

**Paper Title: Housing Barriers for African migrants in Australia**

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**Abstract:** Finding suitable and affordable housing is one of the major concerns facing African migrants in Australia. This paper reports on work in progress at the University of South Australia on housing affordability and community integration for African refugees and migrants. This research seeks to address the relationship between housing and integration and the implications for African community settlement in Australia. The paper addresses the housing barriers experienced by African migrants in Australia and how these barriers affect their ability to obtain housing. It explores specific barriers to obtaining accessible and affordable housing such as racism, social isolation and lack of social and financial capital, the absence of relevant work experience, language difficulties, lack of a driver's license and access to personal transport. These barriers pose significant implications for African migrants' attempts to establish their legitimate place in the wider Australian community. The researcher explores the housing issue and offers a broader understanding of the contemporary Australian housing situation in relation to African migrants' housing conditions.

**Keywords:** African migrants, housing affordability crisis, Australian housing

## **Introduction**

The Australian community has been wrestling with the problem of housing affordability within a diminishing and declining public and private rental housing market for more than three decades (see Beer, 1999). The supply of private rental housing has shrunk and continues to shrink leaving many Australians in housing stress. A recent Adelaide Advertiser newspaper report confirmed that the housing pressure has intensified resulting in first-home buyers facing extreme difficulties in getting a start in the home ownership market (Keane, 2009). Furthermore, aspirations to home ownership are also challenged by high home loan interest rates (currently [09.09] – interest rates are quite low – threatening to rise again but from a quite low base. Which are currently predicted to rise as Australia's house prices remain among the most expensive in the industrialised world (Keane, 2009). This paper attempts to highlight the barriers confronting African migrants in the housing sector as they attempt to settle into the wider Australian community. Like many other migrant communities in Australia, the African migrants seem to be increasingly affected by the growing housing shortage. The most important challenges in the housing sector facing the African community involve economic factors, structural impediments, housing design issues, family size, cultural values and beliefs, educational issues, lack of knowledge about housing services in the wider community and also factors related to lack of social networks. These challenges faced by African migrants have emerged as Australian society continues to grapple with the consequences of the housing affordability decline. As well as African migrants, other affected populations include Indigenous Australians, women, and young people and low-income earners. These individuals experience difficult housing circumstances particularly in Australia's major cities but it is not the aim of this paper to offer a profound analysis relating to these groups. The following section provides brief background information on Australian migration policy before focussing on African migrants' housing barriers in Australia.

## **A snapshot of Australian Migration policy and the migration of Africans to Australia**

The Australian migration system during the 1850s to 1970s was fundamentally a homogenous migration system which mainly settled people of European origin. Such migration practices enabled European refugees to arrive in greater numbers after the end of Second World War, which also enabled Australia to increase its population, address post-war labour shortages and promote economic progress (Jupp, 2002). Australia settled more than 5.9 million of European origin from 1940s to 1970s (Healey, 2002). This migration policy, which deliberately discriminated and excluded people of non-European descent (Sacco, 1996) continued without significant change until the 1970s when the White Australia migration policy was abolished. These Australian migration policy changes may be seen as emerging from, the political unrest and wars taking place in Asia during the late twentieth century which influenced Australia as part of an international community to settle refugees who were displaced and forced to leave countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia and other Asian nations. Through the request of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Australia began to settle people from these conflicts (Nsubuga-Kyobe & Dimock, 2000).

Nevertheless, the migration of people of African descent to Australia is traced back to wars and events that occurred long before the twentieth and early twenty first century in African countries (see Nsubuga-Kyobe & Dimock, 2000). Black Africans arrived in Australia with the First Fleet of convicts in January 1788 and that there were several thousand Africans who came to Australia during the 1830s. But African migration ceased in 1838 (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2008). On the other hand, the migration of Africans re-commenced in the post-World War II period with white Africans migrating to Australia as African nations were gaining independence from British colonial rule during the 1960s onwards. The white Africans were leaving Kenya, Zambia, Malawi, Botswana, Lesotho, and the West African nations of Nigeria and Ghana (Nsubuga-Kyobe and Dimock, 2000). As well as the large numbers of white Africans, there was small number of black African migrants who were allowed to study and work in Australia and some later obtained permanent residence visas. For example, the first black African refugees to arrive to Australia were 26 Ethiopian migrants, 23 men and three women, who all settled in Melbourne under the Federal

Government's refugee program in May 1984 (Triaca, 1984). The civil unrest and starvation in the African continent in recent decades has resulted in a significant influx of people of African descent migrating to Australia, mainly from countries such as Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and several other countries (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2008). The migration of Africans to Australia was facilitated through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Department Immigration & Citizenship 2007a, 200, cited in Harte et al 2009). It is observed that during 2001, 2005 and 2006, the percentage of African migrants resettling in Australia rose from 31% to 70% , (The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2007). Given this brief emphasis on Australian migration history and the migration of Africans to Australia, the sections below give a brief historical account of housing crisis in Australia and the challenges faced by the African migrants in confronting the housing sector.

### **Housing Crisis in Australia**

The Australian housing crisis is argued to have been compounded by several factors such as an increase in the rate of unemployment (Berry, 2003). The current housing concerns across the country are similar to the housing concerns of the 1950s and 1980s where housing prices increased in major Australian cities to the point where an annual shortage in housing supply was not meeting housing demand of ten of thousand households (Healey, 2009). On the other hand, the State and Local Governments' high costs and developers infrastructure charges place excessive restrictions on supplies also contributing to shortage of skilled labour in the construction industry (Healey, 2009). Such practices are contributing to lack of affordable housing and falling rates of home ownership across Australia and also contribute to increasing mortgage defaults (Berry & Hall 2001, cited in Kearins et al. 2004). On the other hand, the number of households in private rental housing market is increasing and the public housing sector has limited housing places to offer to individuals who can not compete in the private rental housing market (Kearins et al., 2004). The absence of suitable, decent and affordable housing is negatively impacting on Australian economic development which also dictates nation's social progress (Berry, 2003). Often, access to home ownership in Australia is seen as achieving the individual's long-term financial security and freedom and is influenced by family commitments, job security and location (Jones & Kent, 1999).

The Commonwealth and State Governments require constructive solutions to alleviate the housing crisis. For instance, the solutions might include the release of lands and new housing developments. Current national housing assistance policy is not comprehensive because it tends to be focused on supporting rental housing, single persons, single parents and people with low socio-economic status and has partially solved these individuals' housing problems (Yates et al., 2005). The average Australian home cost has risen to seven times average household annual income in 2006 in comparison with 1996 where the home cost was four times household annual income (Australian Labor Party, 2007). Arnold (2008) describes State and Territory governments' public housing systems as unable to provide public housing to Australian citizens from low socio-economic status backgrounds and that often applicants with urgent and complicated needs are compelled to wait for more than twelve months to be housed. Moreover, the decline in housing affordability is also accompanied by an individual's lifestyle preferences and also family formation which altered their housing aspirations (Beer, Faulkner, & Gabriel, 2006). It is clear that the Australian housing crisis is fundamentally compounded by many factors such as limited places in public and private rental housing markets, putting significant pressure on Australian citizens and on the public housing authorities across Australia. The public rental housing waiting list in major cities has dramatically risen in recent years and this is predicted to continue. The Commonwealth and State governments' initiatives and programs lack holistic approaches and solutions to address housing issues.

### **Housing Barriers for African migrants in Australia**

The housing barriers facing African migrants in Australia include larger family size, lack of personal transport; lack of financial and social capital; racial discrimination; limited English language skills and lack of knowledge in dealing with public and private sectors. For example, the traditional family structure of African migrants differs from other migrant groups in Australia, often larger than those of non-African households making the traditional Australian housing designs not suitable to meet the African migrants' housing needs. Harte et al. (2009) study found that African migrants who applied for private rental housing are often denied due to their family size and lack of employment. A recent conference paper reported racial discrimination by the landlords and real estate agents against African migrants (Arnold, 2008). On the other hand, employment plays a critical role in individuals' access to

the private rental housing market but African migrants represent high levels of unemployment and underemployment (Sleiman, 2005).

Racial discrimination has been highlighted as one of the major impediments in gaining employment. Batrouney's study reported that employers tend to dislike hiring black Africans (Batrouney 1992). Colic-Peisker & Tilbury (2007) argue that African migrants' physical appearances lead them to suffer from a degree of disadvantage relating to the extent of their visibility. Beer & Foley (2003) acknowledged that migrant groups are among the most disadvantaged communities in the Australian society primarily due to limited support. Other studies have indicated that African migrants are currently under-represented in the workforce and they appeared to have the lowest full-time employment rate compare to other migrant groups in Australian (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2006; Cox et al. 1999). In addition, high unemployment among African migrants leads to issues such as 'loss of self-reliance, self-confidence and psychological and physical health' (Sen, 1999). Having access to employment can improve not only migrants' access to housing but also their health, education, employment, and social status as indicated in the literature (Doug Massey & Denton 1985; Massey and Denton 1993; Massey and Mullan 1984; cited in Haan, 2001).

Furthermore, African migrants suffer from a low level of social capital because they have limited social linkages and networks within the wider Australian community. The access to social networks is fundamentally important as it is described in the literature that social relationships enable individuals and groups such as an African community to access resources through their connections within the wider Australian society (Bourdieu, 1986). Portes, (1998) explained the concept of social capital as vitally important because it constitutes individuals' relationship with one another and also it can be referred to norms and networks that facilitate collective action within the broader society (Wolcock, 2001). More importantly, the ability to speak the language is crucial for African migrants in Australia. Hatoss & Sheely (2009) indicate that that possession of the English language plays a vital role in the capacity of migrants to fit into the broader Australian society. The competition in public and private rental housing sectors adds to African migrants' housing problems. These barriers forced African migrants to live in outskirts of the major Australian cities. For example, a recent study in Western Australia has found that newly arrived African migrants

tend to reside in lower socio-economic suburbs with high levels of public housing and low property prices and where there is limited community services (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2008).

Nevertheless, it is argued in the literature that access to appropriate and affordable housing is fundamentally important for durable settlement and successful integration of migrants into a host society (Jupp, 1994). A study by Tuohey, (2001) described how secure and affordable housing meets an individual's need for privacy, space, safety, interaction, supports and access to employment. Studies conducted in the United Kingdom by Field, (1985), Robinson, (1993); Carey-Wood, Duke, Karn, & Marshall, (1995) Carey-Wood, (1997); Zetter & Pearl, (1999) similarly recognised the important role and the connection between housing and successful settlement. According to Zetter & Pearl (1999) the security, shelter and personal space are of paramount importance in the process of migrant settlement and integration in a new society. More importantly, Hulchanski, Mundie, & Chambon (2000) stressed that it is vital to have a suitable house in a nice environment with supportive neighbourhood and services that aimed towards the successful integration of new immigrants.

In conclusion, this paper has provided brief overview of the Australian migration policy and the migration of Africans to Australia and to review fundamental issues facing African migrants in the housing sector. The paper has offered a snapshot of the broader Australian housing crisis and has identified that the groups most affected by the housing crisis are Australian low income earners who have limited financial resources. It has recognised the tremendous pressure on the supply of public and private rental housing in Australia as indicated by declining housing affordability and availability. These factors and higher rental costs are significantly affecting African communities in Australia. The housing barriers this paper attempted to identify and discuss among many others include racial discrimination, linguistic issues, low socio-economic issues, larger family size and lack of social networks. Poverty, unemployment and underemployment remain critical concerns for African people within the Australian society. The paper has highlighted that the access to housing secure and affordable is crucial for a long-term settlement of African migrants. Without decent housing, it can be extremely difficult for migrants to rebuild their lives in Australia (Cary-

Wood 1997, cited in Perry 2005). Current Australian housing design has implications for the structure of African families, undermines culture, leads to a loss of social capital and other issues (Atem & Wilson, 2008). The study in progress at the University of South Australia, attempts to address the gap in the knowledge in regards to African migrants' housing.

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