humidity, inability to maintain an adequate temperature, no bathroom for exclusive use, lack of space, lack of natural light, inadequate furniture, poorly connected to the city, inadequate design for people with disabilities, excessive noise, pollution, and crime in the area. The remaining three indicators are subjective in nature, reflecting the respondent's views on the

Table 4. Problems with housing quality and access by selected characteristics of asylum seekers in non-institutionalised housing in Catalonia. Percentages.

Characteristic	>2 people per bedroom	2+ quality problems	Too costly	High deposit	Prejudice
Age group					
18–34	10.1	31.13	64.29	54.46	33.93
35–49	10	31.71	79.31	73.56	52.87
≥50	9.52	34.78	76	44	36
N.R.	16.67	12.5	50	37.5	25
Sex					
Male	9	28.32	62.1	53.23	33.06
Female	11.43	34.29	80.37	68.22	50.47
Region					
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	17.5	47.62	62.22	60	28.89
Sub-Saharan Africa	8.33	12	42.31	34.62	11.54
Central America	6.9	30.3	82.35	61.76	55.88
Venezuela	6	32.69	88.68	73.58	56.6
Colombia	13.33	27.59	81.25	68.75	56.25
MENA region	7.41	25.81	63.64	48.48	24.24
Other	16.67	28.57	33.33	55.56	44.44
Municipality size					
<50,000	10.00	38.71	68.75	62.50	56.25
50,000–200,000	4.76	30.43	65.22	60.87	52.17
200,001–500,000	14.29	26.92	58.06	54.84	19.35
>500,000	11.82	29.51	74.22	63.28	39.84
N.R.	0.00	35.29	77.78	38.89	44.44
How did you access current home?					
Real estate market	8.43	40.23	80.68	68.18	51.14
Social assistance, NGO	20.75	24.56	50.06	48.48	25.76
Personal network	3.39	29.51	73.02	65.08	44.44
N.R.	9.09	7.14	66.67	40.00	33.33
Previous contact in Spain					
No	14.00	31.73	61.40	53.51	35.96
Yes	6.93	31.82	80.53	67.26	46.90
Phase of the reception programme					
Phase 0/Not (yet) in state plan	10.34	36.36	78.95	63.16	47.37
Phase 1	28.57	26.19	54.35	56.52	26.09
Phase 2	5.6	30.4	72.87	59.69	43.41
Phase 2 interrupted	5.88	36.84	78.95	63.16	47.37
Observations	206	219	232	232	232
Total	10.19	31.05	70.69	59.91	40.95

costliness of the housing, whether the deposit was excessive and whether they experienced prejudice.

Our data show that the overcrowding rate hardly varied by age, and only moderately so by sex, with a higher prevalence among women than among men. Overcrowding was more frequent among respondents arriving from Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Colombia. However, the most striking difference is visible in terms of the phase of the reception programme, with nearly 29% of those in Phase 1 living in housing with more than two people per bedroom. This corresponds with the finding that overcrowding was also more common among those who accessed housing through social assistance and those who had no previous contacts in Spain, since Phase 1 aims to address these conditions.

In terms of the material quality of housing, again we find little variation by age and a higher prevalence of poor-quality housing among women. Interestingly, poor quality housing was considerably more common around the top and bottom of our income scale, as well as among asylum seekers from Eastern Europe, Central Asia and

Venezuela. While it is clear why those with relatively low earnings tend to report low quality housing, the same result for higher income groups may be explained by their higher expectations and former living standards, especially when we consider that the latter were more likely to be in their own housing units accessed through Barcelona's rental housing market. As one administrator of a municipal service for migrants and refugees explains, 'there is a clear imbalance between what asylum seekers hoped for before they arrived and what they actually find: a very precarious welfare state and highly segmented labour and housing markets' (interviewed in Barcelona, 14th November 2018). The housing trajectory of asylum seekers after arriving in Spain will likely also affect their self-reported satisfaction. The following quote shows how the potential for a negative perception of current housing conditions due to overcrowding and a long commute is tempered by the hazardous conditions faced initially:

For 8 months I was sleeping in the street and in a squat. I only had this [he points to a sofa] and that [he pretends to cover himself with a blanket]. The place was in ruins, it had mould and it was hard to breathe. It was so cold ... Now it's really good! I share the room with other people but I have my own bed and everything I need. I have an hour and a half commute to work, but that's no problem, I just take the metro (Syrian man, Sant Adrià de Besòs).

With respect to the phase of the reception programme, poor-quality housing was most common among respondents in Phase 0 or those not yet in the programme (36.4%) and those who interrupted the programme during Phase 2 due to paid employment (36.8%). It is worth noting that, while Phase 1 is characterised by high overcrowding rates and a lower prevalence of poor-quality housing, in Phase 2 far fewer respondents experienced overcrowding and more experienced the latter. This seems to suggest that the autonomy and relative stability of finding one's own home in Phase 2 entails living in lower-quality housing. The need to adapt to the available accommodation is a recurring theme in the interviews. Several respondents described how they had to cope with accommodations which lacked adequate heating, had structural damage, or were unsuitable to the mobility needs of their household members. The following quote describes the absence of choice and the feelings of frustration at such problems:

We ended up having to rent a third floor flat without an elevator, and my daughter has a fracture in her spine. You can imagine how long it takes her to climb the stairs ... For now, the flat covers our basic needs; but what we'd like is to move somewhere that is more according to our needs. (Venezuelan woman, Olot).

Concerning the three subjective indicators, we found that those between ages 35 and 49 were substantially more likely to report problems of high costs, a high deposit, and experiences of prejudice. The same is true for the women of our sample, with the majority reporting prejudice on the part of the landlords, perhaps as a result of a double discrimination based on origin and gender. However, we found that asylum seekers themselves have contrasting views about the role of gender in the search for housing. Some interviewees observed that 'many landlords prefer women' (Venezuelan man, Barcelona) or 'it's easier for both women and Spanish speakers; and much more difficult for black and Muslim people, especially men' (Honduran woman, Barcelona). Others highlighted that women are more likely to

be affected by adverse labour processes, which in turn affect housing outcomes. This was exemplified by a Georgian woman:

I think life is more difficult for women here; it's much more difficult to find a job, for example. The only women that I know who managed to get a job are working as caretakers, with very little free time and no work contract ... And without a work contract, you can't rent a flat.

Furthermore, reports of excessive costliness and prejudice were more frequent among respondents from Latin American countries.⁴ These impressions were also most common among those in Phase 0 and those who interrupted Phase 2. Similarly, those with no previous contact in Spain were more likely to have accessed housing through social assistance and consequently reported fewer problems with costs and discrimination. However, while reported experiences of racism and prejudice varied widely, other factors constitute structural barriers that create indirect sources of discrimination. These include not having a work permit, strict requirements to rent accommodation, or the low supply of affordable housing. As explained by one social worker:

It is very difficult for asylum seekers to meet the minimum guarantees required to rent ... Many estate agents or landlords ask them to have an indefinite contract, when they often work in very precarious conditions or do not even have a work permit ... This is why discrimination is often not so direct but rather structural, due to all the filters that exist before you can have direct contact with landlords or agents (interview with social worker in Barcelona, 12th November 2018).

Taken together, our results suggest an association between excessive costliness, discrimination and having searched for housing in Barcelona's saturated private rental market with no assistance. Hence, while those who accessed housing through the market reported less overcrowding, chi-square tests reveal a significant relationship ($p < .001$) with poor material quality, with 80.7% of respondents in this situation reporting excessive prices, 68.2% reporting excessive deposits and 51.1% reporting prejudice on the part of landlords. In contrast, those who accessed housing via social assistance reported more overcrowding but a much smaller prevalence of poor-quality housing.

Finally, if we consider the size of the municipality, we see that overcrowding was less prevalent in towns with populations between 50,000 and 200,000, and fairly similar elsewhere, while poor housing quality was more common in smaller towns. The lowest prevalence of self-reported excessive costs was in cities with populations over 200,000 and below 500,000, while the highest was in Barcelona. On the other hand, problems of discrimination were more frequently reported in small towns and villages, and far less common among those living in mid-sized cities.

Homelessness

The picture presented so far is one of housing pathways marked by high levels of insecurity, inadequacy and exclusion for many asylum seekers which may also

include, in its most extreme cases, moments and experiences of rough sleeping. Table 5 below displays the results of our multivariate analyses of the relationship between selected characteristics of the asylum seekers and having slept rough since their arrival in Spain. In each logistic regression model, we account for the influence of age, sex and place of origin on our dependent variable, adding one more independent variable in subsequent models. As we can see in Model 1, compared to respondents under the age of 35, those between ages 35 and 49 are 62.5% less likely to have slept rough since their arrival. Meanwhile, men were over three times as likely as women to have slept in the street, an effect that remained statistically significant across all of the models applied.

More variation was observed in the magnitude and statistical significance of the respondent's place of origin. While in our baseline Model 1, associations with each country were significant, these changed as we incorporated new independent variables, indicating that some degree of the association was attributable to these factors. Taking the most numerous place of origin in our sample (Venezuela) as our reference category, Model 1 shows that those from the former Soviet Union and the 'Other' group were over 5 and 8 times more likely to have slept rough. Meanwhile, asylum seekers from the MENA region, Central America, Colombia, and Sub-Saharan Africa were between 3 and 4 times more likely than those from Venezuela to have experienced it.

No statistically significant correlations were found between having slept rough and having a university degree, being a native Spanish speaker or time since arrival to Spain. Nor did the introduction of these variables substantially alter the magnitude or statistical significance of the associations with age, sex and country of origin found in Model 1, with the sole exception of coming from the MENA region. These results seem to run counter to past research discussing the centrality of educational level, language skills and time since arrival in shaping access to housing and housing outcomes (Teixeira 2008; Murdie 2008). In contrast, respondents who knew someone in Spain prior to their arrival were 52% less likely to have slept rough than those who had no such contacts, after accounting for the effects of age, sex and region of origin. Indeed, both the magnitude and statistical significance of all associations with the latter fell when the presence of this support network was included in our model. Only having been born in Eastern Europe and Central Asia or the 'Other' group remained significantly associated with exposure to rough sleeping.

Thus, in the face of the structural constraints posed by a saturated asylum reception programme and an unaffordable private rental market, practices of mutual help can become key sources of agency and flexibility. Though effective in reducing exposure to rough sleeping (Model 9), the asylum system's linear-phased design, coupled with the housing market's reliance on formal documentation, clash with the more discontinuous labour market and citizenship experiences of asylum seekers. Obstacles to accessing accommodation were often experienced by asylum seekers as involving a high degree of uncertainty and a lack of control over their own lives, yet those who had existing support networks could often draw on those with more resources, experience, and stable positions to help navigate the asylum system and overcome common problems. As one Venezuelan woman describes:

Table 5. Logistic regression results: Having slept rough since arrival to Spain [n = 300].

Characteristics	Models								
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Age (ref: 18–34)									
35–49	**0.375	**0.375	**0.387	0.591	**0.379	**0.377	**0.364	**0.379	**0.318
≥50	0.886	0.886	0.843	1.186	0.98	0.873	0.81	1.034	0.838
N.R.	0.439	0.439	0.445	0.389	0.433	0.424	0.43	0.503	0.415
Sex (ref: Female)									
Male	**3.028	**3.029	**3.042	*2.348	**2.945	**2.996	**2.960	**3.210	**0.292
Region of origin (ref: Venezuela)									
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	**5.059	**5.059	*3.761	**7.715	**5.324	1.795	**4.489	**5.705	**4.568
Sub-Saharan Africa	*3.771	*3.790	2.267	2.305	*3.902	1.317	*3.558	*3.134	*3.799
Central America	*3.419	*3.430	2.97	3.362	*3.732	*3.270	*3.292	*4.159	*3.439
Colombia	*4.006	*4.018	3.111	3.392	*4.168	*4.011	*3.437	*3.516	*4.378
MENA region	*3.005	3.017	2.156	2.058	*3.213	1.036	*3.427	*3.164	2.689
Other	**8.388	**8.408	*5.618	*6.436	**9.091	4.174	*10.677	*7.306	**7.978
Educational level (ref: No university studies)		1.01							
University studies									
Previous contact in Spain (ref: No)			*0.480						
Yes									
Child in Spain (ref: No)									
Yes									
Time in Spain (ref: <1year)									
1–2 years									
>2 years					1.380				
Native level of Spanish? (ref: No)					0.918				
Yes									
Municipality size (ref: Pop > 50,000)						0.322			
Pop < 50,000									
Work permit (ref: No)							**0.196		
Yes									
Phase of the reception programme (ref: Phase 0/ Not (yet) in plan)									
Phase 1									*0.391
Phase 2									**0.250
Phase 2 interrupted									*0.162
Constant	**0.077	**0.077	**0.135	**0.155	**0.065	0.242	**0.102	**0.141	**0.220
Pseudo r ²	0.121	0.121	0.135	0.188	0.125	0.131	0.158	0.164	0.165

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

One of the strengths that Venezuelans have had is that we have been working as a team; those who arrived earlier are helping those who came after them. My cousin recommended me to a landlord, and I got a good price for my apartment. She has also allowed people to register at her home ... When you have been here longer, things get easier and you can start helping others.

Nevertheless, of all the independent variables studied, the strongest negative association found was that with having a child in Spain, which decreased the likelihood of rough sleeping by nearly 85%. This result suggests the possibility that Spain's reception system, at least in Catalonia, is better equipped to provide shelter for asylum seekers with children than for those without. It is worth mentioning, too, that when this variable was introduced, the statistical significance of the region of origin fell substantially, with only the Eastern Europe and Central Asia group and the 'Other' group maintaining statistical significance.

A strong significant association was also found with the size of the respondent's municipality of residence. Asylum seekers living in municipalities with populations below 50,000 were 80% less likely to have experienced rough sleeping than those living in larger urban areas. Finally, as one might expect, having a work permit was associated with a 69% lower probability of having spent at least one night in the street.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at the multi-layered barriers asylum seekers face in accessing secure and adequate housing upon arrival in Catalonia (Spain). Unlike earlier scholarship, our main contribution has been to analyse the combination of individual factors, actors, and structural barriers in shaping the housing outcomes of asylum seekers, focusing particularly on their transitions between state- or NGO-assisted accommodation and the private housing sector.

Looking across the different dimensions of housing precariousness, four findings are particularly striking. First, in terms of gender, we found that, while women are less likely to resort to rough sleeping, they show a higher prevalence of poor-quality housing along both objective and subjective measures of inadequacy. These gender disparities parallel the experiences of asylum seekers in Canada and Australia (Rose, 2001; Van Kooy and Bowman, 2019), and may be attributable to gendered aspects of their migration experience, including a greater likelihood of cohabitating with children, and to adverse labour integration processes in a highly gender-segregated labour market. Second, our results show that education and time since arrival had practically no effect in decreasing the likelihood of sleeping rough or accounting for region-of-origin differences in exposure to it. Although these factors are typically perceived as facilitators of integration into host societies (Rose, 2001; Teixeira, 2008), when taking into account the structural features of Spain's overwhelmed asylum system and housing market, they are insignificant in avoiding even this most extreme form of precariousness. Third, our findings confirm the key role of personal support networks in shaping the housing outcomes of asylum seekers in Catalonia. When we account for the presence of prior acquaintances, the association between the experience of rough sleeping and one's region of origin is rendered statistically

insignificant. Murdie (2008, p. 99) also observes the importance of support networks in the case of Toronto, but warns that reliance on friends and relatives ‘is not necessarily a viable long-term strategy for acquiring affordable, good-quality rental housing’. Fourth, given the structural deficiencies of the Catalan housing market, particularly in Barcelona, NGOs have become key points of access to good-quality and affordable accommodation. While those who attempt to access housing through the private market tend to face excessive costs, discrimination, and low-quality housing, those who access it with assistance from NGOs report fewer such problems, even narrowing the gap between those with and without pre-existing support networks.

Nevertheless, the study has some important limitations. Chief among these is the study sample which, despite providing much-needed information on the previously unreported living and housing conditions of asylum seekers in Catalonia (and Spain), is unlikely to represent the whole of the asylum-seeking population. This is largely due to a lack of official, timely and publicly available information on the specific characteristics of asylum seekers in Catalonia. Moreover, respondents who volunteered to participate in longer interviews differed from those in our study sample, specifically in terms of their gender composition (65% male in longer interviews versus 55% in the survey sample). Finally, even though support was offered both by the research team and by NGOs, the study’s reliance on self-administered paper questionnaires likely excluded participation by asylum seekers who were not sufficiently literate in any of the available languages. Using NGO lists as our sampling frame also limits our findings to people in the state asylum system, though our recourse to cases addressed by municipal social services was intended to reduce this limitation to the extent possible. Thus, our findings may not reflect the conditions experienced by some of the most vulnerable asylum seekers in Catalonia, a troubling thought given the high degree of precariousness identified in this study.

Despite these limitations, our study has shown evidence of a deeply insecure and fragmented housing system that contributes to the already high levels of disorientation, precariousness, and exclusion of asylum seekers. While Spain’s reception approach is, at least on paper, unique in promoting the autonomy of asylum seekers and their embeddedness within the community early in their asylum process, the above findings suggest two overarching shortcomings. On the one hand, the self-sufficiency the system gives to asylum seekers can not only create opportunities for their inclusion but also makes them vulnerable to multiple forms of precariousness (Gabrielli *et al*, 2022; Garcés-Mascreñas and Pasetti, 2019). When the freedom to secure one’s own housing is met with a housing market that exhibits an insufficient supply of affordable and good-quality accommodation and with a reception system that suffers from severe underfunding and understaffing, asylum seekers can be left with highly precarious housing trajectories. On the other hand, the often-non-linear pathways of asylum seekers map poorly onto the linearity and rigidity of current reception policies. While the programme expects people to quickly access the system, obtain accommodation, and transition to the rental market in a matter of months, issues such as gender, family composition, origin, labour and migration trajectories, lack of personal network or place of residence, among many others, can pose significant obstacles.

These shortcomings suggest a set of key policy recommendations. There is a fundamental need to adapt the reception system to the different profiles of asylum seekers. This would necessarily entail not only lengthening the time frame of each phase in cases of need, but also creating specific tracks for people in situations of high vulnerability. The precariousness that can result from the principle of autonomy is a much more complex issue since, as we have shown, it cannot be dissociated from the general conditions of the labour and housing markets. Of particular importance is greater investment in public and social housing and measures to prevent discrimination and guarantee the right to equal treatment in the rental market, including awareness-raising campaigns, mediation processes and sanctioning procedures against discriminatory, xenophobic, or racist practices (Ribera-Almandoz *et al.*, 2021).

At a more theoretical level, by exploring the complex interactions among micro-, meso- and macro-level factors, our approach has moved beyond an exclusive focus on processes of exclusion, privation, and dehumanization. Instead, following recent accounts in the field of critical migration studies, we have highlighted how the asylum system not only stratifies people according to multiple sets of criteria (origin, gender, phenotype, educational level, skillset, or economic assets), but also generates a great deal of labour around the surveillance and control of migrant populations (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Our study of the housing trajectories of asylum seekers in Catalonia has extended this approach by examining the relationship between the asylum system and the housing market. Our findings shed initial light on the role of the housing market, revealing the complex ways in which state and non-governmental actors, norms and practices determine housing outcomes for asylum seekers and affect their lived experience. By doing so, we open up critical avenues for future research to examine the work carried out by the NGOs, social workers, landlords and real estate agents involved in housing provision for asylum seekers.

Notes

1. According to data provided by the Ministry, between 2015 and 2019 the state budget for the reception of claimants of international protection has increased from 53 million Euros to 268 million, and the accommodation places have risen from 930 to 9.129 – or 12.853, if we include the temporary accommodation places in hostels, hotels and shelters (Pasetti, 2020).
2. It should be noted that the age and sex composition of our sample varied dramatically by region of origin, as the majority of those from the MENA region and Sub-Saharan Africa were young men. In contrast, the majority of respondents from Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Latin America were women, and these regions had a more balanced age distribution. These variations are consistent with the general population of asylum seekers coming from these regions in recent years (OAR, 2020).
3. The high standard deviations for those groups with higher residential mobility are also of note, as they suggest a fairly high degree of volatility in this regard.
4. Non-response to these three subjective indicators was high among respondents from Sub-Saharan Africa, who also had the highest proportion of respondents in institutionalised housing. For this reason, the results for this region of origin should be taken with a grain of salt.

Acknowledgements

We want to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful and constructive comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research has been funded by 'la Caixa', in collaboration with the Associació d'Universitats Públiques de Catalunya, ACUP (Grant agreement 2017ACUP00030). It is also part of the Property and Democratic Citizenship project, which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 771795).

ORCID

Olatz Ribera-Almandoz  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5261-8975>

Carlos Delclós  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3061-7709>

Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4039-3964>

References

- Aigner, A. (2019) Housing entry pathways of refugees in vienna, a city of social housing, *Housing Studies*, 34, pp. 779–803.
- Arbaci, S. (2008) (Re)viewing ethnic residential segregation in Southern european cities: Housing and urban regimes as mechanisms of marginalisation, *Housing Studies*, 23, pp. 589–613.
- Baban, F., Ilcan, S. & Rygiel, K. (2017) Syrian refugees in Turkey: pathways to precarity, differential inclusion, and negotiated citizenship rights, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43, pp. 41–57.
- Balampanidis, D. (2020) Housing pathways of immigrants in the city of athens: from homelessness to homeownership. Considering contextual factors and human agency, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 37, pp. 230–250.
- Beer, A., Bentley, R., Baker, E., Mason, K., Mallett, S., Kavanagh, A. & LaMontagne, T. (2016) Neoliberalism, economic restructuring and policy change: Precarious housing and precarious employment in Australia, *Urban Studies*, 53, pp. 1542–1558.
- Blake, K. S., Kellerson, R. L. & Simic, A. (2007) *Measuring Overcrowding in Housing*. (Baltimore, MD: US Department of Housing and Urban Development). Available at https://www.huduser.gov/publications/pdf/measuring_overcrowding_in_hsg.pdf (accessed 7 August 2020).
- Borg, I. (2015) Housing deprivation in Europe: on the role of rental tenure types, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 32, pp. 73–93.
- Caroz-Armayones, J. M., Benach, J., Delclós, C. & Julià, M. (2022) The double burden of precariousness: linking housing, employment, and perceived stress – a cross-sectional study, *International Journal of Environmental Health Research*, pp. 1–10. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09603123.2022.2075330>
- Carr, H., Edgeworth, B. & Hunter, C. (2018) Introducing precarisation: Contemporary understandings of law and the insecure home, in: H. Carr, B. Edgeworth, & C. Hunter (Eds) *Law and the Precarious Home: Socio Legal Perspective on the Home in Insecure Times*, pp. 1–19. (Oxford: Hart).

- Clair, A., Reeves, A., McKee, M. & Stuckler, D. (2019) Constructing a housing precariousness measure for Europe, *Journal of European Social Policy*, 29, pp. 13–28.
- Clapham, D. (2005) *The Meaning of Housing: A Pathways Approach* (Bristol: Bristol University Press),
- Darling, J. (2016) Asylum in austere times: Instability, privatization and experimentation within the UK asylum dispersal system, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 29, pp. 483–505.
- Filandri, M. & Olagnero, M. (2014) Housing inequality and social class in Europe, *Housing Studies*, 29, pp. 977–993.
- Gabrielli, L., Garcés-Masareñas, B. & Ribera-Almandoz, O. (2022) Between discipline and neglect: the regulation of asylum accommodation in Spain, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 35, pp. feab049–281.
- Garcés-Masareñas, B. & Pasetti, F. (2019) ¿A más solicitudes de asilo igual recepción? El sistema de acogida en España desde 2015, *Anuario CIDOB de la Inmigración* (noviembre de 2019), pp. 114–126.
- Garcés-Masareñas, B. & Ribera-Almandoz, O. (2020) Políticas de la indigencia. Solicitantes de asilo sin casa en Europa. (Barcelona: CIDOB). Available at https://www.cidob.org/es/publicaciones/serie_de_publicacion/notes_internacionals_cidob/237/politicas_de_la_indigencia_solicitantes_de_asilo_sin_casa_en_europa (accessed 12 November 2020).
- Hamann, U. & El-Kayed, N. (2018) Refugees' access to housing and residency in German cities: Internal border regimes and their local variations, *Social Inclusion*, 6, pp. 135–146.
- Han, C. (2018) Precarity, precariousness, and vulnerability, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 47, pp. 331–343.
- INE (2020) *Encuesta de Condiciones de Vida (ECV). Año 2019*. (Madrid: Instituto Nacional de Estadística).
- Kissoon, P. (2010) From persecution to destitution: a snapshot of asylum seekers' housing and settlement experiences in Canada and the United Kingdom, *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 8, pp. 4–31.
- Lombard, M. (2021) The experience of precarity: Low-paid economic migrants' housing in Manchester, *Housing Studies*, pp. 1–19.
- Marsh, A., Gordon, D., Heslop, P. & Pantazis, C. (2000) Housing deprivation and health: a longitudinal analysis, *Housing Studies*, 15, pp. 411–428.
- Mezzadra, S. & Neilson, B. (2013) *Border as Method, or, The Multiplication of Labor*. (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press).
- Murdie, R. A. (2008) Pathways to housing: the experiences of sponsored refugees and refugee claimants in accessing permanent housing in Toronto, *Journal of International Migration and Integration / Revue de l'intégration et de la migration internationale*, 9, pp. 81–101.
- OAR (2020) *Datos e información estadística*. Madrid: Oficina de Asilo y Refugio, Ministerio del Interior. Available at <http://www.interior.gob.es/es/web/servicios-al-ciudadano/oficina-de-asilo-y-refugio/datos-e-informacion-estadistica#publicaciones> (accessed 16 June 2020).
- Pasetti, F. (2020) (coord.) *Sobre los solicitantes y beneficiarios de protección internacional. Informe nacional para España, NIEM 2020*. (Barcelona: CIDOB). Available at https://www.cidob.org/publicaciones/serie_de_publicacion/project_papers/niem/sobre_los_solicitantes_y_beneficiarios_de_proteccion_internacional_informe_nacional_para_espana_niem_2020 (accessed 29 July 2020).
- Peck, J. (2012) Austerity urbanism, *City*, 16, pp. 626–655.
- Phillips, D. (2006) Moving towards integration: the housing of asylum seekers and refugees in Britain, *Housing Studies*, 21, pp. 539–553.
- Ribera-Almandoz, O., Delclós, C. & Garcés-Masareñas, B. (2020) «Casa nostra, casa vostra»? *Condicions i trajectòries d'accés a l'habitatge de sol·licitants d'asil i refugiats a Catalunya* (Barcelona: CIDOB). Available at https://www.cidob.org/es/publicaciones/serie_de_publicacion/monografias/monografias/casa_nostra_casa_vostra_condicions_i_trajectories_d_acces_a_l_habitatge_de_sol_licitants_d_asil_i_refugiats_a_catalunya (accessed 16 October 2020).
- Ribera-Almandoz, O., Sales-Campos, A. & Garcés-Masareñas, B. (2021) *Precarietat i exclusió residencial en la població migrada en temps de Covid-19* (Barcelona: CIDOB). Available at

https://www.cidob.org/publicaciones/serie_de_publicacion/cidob_briefings/precarietat_i_exclusio_residencial_en_la_poblacio_migrada_en_temps_de_covid_19 (accessed 2 September 2021)

- Rose, D. (2001) The housing situation of refugees in montréal three years after arrival: the case of asylum seekers who obtained permanent residence, *Journal of International Migration and Integration / Revue de L'integration et de la Migration Internationale*, 2, pp. 493–529.
- Shier, M. L., Graham, J. R., Fukuda, E. & Turner, A. (2016) Predictors of living in precarious housing among immigrants accessing housing support services, *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 17, pp. 173–192.
- Soederberg, S. (2019) Governing global displacement in austerity urbanism: the case of berlin's refugee housing crisis, *Development and Change*, 50, pp. 923–947.
- Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Teixeira, C. (2008) Barriers and outcomes in the housing searches of new immigrants and refugees: a case study of “black” africans in toronto's rental market, *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, 23, pp. 253–276.
- UNHCR (2021) *El asilo en España* (Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Available at <https://www.acnur.org/es-es/el-asilo-en-espana.html> (accessed 15 July 2021).
- Van Kooy, J. & Bowman, D. (2019) ‘Surrounded with so much uncertainty’: Asylum seekers and manufactured precarity in Australia, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45, pp. 693–710.
- Waldron, R. (2021) Generation rent and housing precarity in ‘post crisis’ Ireland, *Housing Studies*, pp. 1–25.