

PLATFORM COMMUNITIES FOR NEWCOMER MIGRANTS



INTRODUCING OUR RESEARCH

Research Problem

As the planet becomes more urbanised it is important to understand the role of migrants for the development of sustainable cities. This is because migrants will account for many of the 2.3 billion more people estimated to be living in cities in 2045 compared to 2020. Migrants also make significant economic contributions, estimated at 10% of global GDP in 2019. By understanding how the urban context of housing, employment, and social networks impacts migrants we can, in turn, design better policies to build sustainable cities.

Research Question

Living in cities exposes residents, including migrants, to structural vulnerabilities in housing, employment, and in social relationships. Little is known about how newcomer migrants face these precarious conditions, or if policy interventions are being effective. To address these knowledge gaps, we asked “how does precarity in housing and living conditions affect the daily lives of migrants in cities?”

Research Design

Our study is the first to compare the daily life experiences of newcomer migrants in the major cities of Hong Kong (China), Atlanta (United States), and Tshwane (South Africa). We completed long interviews with 254 migrants and 16 non-governmental organisations in six communities in these cities. Adopting a “participatory action research” design, we created a common survey instrument from pilot studies, prior research, and input from local stakeholders. We define “newcomer migrants” as persons living in a community for less than a year and being born outside the territory; “community” as a popularly and officially recognized place with about 100,000 persons; and “housing” as the range of habitations recognized by the UN, including sleeping rough, squatting, renting, owning, and staying in temporary quarters.

KEY FINDINGS

Hong Kong



Based on 74 long interviews conducted in the communities of To Kwa Wan (industrial suburb) and Yuen Long (commercial hub and New Town) we found:

Newcomers face particular economic and social challenges in the city, including

- Employment deskilling;
- Unaffordable housing which led to renting and sharing cramped accommodations and, in some cases, staying in abandoned pig sties;
- Significant disruptions in their social relationships with those left behind and with those with whom they shared their housing;
- Feeling disconnected with Hong Kong and not belonging;
- Uncertain legal status, which affected them every day, and threatened their expectation of building a better life;
- Making little or no use of governmental or non-governmental agencies for support.

Newcomers live with housing precarities

Most newcomers rented. They experienced instability and pressure and linked this to the small size of the units, the high rents, and the difficulties of being forced to share space with strangers or family members they did not know:

“I can really feel the pressure (ngaat bik gam 壓迫感)... Every morning is chaos, you know elderly people [my in-laws] wake up so early, my daughter needs to go to kindergarten, and I need to go to work. So, I always need to wait for so long just to use the washroom” (Transcript 55: 2).

Newcomers live with declining physical health and stress

When migrants arrive, 90% said their self-rated health was excellent or very good, which is above the Hong Kong average (70%). However, one third said their health had declined after arrival. More reported a reduction of health in To Kwa Wan than in Yuen Long. They linked this to housing precarity:

“My son sleeps on the lower deck of the bed, while my husband and I sleep on the upper deck [in a sub-divided flat]... My husband always comes back home late at night after work, every time he climbs up the bed stairs, that would unconsciously wake me up and I could hardly fall asleep afterward. My health has been getting worse...” (Transcript 2:3).

Precarity was experienced not only in housing but also employment, social relations, and in planning for the future. This overwhelming sense of precarity increased mental stress:

“I work [informally] in Hong Kong and I am worried. I am not sure when I will be forced back to Vietnam” (Transcript 22:7).

Atlanta



Based on 110 long interviews conducted in the communities of Clarkston (a suburban hub for the asylum seeking and refugee population, aka Georgia’s “Ellis Island”) and the Buford Highway area near Stone Mountain (a centre of economic migration especially from Latin American), we found:

Newcomers face particular economic and social challenges in the city, including

- Employment deskilling, especially those who were seeking asylum or had been granted refugee status;
- Feeling some connections to Atlanta, but expecting to leave if and when better opportunities arose;
- Uncertain legal status, which affected them every day and threatened their expectation of building a better life, especially if they were undocumented;
- Some use of non-governmental agency support, especially if they had refugee status.

Newcomers live with housing precarity

While newcomer migrants experience vulnerability and uncertainty in employment, social relations, and in setting aspirations and plans, we found that housing was the most significant source of precarious conditions. Arriving migrants face unresponsive landlords, poor maintenance, and vulnerability to increasing rents and displacement:

“The people who run [my] apartment complex, they don’t care. When something is broken in the apartment, when [I] call the office nobody is responding to [me] and [I] have to wait about a month in order to get it fixed. ... Then the apartment complex in general is so dirty and there are lots of bugs; nobody cleans it.... [I] want to move out but [I] cannot afford it” (TB5_6).

Newcomers have poor health

Only one-third of newcomers said their self-rated health was excellent or very good. They spoke of difficulty in obtaining medical care in Atlanta, with understandings of medical insurance systems very limited. Many went without treatment because of the expense of care and geographic barriers to access:

“[We] can’t afford to pay the doctor [here]. [We] can’t afford to pay for medications...[in Atlanta, you] need health insurance to see a doctor. So... here... there are a lot of expenses, especially in medical things. And [we] cannot afford that” (TB3_4).

Newcomers said support from NGOs was important, but too limited

Almost two-thirds of the refugees received relocation assistance from non-profit organisations. Just 5% of undocumented immigrants received assistance from organisations in the realm of housing. Many refugees expressed that the assistance was valuable but that they could have benefited from more sustained, comprehensive support, such as English-language instruction:

“...When you first come here, there is someone who can—like who will help you to rent a house, and buy a car, and it’s going to be for three to four months. If you’re not speaking English, that’s worthless, because you cannot work... So they have to help refugees more, like in order to get jobs. I’m not saying that helping them for five or six years, like I’m saying like for one year” (TB2).

Tshwane



Based on 70 long interviews conducted in the communities of Sunnyside-Burgerspark (in central Pretoria with high density, transitional housing) and Mamelodi East (a remote and informal settlement of some improved and many unimproved structures, see above) we found:

Newcomers face particular economic and social challenges in the city, including

- Employment precarity, with only 14% working regularly, and these workers earning less than minimum wage or bread line, and lacking job security, but reporting they were gaining some “on the job” skills;
- Renting small or distant living spaces and units, with many lacking access to fresh water, electricity, and the Internet, and living with strangers, but sometimes paying modest rents;
- Being reverse remitters, with 69% receiving cash from family back home that was sent to them. This dependence led to positive feelings of status and esteem for being given responsibility for the livelihood of the family but, at the same time, it added social pressure to deliver these expectations to distant family;
- Home: 75% said where they were staying was not home;
- Limited or zero access to urban services and NGO support in Mamelodi East.

Newcomers live with housing precarity

Some respondents lived in abandoned cars inside hijacked buildings. Shacks and flats were poorly maintained and forcible eviction from self built zinc and wood housing was reported. However, and particularly in Mamelodi East, a lack of regulation led some to feel an absence of scrutiny and a possibility for autonomy and flexibility to imagine an improved future. Living in rooms with no water or electricity did not affect this optimism. Housing precarity is understood as multidimensional. For some, despite material hardships, it offered crucial access to urban opportunity which would otherwise not be possible. As one respondent said, when asked about what is needed to be successful here:

“You must be prepared, have savings and accommodation. You need guidance from a local person. And you must be patient”

Newcomers have good health

Young and often encouraged/selected by their families to migrate to Tshwane, most economic migrants self-rated their health as good to excellent. Health levels improved over their first months of living in Tshwane. Regarding subjective and affective wellbeing, many revealed a positive and optimistic attitude, and had confidence in the future.

Being upwardly mobile attracted prejudice and attacks

We found that negative experiences of xenophobia and incidences of being attacked increased the longer newcomers stayed in Tshwane. Upon first arriving, living in precarious housing and lacking employment made many invisible. Yet, as they found informal employment and started to gain the access they sought, attacks increased. While migrants in South Africa are legally protected by the constitution, research arising from this project among refugees and asylum seekers in Tshwane is further investigating the circumstances under which such legal protections are not effective. As one respondent articulately says when asked about what is needed to be successful:

“We need to persevere. Not to be dependent on the system. Even if things are tough, we shouldn’t run home”

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Newcomer migrants face similar economic and social challenges and opportunities in Hong Kong, Atlanta, and Tshwane. But there are important differences too. We asked, can best practice policy from one city be applied elsewhere? Our recommendations have been subjected to academic peer review and been co-created and ground-truthed with local stakeholders, including migrants, NGOs, social sector workers, and business leaders.

We call for a policy agenda that makes investments in “*platform communities*” to enable newcomer migrants to contribute to sustaining the development of cities. Based on our comparative analyses of housing, we introduce five examples of how to build such platform communities:

Increase local social and cultural capital to enhance belongingness and home

Deskilling and precarious legal status increased the dependency felt by newcomers, and reduced their resourcefulness. Business and Government can facilitate migrants’ self-help by implementing small-scale commercial hubs in specific neighbourhoods and communities, and channelling and co-ordinating other forms of support through these nodes.

Increase educational access for migrant children

While each of our study cities have policy that, in theory, gives children rights to access primary and secondary education, the results are uneven. Barriers to access remain, such as cost, transportation, language, gender stereotyping, ethnic and racial discrimination, cramped housing, split familyhood, and precarious legal standing. Supporting migrant children builds sense of community in the short-term by easing the pressure on migrant parents and youth themselves and, over the longer term, by increasing talent, the circulation of success stories, and the shared confidence among all in the community. The Hong Kong government’s *Initiation Programme* (see case study below) is one example of how to achieve this.

Increase NGO/Faith Base Organisation (FBO) support for newcomers

Migrants often received little or ineffective support from NGOs. Models of effective provision are emerging, for example the *Clarkston Refugee Hub* (see case studies below). This aspect of service delivery should be re-examined strategically by the Government to ascertain if the issue is one of information, of accessibility, of product mix, or some other factors. Appropriate measures may include ensuring NGOs are clustered in the right places, noting that the impact of precarity varies over the life course of the migrant in the city and is not fixed, increasing the financial support for NGOs/FBOs who work with migrants specifically, and coordinating these services through a network of platform communities.

Promote health by addressing wellbeing through housing and community

Our findings link conditions of precarity with positive and negative changes in objective (self-rated health), subjective (satisfaction) and affective (confidence in the future) dimensions of wellbeing and health. The relationship between precarity and health is therefore not the “dose-response” type that informs many public health programmes. We call for interventions in migrant wellbeing that work holistically to include physical and mental aspects and are sustained and not turned off when most needed. We urgently recommend a centrally coordinated and multi-agency approach that is focused on platform communities and involves multiple stakeholders.

Increase the effectiveness of communications between migrants and partners in urban prosperity

This is about all forms – written, spoken, performed – of communications and the role communications plays in fostering understandings between diverse groups and building partnerships to achieve common ends. The *Feast of the Clowns* (see case studies below) is a best practice example of what is possible. Migrants do not seek charity but require an even playing field on which to cooperate and compete, for the common good. Partners will vary from platform to platform, but often include churches, property companies, universities, developers, and banks.

BEST PRACTICE CASE STUDIES

Initiation Programme, Hong Kong



Hong Kong's Education Bureau has provided a block grant to four primary schools and two secondary schools to carry out a six-month full-time education each year for newcomer students before they enrol to local mainstream schools. Rolling out the Initiation Programme for migrant children lessens newcomers' burden from commuting, supports parenting, and better connects migrants and others across the city. In our study community of To Kwa Wan we heard many good examples of the success of the programme delivered by Po Leung Kuk Madam Chan Wai Chow Memorial School, the only primary school currently implementing the Initiation Programme in the city.

For more details about the programme: <https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/student-parents/newly-arrived-children/services/initiation-program/index1.html>

Feast of the Clowns, Tshwane



The Feast of the Clowns is an annual community-based festival organised by Tshwane neighbours to raise funds and public awareness towards social injustice. Coordinated by the Tshwane Leadership Foundation it has operated for 17 years. Feast offers newcomer migrants an invaluable platform for meeting and networking with the wider community.

For more details about the festival: <https://www.iol.co.za/pretoria-news/feast-of-the-clowns-set-to-raise-laughs-funds-30855811>

Clarkston Refugee Hub, Atlanta



Resettlement agencies have been co-ordinating and concentrating their efforts in Clarkston, Georgia for several decades and in the context of changing political conditions. Now, many cultural institutions, including churches, businesses, and non-profits have clustered in Clarkston to support the growing refugee population. This emerging hub has enabled positive agglomeration economies and success stories, including micro-businesses such as Refuge Coffee (pictured above), and Clarkston's Thriftown Grocery, an enterprising big box destination grocery store. A similar process of clustering is underway in Buford Highway corridor, spearheaded by the Latin American Association, which is a formal organisation with a range of services for newcomers.

For details of the Latin American Association see <https://thelaa.org/>

RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS

**Just Faith: Glocal Responses to Planetary Urbanisation. Pretoria: AOSIS
HTS Religion & Society Series.**

De Beer, S.

This scholarly book scaffolds our specific findings on the housing context of migrant challenges and opportunities within the body of knowledge on planetary urbanisation and urban theology. A critical and comparative theological reading of ‘the urban’ is provided, deliberating on bridging the divide between voices from the Global South and the Global North. The methodology chosen transcended narrow disciplinary boundaries, situating reflections between and across disciplines, in the interface between scholarly reflection and an activist faith, as well as between local rootedness and global connectedness. It suggests the inadequacy of most dominant faith expressions in the face of all-pervasive forces of urbanisation, and it also provides clues as to the possibility of fostering potent alternative imaginaries. It explores a decolonial faith that is expressed in various forms of justice, and offers critical lenses with which to interrogate the consequences and challenges of planetary urbanization. It considers concrete and liberating faith constructs in areas ranging from gender, race, economic inequality, a solidarity economics and housing to urban violence, indigeneity and urbanisation, the interface between economic and environmental sustainability, and grass-roots theological education.

Keywords: Urban theology, Planetary Urbanisation, Faith, Justice, Precarity.

Contact: stephan.debeer@up.ac.za

Dwelling as just faith: migrant housing, precarity and the activities of faith-based organisations in Tshwane and Atlanta

Bailey, A. J., de Beer, S., & Hankins, K.

This paper describes how migrant housing is provisioned by NGOs and FBOs in selected communities in Tshwane and Atlanta. We test the argument that FBO activities in relation to migrant housing are not restricted to the operation of urban land markets but circulate power as part of a broader planetary urbanization. We go on to explore the ethical issues of this insight that migrant housing is part of a constitutive process, part and parcel of the mutual becoming of migrants, communities, and the urban. If migrants and FBOs co-create homes and communities, what is the division of labour and resources and responsibilities? We conclude by calling for a re-focusing of urban research from housing as an economic commodity to dwelling as a layered process of becoming, a verb as much as a noun. It is part of a special collection of original findings on the link between housing and role of faith organisations for migrants in cities entitled *Just Faith* and, as such, enables our specific findings from two cities to be interrogated alongside complementary research from other global contexts.

Keywords: Urban theology, Planetary Urbanisation, Faith, Justice, Precarity.

Contact: bailey@hkbu.edu.hk

Life course and urbanised precarity among newcomer migrants in Hong Kong

Ng, R. W. Y., Bailey, A. J., & Hankins, K.

Our research examines how precarity circulates through the life course of newcomer migrants. The case study considers 59 long interviews with newcomer migrants in two communities of Hong Kong. Precarity is multi-dimensional and circulates across domains of employment, housing, social relationships, and socio-legality. It is felt affectively as limit and enclosure and associated with disruptions in spatial and temporal relations that migrants curate over their life course. In Hong Kong, newcomer migrants negotiate their experience of daily urban life by linking lives and reproducing spatial and temporal relations which variously intensifies and mediates precarity. We call for research that further explores the significance of life course for circulating urbanised precarity.

Keywords: Precarity, Life course, Socio-legality, Housing, Migration.

Contact: rainbow5@life.hkbu.edu.hk

Housing, precarity, and the subjective wellbeing of youth in Hong Kong

Bailey, A. J., Lai A. H. Y, Chan, C. K. Y., Lam, W. T. L., Wong, J. K. Y.

This paper outlines a theoretical framework that links precarity experienced in housing with subjective and affective wellbeing. It provides conceptual underpinning for our argument that the resourcefulness of housing can be harnessed by building platform communities. Its particular case study considers young persons living in Hong Kong, a group in need of assessment because improving the subjective wellbeing of young people helps build sustainable communities. However, for youth, the role of precarity, an increasingly prevalent condition and experience of daily life in cities has not been widely considered in analyses of subjective wellbeing. We examine the case of housing contexts by collecting data from a sample of 1851 youth aged 17-23 who were living in Hong Kong in 2018-19. The relationship between precarity and youth subjective wellbeing varies across private, public, and Home Ownership Scheme housing. While measures of spatiality, temporality, and transition experience are significantly associated with wellbeing, traditional factors, including financial standing, human capital, social capital, and home ownership are insignificant. In noting the importance of housing context the paper calls for further and longitudinal considerations of precarities and wellbeing as processes that simultaneously transform the lives of young people and the housing and cities in which live.

Keywords: Subjective wellbeing, Youth, Precarity, Housing, Hong Kong.

Contact: bailey@hkbu.edu.hk

FURTHER DETAILS

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For further information contact any of the following:

Hong Kong Adrian Bailey (bailey@hkbu.edu.hk)

Atlanta Katherine Hankins (khankins@gsu.edu)

Tshwane Stephan de Beer (stephan.debeer@up.ac.za)

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