Precarious Workers and Precarious Housing: Investigating Stories of Migrant Workers' Housing Struggles in Edmonton, Alberta

A Final Research Report by:

Alberta Workers Association for Research and Education (AWARE)
Migrante-Alberta
York University

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Report Prepared By: Whitney Hayes (AWARE), Marco Luciano (Migrante-Alberta), Deanna Neri (University of Alberta/Migrante-Alberta), Mycah Panjaitan (York University), Ethel Tungohan (York University)

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Executive Summary

This report investigates the current and ongoing challenges the migrant worker community in Edmonton face around homelessness and housing insecurity. Using Participatory Action Research, research team members from AWARE, Migrante-Alberta and York University made sure to involve the migrant worker community throughout the research process by holding research training workshops and by analyzing the data collaboratively. Overall, research team members conducted 22 interviews with migrant workers and 5 interviews with representatives of settlement/faith organizations.

Our research reveals that migrant workers face the following challenges: racialized stigma as migrant workers and/or as racialized immigrants made it harder for them to rent apartments; low wages; precarious immigration status; on-going employer surveillance; a lack of access to formal housing supports; gender-based violence; health issues, and the absence of feeling at-home. These challenges are compounded by the lack of knowledge expressed by settlement service providers around immigration policy or funding to fully support the needs of migrant workers. In response to these concerns, this report has made the following recommendations: coordination between government actors and community organizations to effectively support migrant workers; regularization policies and programs to allow every resident access to services, and development of a community center catering to the needs of migrant workers.

Introduction and Purpose of Study

The overall objective of this project is to understand the scope of precarious housing and homelessness within the migrant worker community in Edmonton. Specifically, we sought answers to the following questions: **How are migrant workers affected by precarious housing situations? What supports are taken up and available to them?**

As a research project grounded in a partnership between academics from York University, the Alberta Workers Association, and Migrante-Alberta, our ultimate goal was not only to contribute to the academic and policy literature on migrant work and precarious housing but also to discover the types of programming support needed by migrant workers facing precarious housing situations. In addition, we sought ways to provide migrant workers with a safe space to discuss their experiences and to understand the types of support that are available.

Methods/Methodology

This project was undertaken in partnership with the Alberta Workers Association (AWA), Migrante-Alberta, and with York University from 2018 to 2020. As members of the research team, we saw this research project as being important not only because it could be used towards the advancement of academic knowledge but also towards meeting the needs of vulnerable migrant community members who faced housing challenges and ultimately, towards advancing social justice. In order to meet these goals, we decided to use Participatory Action Research (PAR) as our main methodology. There are different approaches to PAR, with some defining projects that involve loose collaborations between academics and community members as an example of PAR and others considering PAR as a mutually beneficial approach that would allow community members' and academic members' needs to be met (Tungohan 2020).

Our research team's approach is closer to the latter but, bearing in mind calls from community collectives such as the Downtown East Side that seeks more accountable ethical research practices that calls for research to be "brought back" to the community in more meaningful ways (Boilevin 2019: 10), we decided to use this project to empower migrant workers directly.

Migrant workers were involved in all stages of the research process. In consultation with the migrant worker members of AWARE and Migrante-Alberta, the research team led a training session that gave an overview of the research process, the ethical considerations that were important to remember, and the various methods that they could use when answering questions. From these series of workshops, migrant workers developed major themes and questions.

We then created two research teams, with one group consisting of caregivers and the other of undocumented workers. Both teams decided against using focus groups. They felt that it would not provide for a safe and comfortable environment for participants, who may wish to remain anonymous. To ensure the comfort and safety of participants, the interviews were conducted by fellow migrant workers usually from the same country of origin in order to allow participants the option to speak in their native language. The time and place of the interview were also chosen by the participants. The majority of the interviews were conducted in public spaces such as food courts, bank lobbies, and parks as preferred by interviewees. While these are not the most conducive venues for conducting interviews, participants expressed that they feel safer and

more comfortable in these places rather than where they lived, given their precarious housing situations. Throughout the interview, the researchers emphasized that participants can always choose to stop or withdraw their interviews without penalties or repercussions. Research participants were also reminded that they may refuse to answer any question throughout the interview should they wish to do so.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling. We maintained the confidentiality of all informants, everyone was given pseudonyms. Interviews were saved in a secure Dropbox folder that only members of the research team could access. After each interview, the researchers ensured the participants had the necessary contact information should they wish to withdraw from the research. As well, they were given $30 compensation for every hour of interview that they were part of and a list of organizations and contact persons to ask for help (i.e., legal matters, housing, recreation, etc.). Based on these interviews, the researchers identified service organizations that could provide support. The research team then developed another set of questionnaires for service organizations to contextualize further the results of our migrant worker interviews. Five settlement/faith organizations agreed to be interviewed.

The undocumented migrant workers team interviewed a total of 10 participants. The caregiver team feared that conducting the interviews would affect their permanent residency applications. After several counselling sessions, they still did not want to participate. Instead, one migrant worker who lost their status decided to do the interviews with the help of a graduate student who also attended the research workshops. They interviewed a total of 6 participants. During the pandemic, the team decided to complete 6 more interviews. Overall, we conducted 22 interviews with migrant workers and 5 interviews with representatives of settlement service and faith organizations.

Different members of the migrant worker community completed transcription and translations of all interviews. The research team analyzed and interpreted the data, and also co-wrote this report.

Literature Review

The literature shows that there is a gap in addressing the specific and unique needs of temporary foreign workers (TFWs) and newcomers when it comes to the issue of homelessness and housing support. Walsh et al. have found that "…homeless immigrants are underrepresented" (890) in housing shelter assistance and that immigration settlement service providers have expressed their own lack of knowledge around immigration policy (900). This is not surprising as the rules around TFW work permits are constantly being modified as highlighted by the 2020 Parkland Institute report on working and living in Alberta without status (5). The report discusses the unstable, non-linear processes TFWs and newcomers undergo to attain status which tend to leave them in a vulnerable, limbo state – a sentiment participants of these interviews have expressed. Therefore, understanding this complicated process not only poses an obstacle to service providers, but also to the TFWs and newcomers who have to adapt and cope with these changes.

Moreover, Fiedler et al. write about the difficulty in collecting data around the homelessness of recent immigrants due to the data criterion created by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation as it does not account for the different living experiences of this demographic when measuring housing need in Canada (214). Accordingly, the immigration status of TFWs and newcomers accounts for the different lived experiences they may undergo when facing homelessness and housing precariousness. Participants of the study affirmed that they face

distinct vulnerabilities because immigration status affected their finances and their capacity to afford housing. Participants expressed grief in not being able to work due to the loss of their status and the stress of the financial burdens this lays on them.

Immigration Status informs the types of services TFWs and newcomers can access and the extent of support they can be given. Bhuyan (2012), in writing about Violence Against Women shelters in Toronto, discusses how service providers are met with complications in giving proper adequate assistance to women with precarious status. In some cases, settlement service providers are explicitly prohibited from giving services to migrants with either no status or temporary status, limiting their service provision to citizens and permanent residents. In this regard, TFWs and newcomers find housing through their own personal networks of friends, extended family or mutual acquaintances. This has been the case for many of the participants of these interviews as these networks have been their go-to and only resort.

Discussion

Our project affirms these findings, highlighting the special needs facing TFWs, migrant workers, and migrant workers without status. We add nuance to these findings by providing more context into the specific experiences of precarious migrants in Edmonton, Alberta. When reading through these narratives, we are reminded of Luin Goldring and Patricia Landolt's arguments that migrants face varying trajectories of precariousness in Canada, with many migrants going through "non-linear" journeys where they move from various legal and non-legal statuses (2013: 3).

One of our main observations was the way many of the migrants we interviewed switched between different immigration statuses as they tried to find a way to stay legally in Canada. For example, some of the migrants we spoke to have entered Canada as temporary foreign workers, but later switched to having an international student visa in the hope of eventually obtaining a post-graduate work permit, and eventually, permanent residency. Unfortunately, they became undocumented while amassing enormous student debt because they later discovered the school where they studied at was not an accredited institution, which meant that they would be unable to avail of a postgraduate work permit that would have allowed them to extend their stay in Canada and perhaps even apply for Canadian citizenship. Others came into the country as caregivers but lost status after they left their jobs because they faced employer abuse or because they were fired. Yet others obtained work visas as the partners of temporary foreign workers but became at risk of losing status because they separated from their partners or their partner passed away.

Hence, echoing Goldring and Landolt (2013), we also found the role of luck in dictating migrant workers' security of status, with migrants' access to secure housing depending on random events, such as policy changes, the whims of their employers, the security of their family relationships, and other matters. This means that migrants' situations can change drastically, depending on circumstances that are outside their control creating precarious and transient housing or homeless circumstances.

Understanding this larger context helps explain the themes below:

Theme One: Long-standing stigma against migrants makes it hard for migrants to find places to rent. The houses that they are able to find are oftentimes sub-standard.

Migrant workers, particularly those from racialized backgrounds, oftentimes find it difficult to get housing because some landlords simply do not want to rent to them. The belief that migrants workers - be they temporary foreign workers, caregivers or newcomers - are undesirable tenants is pervasive. As such, some landlords impose higher requirements for migrant workers who would like to sign a lease. For example, some landlords only accepted references who are based in Canada. This obviously presents a hardship for migrant workers who have only just arrived in the country and thus do not have Canadian references. Some landlords also only accept references from within the province. This means that a migrant worker moving from, for example, Saskatchewan to Alberta, may find that prospective landlords in Alberta would not accept references from their landlords in Saskatchewan:

Ivan: When I arrived in Edmonton I faced a housing problem. I could not rent an apartment for my family because I arrived from a different Province and I did not have any reference. Because of this it took me a month or two to look for a home. Problem was not because of money. They just refused me.

Some of the settlement service workers who we spoke with try to advocate on behalf of migrant workers but also encounter resistance from landlords, even when the migrant worker in question has legal status. As one settlement service worker we interviewed asserted: “I actually just had a case this morning where she’s being rejected now for the third time in two weeks with different landlords. She’s a temporary resident but because of her credit background and because she did run out of status and then regained it, the landlord looked into all of that. So that’s another huge challenge.” Despite having a settlement services worker vouch for her and despite finally acquiring legal status to stay in Canada, the landlord saw the migrant worker as a risky tenant and rejected her application.

The reluctance of landlords to accept migrant workers as tenants have forced some migrant workers to accept substandard housing. Some of the landlords who migrant workers lease their apartments from recognize the difficulty that they face in securing housing and see this as an opportunity to take advantage of migrant workers by, for example, charging higher rent. In the following interview excerpts, migrant workers describe their housing situations, highlighting cramped and crowded conditions and poor ventilation:

Edna: it was my first time to stay in a one housing staff with nine people inside the house and only four (4) rooms.

Eugin: I rented a basement with small windows. … to four, five people, so it was just like terrible condition for myself, for my family.

Katrina: We lived 6 months in that basement and it was terrible. It was cold.

Olga: Well, the first room, it was very small. And there’s three guys living in the house.

Marlene: I’m not really comfortable staying in one room with others so far hahaha because you just share bed in a room.

Robert: We are 3 families in this unit, 3 bedrooms, total of 7 persons

Markus: “Coming from Taiwan, 8 of us, we were brought to a place with 5 bedrooms converting the basement and living room using curtains as divisions. Two couples [already] occupy the first 2 rooms, then 2 persons from our group stay in the smallest room, then the other 2 rooms were filled with 3 persons each. I can’t forget that time, we bought our beds and only 5 inches apart from one another in one room.”

Theme Two: Migrants are finding it difficult to pay rent because they are not being paid enough.

The high costs of living in Edmonton, coupled with migrant workers’ relatively meagre salaries, mean that it is simply too difficult to make ends meet. Many are paid minimum wage ($15/hour) which they find is insufficient to pay rent. If they are undocumented they are often paid even less. As Jacky, a caregiver, succinctly describes: “Caregivers’ income is not enough to pay rent.”

Many of the migrants who we interviewed - some of whom are also supporting families in Canada and also in their home countries - discussed how they sometimes have to decide between paying rent or paying for groceries. In fact, we discovered that hunger was widespread among the migrants in our study:

Eugin: “We have to choose between groceries or rent.”
Olga: “Well, we can’t be homeless, because we have two kids now, a newborn and a teenager, so we just have to go without food. It is easier.”

In addition, restrictions on migrant workers’ employment contracts and immigration visas prohibit them from working in other jobs. This means that their ability to earn more is limited.

Interviewer: Why don’t you look for a second job?
Martha: No, because I’m not open and I wasn’t a PR (permanent resident) yet. With Caregivers, you're not allowed to do other jobs... you only work for your designated employer.

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Eugin: “ I think the main cause of this one is a problem with the work and not enough work for foreign workers and low salaries that employers pay to their foreign workers, especially the first period cause they have the possibility to hold their employees and employees don't have any chances to change the work.”

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Jacky: “I’m not really free, there are rules that I have to obey. And every day you have to perform according to the rules, and if you break the rules there are repercussions.”

Adding to the pressures that some migrants are facing is the reality that some employers make it even more difficult for them to save because they take ‘cuts’ from migrant workers’ salaries:

Lisa: “My employer came to pick me up but in my contract I have to pay for food and living. That’s the old pathway. Automatically deducted from my income. Everything is deducted like CPP, food and living, tax. I actually get paid bi-weekly but still with everything deducted from your income, you can only save a little bit.”

Theme three: Migrants have difficulty finding affordable housing due to their precarious immigration status, which is then linked to experiences of job loss and/or to employment difficulties

People's housing situations are inevitably tied to their economic and immigration status. In fact, all of the migrants that we spoke to discussed how their housing security is directly linked to their immigration status and/or to their job security. Simply put, some migrants have a hard time paying rent because they lack funds; they lack funds because they cannot get jobs and/or have been laid off; their immigration status, in turn, can make it difficult for them to get hired.

The following interview excerpts highlight the connections between housing security, immigration status, and job security. In all cases, the migrant workers in question discuss why they are unable to afford housing:

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Interviewer: "Are you earning enough?"
Kylie: "No, it's not enough.
Interviewer: "Were you able to save money before?"
Kylie: "Yes, I was able to, but when I switched from having a work permit to student permit, it was a bit difficult. Because I can only work for 20 hours a week...I didn't have the opportunity to save. So it was just from one paycheck to the next one. All the savings I had before, I've used since becoming a student. Now it's difficult to manage to pay rent, food and everything... with my current status I cannot work until I [get] my status figured out. I'm still [facing a] financial burden, no status means I cannot work (legally) and thus have a hard time paying rent."

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Interviewer: Why are you not able to access housing?
Jane: "No, because of my status, I have no work. I feel hopeless and cannot move and cannot do anything."

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Interviewer: How would you rate your current financial situation now compared to when you first arrived?
Markus: "It's really a struggle the last three years. Being a student means limited income, and when somehow I lost my status last year, it was really difficult because I could not work legally)...The last five months, I was able to survive working illegally while trying to restore my status, my situation. But with the threat of Coronavirus, almost everything was shut down, including my job. And as much as I wanted to look for another job so I can continue to provide for myself and for my family, I feel helpless. Since April 1st, I was out of a job, I'm trying my best to be a good person by staying home so I can help not to spread the virus."

In one case, one of the people we interviewed described how her husband's job loss led them to become homeless. Their temporary work visa made it difficult for her husband to find a job:

Adel: "We stayed in his truck and we experienced a snow storm. We stayed there for two weeks. We were like homeless until he got his job.

In another case, one woman we spoke to discussed how her husband's death caused her to lose status - which in turn prevented her from finding work - and led her to resort to fundraising from fellow community members:

Ana: "I'm not working now and not eligible for work, my husband passed away few months ago, so I am out of status now. I raised money through Go Fund Me, the Russian community help me with it. Now it is the worst situation with money since we came here. I don't have any income now because my husband passed away, and after a few months I am going to be homeless [with my daughter]."

The Settlement service workers who we interviewed affirmed migrant workers' explanations of how housing, immigration, and employment were closely interlinked. It was a struggle, in fact, for them to find resources to support migrant workers, particularly because they lack funding:

Settlement service worker # 1: They can't get to the next stage of housing and income because usually they don't qualify because of their immigration status. So those are some of the things that we're not able to help with. Then we have a gap in our service there too because we don't have enough funding to help them get to the next step."

Theme Four: Migrant workers who live with their employers face increased surveillance.

Some of the migrant workers we interviewed live with their employers. This may be due to the requirements of their immigration programs. For example, the Caregiver Program, depending on the agreement that the worker has with their employers, may require that workers have to reside in the same households as their employers. Many researchers have written about why living with their employers is harmful for caregivers (see Bakan and Stasiulus 2005; Tungohan, et al., 2015).

Caregivers have to contend with difficulties keeping boundaries and thus having to work extended shifts without compensation. This was the case for Jenny, whose employers' children constantly opened her room without knocking and expected Jenny to help them with various tasks, even when she was off-duty: "The only difference is that back home we have locks on our door, here in my room, I don't. So even if I'm already done work, if the kids want to go in my room, they can. That's illegal. My room should have a lock."

Jacky, another caregiver also commented that: "The door in my room doesn't have a lock".

Yet other caregivers also find that living with their employers means that they do not get any respite from the labour abuse that they face. Because their workplaces are also their living spaces, they are constantly in the company of their abusive employers:

Lisa: "I am not happy working with them especially to the wife. She always mad at me and sometimes locked me in the room. Her jealousy went to the limit, when she physically attack me."

Edna: "It's really hard since for the two weeks it's like it's a miserable experience already because my employer had an alcohol problem… The husband is the one's working and the lady employer is at home. And she is always drunk for every day... I could not even eat with them since it's like the harsh words that you can hear from her is really bad but I don't have choice...right... it's like I am scared that I have to call. Once I had my work permit, I did not stay longer because for me I'm already verbally abused.

Not having a space of their own and experiencing abusive and toxic work environments have led some caregivers to seek respite from their workplaces by asking friends for temporary accommodations during the weekends when they are off-work. These experiences highlight how caregivers never truly feel at ease because they live where they work. Jacky, a caregiver who was not in an abusive environment, still sought freedom from her workplace/home

Jacky: “I think my main issue was on my first week, that on my days off, I don’t know where I would go, what would I do? You feel lonely. You go to the mall but once you get used to it, you look for a sense of belonging, you look for a community.”
Mary: “Like I said, I go to church or to the mall because if I stay at home, I won’t be able to get rest, I’m kinda forced to work.”

Other migrant workers who find themselves living with their employers also experience increased surveillance. Some even find that their employers dictate their activities by imposing rules that they have to follow. For example, Markus notes that his employer, who also owns the house where he lives, did the following: “he changed the doorknob of the main door (after we moved in) and didn’t provide us with the new key’ to avoid going out more often especially at night. I find it ok since I don't go out that much, and my relationship with the family was really open, but I also feel bad for my co-border since it was really done on purpose for him.”

Theme Five: Migrant workers who have become homeless have very limited access to formal housing supports.

Our interviews with both migrant workers and with settlement service providers reveal the special difficulties that migrant workers who have lost housing face. Not only are their long waiting lists for subsidized housing but the housing supports that are available are severely limited; most of the supports that *are* available tend to prioritize Canadian citizens and permanent residents. It is only through the interventions made by settlement service workers who have their own personal contacts that some migrant workers could even access housing. In these cases, the settlement service workers do not consult other government and non-government organizations but are rather reliant on immigrant organizations, faith-based organizations, and local community groups to provide housing. Two organizations we spoke to confirmed that they refer people struggling with housing back to their own communities to find friends that will help them: if it is a Filipino client, the organization will contact the Filipino community, if it is Russian, they will contact the Russian community:

> Settlement worker # 1: “we refer them to the community and there’s a few different agencies that can assist with that, sometimes we reach out to the church and the mosques that umm sometimes offer that help and support but it’s not always available so it’s not a consistent thing.”
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> Settlement worker # 5: “If that’s the same community or faith [group] it’s easy for them to accommodate someone. Especially for women with kids right? Because out of compassion so they can temporarily relocate in the future.”

Settlement service workers note that there are some community and faith-based organizations who are more willing to accept migrants who they either have more in common with or who they perceive as facing more distress:

> Settlement worker # 2: While [in the] community, [migrant workers] have their own physical house. [For organizations from] the same community or faith, it's easy for them to accommodate someone especially for women with kids right? Because out of compassion so they can temporarily relocate in the future.

Because of the absence of formal housing supports, migrant workers become reliant on informal contacts for housing. Three of the migrant workers we spoke to sought housing from friends or friends of friends. Adel, for instance, even contacted a friend she knew from Hong Kong, who knew people in Edmonton, who then allowed her stay with them temporarily. Two others spoke about how they asked their friends if they could stay with them. For Jenny, one worker who was in the Caregiver Program, her employer's decision to suddenly terminate her contract and to kick her out of the house made her suddenly homeless. She describes it as follows:

Jenny: "My employer throw all my clothes outside the house."
Interviewer: **"**So basically, they kicked you out of the house?"
Jenny: Yes. And also I'm working 14 hours every day.

For another worker, their inability to find work meant that they could no longer afford to pay rent so they needed a place to stay while they were job-hunting.

For Markus, this meant constantly moving from friend to friend: "Friends, people from my church, they are like angels sent to help me. From August to November I moved from one place to another almost every month. It wasn't easy but it was really a big help. And I can't thank them enough for it."

He further reflected: "I hope we have a program that can meet those needs. Like when the time I don't have the means to pay rent, the government should have a place for us. Even for short period of time that they can let us stay so we can recover with our financial concerts or status. I'm not really sure if the government has programs already for the citizens or residents of Canada but for TFW and the likes who was part of the community and still is, I just hope that they can start to care for them too. We have given our fair amount of duties and taxes to them, but on the time we needed the support we can't even get any from them, simply because we are out of status already."

Mary: "Based on my experience, under live-in caregiver, it's hard, if you're staying at your employer's house, it's limited. I wish we can have a place to stay where we can comfortably move and rest and can do whatever we want to. I wish they can provide a house for us caregivers where we can call home not worrying about being bothered by our employers especially when we are already off work. Like where we can actually enjoy our days off.

Theme Six: Applying a gender lens to our analysis reveals that female migrants face housing problems due to experiences of gender-based violence.

The female migrants who we spoke to who became homelessness following their experiences of domestic violence. Because their status in Canada was tied to their husbands, leaving their husbands led to a loss of status. This was the case for Katya:

Katya: "Now I don't have work as I don't have a work Visa. I live off my savings. I had problems with domestic violence and divorce. When you see their brochures [for shelters], they tell you

that they know what you worried about and what you feel. It looks like these brochures were made by professional specialists. But when you come to office they don't understand your problems and feelings at all."

Some women who were facing repeated instances of domestic abuse relied on the support provided by the shelter to rebuild their lives. In the cases below, the police intervened.

For Natasha, the police's intervention led her to find support in a shelter: "My relationship with my partner] was on and off and what's happening to me that time was I don't have support from anyone. I don't have my family here only him, so the violence that's happening to me was repeatedly doing during that time and even the police got involved in our problems that's why I end up in the shelter and I start my life again."

For Katya, however, her husband reported *her* as being the abuser, which initially made it hard for her to get placed in a shelter: "My husband reported me to the police and I could not [get referrals] to shelters or female organizations. My husband [used force] on me. He made conditions so bad for me with the help of his lawyer that I [had to] leave our house. From this situation, I can say that citizen and women non-citizens don't have the same rights. The law is on the side of citizens."

Kayta ended up losing status and had to return to her home country but transferred guardianship to her landlady so her son could finish high school in Canada.

While the women who we spoke to were grateful to have found housing, they mentioned that living in a shelter presented challenges. Adel mentioned feeling uncomfortable because the shelter where she lived had cameras everywhere, with staff strictly guarding their movements. Natasha noted that she was uncomfortable in the shelter where she lived because of an incident involving other children living in the shelter; consequently, she tries as much as possible to spend time away from the shelter, but she oftentimes does not know where to go.

Theme Seven: Migrants who have precarious immigration status and face housing problems suffer from health problems.

Needless to say, the stress and anxiety of having precarious immigration status has led to negative health outcomes for migrants:

Jane: "Physically and emotionally, I am so stressed."

Katrina: "I was sick every time."

Agnes: "Yes, it's really different like when you go out, we usually eat fast food, because the stores that you want to buy food or to eat like Filipino are too far. Everything they eat here is either fries, burger, or pizza. You only eat vegetables once. That's probably why I got sick coz of all this fatty food. Our body is not used to what they're eating compared to what we eat back home."

One migrant who we spoke to who was worried about her housing and who was also non-status discussed how her fear of being discovered as lacking papers led her to give birth by herself through the help of YouTube videos:

Olga: “Yeah so I had my baby at home in my bathroom because we were not able to afford a hospital seat. And I seen the doctors for the first time when I was about 8 months pregnant because we could not pay for that and I did not have medical insurance and medicine.”

Another migrant discussed the difficulties of receiving ongoing medical care:

Natasha: “I went to the [an organization to] seek for help and they referred [me] to a doctor from the community life centre so they were the one who mostly gave help. But the struggle is real. I still don’t have a house to stay after that. After giving birth? I don’t have income. You’re not with your husband after giving birth so you were just the one who support your kids all throughout.”

The settlement service workers who we spoke to affirmed that migrants, particularly those without status, are facing significant health challenges. Many noted that non-status migrants fear seeking medical care because the doctors and healthcare workers who they meet might report them to government authorities, which may result in their deportation.

Theme Eight: There is a big difference between a ‘house’ and a ‘home.’ Migrant workers facing precarious situations find that they are living in a ‘house’ that is not their home.

Our final theme is a bit more abstract but is worth noting nevertheless. For migrants who have access to housing - be it temporary housing, a shelter, or permanent housing that they secured from their employers or from a landlord - there is a significant difference between seeing their housing as a place where they could eat and sleep, and their housing as a home where they can get refuge.

Katya: “I don’t feel like I am at home.”

Lisa: “My definition of home? For me, home is when your family is together, either the house is big or small. Especially here, you’re alone. You have money but you’’re alone. You have friends but you don’t get to see them coz your days off is different from their days off.”

Jacky: “Home is where you belong. Home, is like you are a part of it. There is a place for your family, no matter what and how long you are gone. It is not home (with employers). There is no comparison. This is just a space for me and certainly it is not easy. It is not a home. Home is your own space. You feel safe and there is no timeline, no schedule. It is where you can let your guard down... At the end of the day, the difference of an employee that goes home is that, you dont have to face again with the people that you work for. After an argument at work, you go home, you unwind, then be with your family and call it a day. But with live-in caregivers where will you go? It’s an awkward situation.”

Patricia: “For me, [home] I when I am in peace, when I have my own privacy and a place to relax…even if you have a house, if you can’t be peaceful inside, you can’t consider that as a home.”

Housing and Precariousness During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the issues discussed above. Many migrant workers lost their jobs or their hours of work were reduced. It is important to reiterate that a temporary foreign worker or caregiver cannot look for different or extra work, because their immigration status only allows them to work for the employer listed on their visa.

For Markus: “Almost everything was shut down, including my job. And as much as I wanted to look for another job so I can continue to provide for myself and for my family [in the Philippines], I feel helpless.”

The loss of work not only affects one’s livelihood, but also one’s immigration status. While analyzing interviews during the pandemic, two main themes kept arising: 1) Changes in work leading to changes in housing and 2) Worries about status tied to worries about livelihood

Theme 1: Changes in work leading to changes in housing

Two caregivers shared that their hours were cut since their employers were now staying at home:

Jacky: “So now with Covid-19 I only work 6 hours a day because they are both here at home.”

Maureen: Because they stop working, and no school for the kids, so they told me they don’t need me full time. They can pay me half during this pandemic. So instead of 5 times a week. They need me only 2 times a week now.

For many caregivers in Canada, their housing situation completely changed during the pandemic. Now their employers were home all day. Because of how uncomfortable this was for Maureen, and only having to work two days a week, she decided to leave her employer’s home to live with a friend. Many caregivers do not have that option.

Again, informal networks for housing support were used by migrant workers. Roby, a temporary foreign worker, had to move in with a friend: “It is a very very hard time...One thing is we’re facing a financial problem right now. Because no work, no pay. I have a close friend that he offer me a room to stay, because this time is difficult. This guy or my friend was very kind to me and support me during this crsis and even give me free food sometimes.

Theme 2: Worries about status tied to worries about livelihood

Because one’s immigration status is tied to their employment, if they lose their job, their immigration status is in limbo and therefore their livelihood is threatened. Worries about changes in status and the effect ones status has on freedom and ability to access services were shared repeatedly:

Robert: [The pandemic] really has a big effect on our plans, with all the struggles we’ve been [through] then. Now this crisis I lost my status. Sometimes my morale goes down on whether we can still regain our status.

Maureen: I am worried because I don’t know what will happen for my Permanent application. It’s like all the application was freeze during this pandemic.

The worry of increased state surveillance during the pandemic potentially leading to deportations because of one's status was expressed by Abby:

Abby: There are alot of cops in the street, just looking for whatever people are doing. And I'm scared of that because of this pandemic. Even if I am not doing anything wrong, for example, if I am not wearing a mask, or if I cough in the street or something connecting me that I got the virus, right? Like if they are going to take me and ask me for my ID, or everything? And that's my fear. What am I going to show them to prove who I am? If they find out that I don't have a status, you know that's my fear too.

The stress about one's status is also linked to worries about family separation. Even with borders closing and less air flights available due to the pandemic, there are some who still retain the right to freely cross borders. This is not the case for precarious migrants. Those with precarious immigration status find that their freedom to travel internationally is extremely limited, thereby extending the time that they are kept apart from their families. In fact, for many migrants, not knowing *when* they can see their families and when they can finally reunite in Canada is a huge cause of concern:

Robert: Back home, I really worry about our child in the Philippines.

And finally, because one's status is also linked to one's ability to access services, Markus shared his heightened worry about not being able to access healthcare during the pandemic: "I am worried for myself getting infected, thinking of the bigger problem that lies ahead, since I don't have coverage for Alberta Health Services. The government also reiterates that they won't provide assistance for people in my situation."

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

We end this report by reiterating that migrant workers from different sectors and with varying immigrant status all face tremendous challenges with housing. Those with visas tied to their employers face problems with accessing affordable and quality housing and also with employer surveillance. In contrast, those with more precarious immigration status (i.e., those who have lost status or are in the process of losing status) face difficulties with finding stable housing. One reason for this is due to the lack of shelter space for non-citizens. Another reason is the occurrence of racialized stigma against migrant workers who face barriers in the rental market. It is also worth noting that the pandemic has intensified the pressures felt by *all* migrant workers.

Given our findings, we make the following policy recommendations:

In making these recommendations, we wish to stress the intersection of health, employment, and housing issues arising from precarious immigration status. These problems should not be compartmentalized as they need interconnected solutions.

1. **Initialization of ongoing dialogue and understanding between different levels of government on housing, immigration, health, and labour issues and greater coordination between community organizations on programs that support migrant workers.**

    - Many community organizations do not know which organizations in the city help migrant workers and to what extent. When organizations work closely together,

they will be able to maximize resources and avoid duplication of services. Coordination between different organizations from various sectors will help lessen the complex processes that often overwhelm migrant workers in accessing services. Building coalitions with different community organizations will also improve information dissemination among migrants.

- Governments need to work together to understand the links between immigration status (federal), healthcare (provincial), housing (municipal), and employment to design better policies and fund support programs.

- Federal, provincial, and municipal governments also need to work and communicate with different organizations that are in the frontline helping people with precarious immigration status. In this way, all relevant stakeholders will be able to understand better the everyday realities of migrant workers and come up with strategies to better support existing organizations that cater to these individuals.

2. **Regularization policies and programs: the need for *every* resident to be treated free from discrimination based on ethnicity, socio-economic and immigration status. Immigration status should not divide people across the country. All *residents* of a community should have the same ability to access services and supports or have the same "status".**

- There should be equitable access to health, housing, and social services for all migrants in Canada. For instance, shelters should be provided with more funding so they can house more migrants for a longer period of time should it be necessary.

- Strengthen campaigns or improve information dissemination regarding housing discrimination based on Alberta Human Rights Act and Residential Tenancies Act. Efforts should be made to inform landlords and tenants of the contents of these Acts, perhaps through an information-dissemination campaign in community newspapers, municipal Twitter accounts, etc.

3. **Development of a community center accessible and suitable to the needs of migrant workers: There is a need for a publicly accessible community centre for migrant workers facing housing challenges. The creation of such a centre, similar to the Immigrant Workers Centre in Montreal, would be tremendously helpful for migrant workers, especially during the pandemic, when public spaces that they can normally access are closed.**

- Need for a supportive drop-in space to:

  a) provide a safe place for migrant workers who live with their employers to go to on their days off.
  b) be accessible where migrant workers can get education on supports available, immigration protocols, and employment rights.

c) be safe and comfortable that allows migrant workers to find comfort and support from each other that gives the feeling of “home”, particularly because they are often here without their family.

- Need for temporary transitional housing for workers changing jobs (including trying to leave abusive employers).

- Need for a space that acts as a center to bridge community organizations supporting migrant workers. In the long-term, we recommend the creation of a one-stop-shop service where immigrants can find different organizations that offer various services.

Steps Forward

We will be discussing our report and brainstorm on other possible policy recommendations with policymakers, service organizations and migrant workers over the course of two webinars, which will be held in November 2020.

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