



The Housing Pathways of Pakistani New Immigrants in Sheffield

David Robinson
Aisha Siddiqah

November 2007

Introduction

This report presents an overview of the experiences of Pakistani new immigrants in Sheffield interviewed as part of a Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded project exploring the housing experiences of new immigrants during the first five years of settlement in the UK.

In-depth qualitative interviews were undertaken with 39 new immigrants, including 10 Pakistani people - six women and four men aged between 24 and 43 years old. All were married, nine out of 10 were living with their spouse and six had dependent children. At the time of the interview, four out of 10 were living with family members who owned the property, four were living in private rented accommodation, one person was living in a refuge and one person was living with his wife in a house that she owned. Seven arrived into the UK on a Spouse Visa and three people entered as migrant workers.

The History of Pakistani Immigration into Sheffield

Sheffield was not a major destination for people arriving into the UK from the Caribbean, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan during the post-war period, compared to other industrial towns in the North and Midlands of England, but people from the New Commonwealth and Pakistan did move into the city, resulting in the emergence of established and long-standing populations. The Pakistani population has continued to grow through chain migration, and according to the 2001 Census of Population is the largest single minority ethnic group in Sheffield.

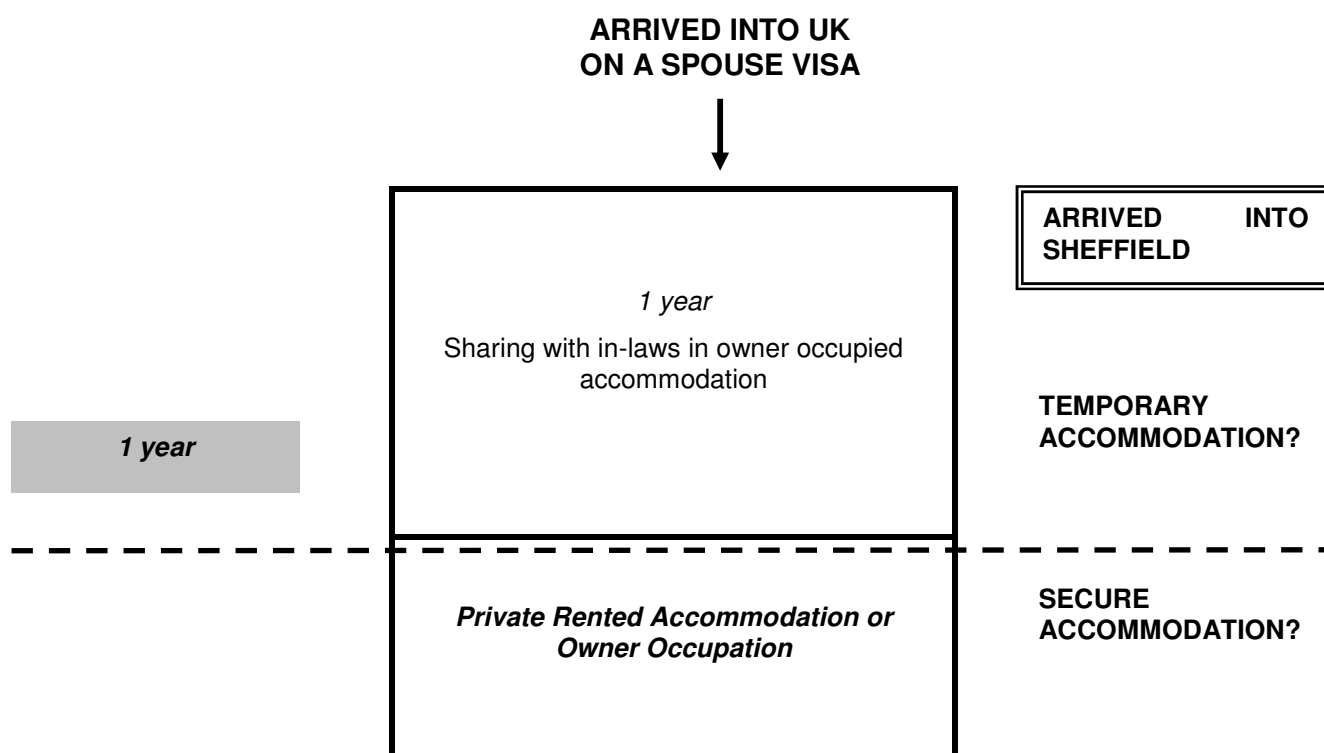
The Housing Careers of Pakistani New Immigrants

Key Findings:

- the residential circumstances (housing and neighbourhood situations) of Pakistani new immigrants arriving into the UK on a Spouse Visa reflected their reliance on their spouse (and often his or her family) for a place to live
- Pakistani migrant workers stayed with family or friends upon first arriving in the UK, before moving into private rented accommodation
- no Pakistani new immigrants had entered the social rented sector, reflecting their restricted right of access to welfare benefits, including social housing

With accommodation arranged prior to their arrival, all Pakistani respondents knew where they would be staying when they arrived in the UK. Nine out of 10 respondents came straight to Sheffield and stayed either with their in-laws, in a property owned by their spouse or in a property owned by a family member (and, in some cases, provided rent free). In contrast to the other groups, these initial accommodation situations often provided Pakistani respondents with a long term place of residence, although respondents rarely had a legal right of residence, in most instances staying as a guest with their spouse's family. Eight out of 10 Pakistani new immigrants remained in their first accommodation setting for at least six months and the average length in the initial accommodation setting was 13 months. The nature of this accommodation (flat or terrace, semi-detached or detached house) varied, reflecting the housing market position of their spouse or their spouse's family.

A Typical Pakistani Housing Career: From Arrival to Secure Accommodation



Nine of the Pakistani new immigrants moved into accommodation where their family was already living and in a neighbourhood with a history of Pakistani settlement. On the one hand, therefore, they reaped the benefits of living in neighbourhoods more attuned to ethnic diversity, but on the other they were faced with life in increasingly overcrowded accommodation.

Housing Situations and Experiences

Key findings:

- Pakistani new immigrants entering the UK on a Spouse Visa were reliant on their spouse for a place to live. A breakdown in relations could result in homelessness
- new immigration sometimes increased overcrowding for Pakistani households already living in the city
- Pakistani migrant workers moved frequently, in a bid to improve living conditions, while new immigrants arriving into the UK on a Spouse Visa rarely moved house

Three particular problems were evident within the housing experiences of respondents: insecurity, poor living conditions and overcrowding.

Seven out of 10 Pakistani respondents were living in accommodation owned by their spouse or their spouse's family. Their residential security was therefore dependent upon their continuing relationship with their spouse and/or their spouse's family. In one case, this relationship had broken down, with severe consequences. Nivin arrived into the UK on a spouse visa from Pakistan and immediately upon arrival moved into her husband's house, which he shared with members of his family. Problems immediately emerged with the marriage and within three months Nivin left her husband (and her accommodation) with the

help of the police. However, Nivin's immigration status was reliant on the continuation of her marriage, spouses not being allowed to apply for indefinite leave to remain if the relationship breaks down before they have lived together for four years, other than in cases of domestic violence or death. Resident in the UK on temporary visa, she also had no recourse to public funds, including social housing and welfare benefits. Being on spouse visa, she was allowed to work but had been in a position to look for work since arriving in the UK. Nivin knew no one in the town where she had been living with her husband. The only person she could think to phone was the brother of a friend from Pakistani, who lived in a different city. In the event, she lived with her friend's brother, his family and a lodger and his family (a total of seven adults and two children in a two bedroom house) for six weeks, until she was put in touch with a solicitor who managed to negotiate access to a refuge for South Asian women.

Among the 39 new immigrants interviewed, overcrowding was a major problem for respondents living in the private sector (owner occupation and private renting). All the Pakistani new immigrants interviewed were living in private rented or owner occupied accommodation and overcrowded and cramped conditions were common. This finding reflects the relatively high levels (26.4 per cent) of overcrowding within the Pakistani population of the UK recorded by the 2001 Census of Population. Two factors appear to explain overcrowding among the Pakistani new immigrants. First, nine of the 10 Pakistani new immigrants interviewed moved into established households upon arriving in the UK. Second, Pakistani new immigrants typically lacked the resources to move house to escape overcrowding.

Poor living conditions were also reported by the two Pakistani respondents living in the private rented sector who had arrived in the UK through the High Skilled Migrant Worker visa. Both respondents reported moving house in an attempt to improve their living conditions. In one case, moving into a new property in an adjacent neighbourhood owned by a different landlord served to provide a safer and more suitable living environment. In contrast, Qasim recounted how he moved through a series of poor quality, private rented properties owned by the same landlord. One flat that he lived in was accessed by a steep external stairway, while the interior was in urgent need of repair and maintenance. Subsequently, he moved into a flat above a fish and chip shop where *"there was a lot of noise, vibration of the fryer and everything that used to come upstairs and used to disturb me a lot"*. After then living in a shared flat with three other men that he did not know, Qasim was joined in the UK by his wife and two young children and they moved into a flat together. Reported problems included the lack of central heating and an infestation of mice. In addition to these concerns, Qasim also raised concerns about the lack of play space in around the flat for his two small children.

Qasim reported that his occupancy of these various properties was informal and that no tenancy agreement was involved. Similar informal arrangements were also apparent within the housing careers of other migrant workers. Information about available opportunities was circulated through word-of-mouth networks and access was negotiated through direct contact with the landlord. An apparent consequence was that Pakistani landlords were often accommodating Pakistani tenants and Polish landlords were often accommodating Polish tenants. All had a shared experience, however, of living with the insecurity of such informal arrangements, as well frequent exposure to poor living conditions.

The Importance of Place

Key findings:

- place was more important than housing to the residential preferences of the Pakistani new immigrants

- the places that Pakistani new immigrants settled were typically areas of established minority ethnic settlement that were rich in resources and culturally relevant services and facilities
- Pakistani new immigrants had definite views about the parts of the city that they wanted to live

Pakistani new immigrants attached great importance to nature of the place where they lived, prioritising place concerns above housing issues when discussing residential preferences. In particular, Pakistani new immigrants put a high value on living in what might be referred to as 'cosmopolitan' neighbourhoods. This factor was prioritised above other neighbourhood attributes and the specifics of their accommodation situation:

"The area I'm living in right now is a good area because there are a lot of Pakistani families living round there [and] we've got our daily life facilities there" (Abdul).

The inner city areas of minority ethnic settlement where the Pakistani new immigrants were living were reported to represent a rich source of information, support, assistance and security within a society that can often appear suspicious and hostile. Safety and comfort was reported to come from living in an ethnically diverse neighbourhood where people do not stand out by mere virtue of not being white. Pakistani people also talked about the invaluable advice and assistance received from family and friends and community-led services, such as a local Muslim community centre, that helped them negotiate their way through various bureaucratic procedures and access key services, such as health care. These experiences were in stark contrast to the reported experiences of the Somali and Liberian new immigrants interviewed, who were often living in parts of the city with little history of accommodating difference and diversity.

Engaging with the Housing System

Key Findings

- the early housing careers and associated settlement patterns of Pakistani new immigrants reflected their reliance on their spouse/family for a place to live
- Pakistani migrant workers exercised increasing choice about where they lived, as they became familiar with different parts of the city and available housing opportunities, and accumulated the resources to buy or rent
- the existence of an informal accommodation circuit was evident in the housing careers of the Pakistani new immigrants
- engagement with housing agencies (such as social landlords) was limited

The most striking aspect of the housing experiences of the new immigrants in the first days, weeks and even months of settlement in the UK was the limited scope they had to shape and direct their housing outcomes. This lack of individual agency was most apparent in the arrival experiences of Pakistani new immigrants who came to the UK on a spouse visa. Initially reliant on their spouse and/or their spouse's family for accommodation, they rarely exercised any choice about where they lived. In cases where these new immigrants had moved house, this process was typically managed by their spouse and/or their spouse's family and only in instances where relationship breakdown had led to a respondent being forced to strike out alone and secure alternative accommodation had respondents had any contact with the key institutions within the housing system (emergency accommodation providers, social or private landlords, letting agents, estate agents and such like).

The housing careers of the Pakistani migrant workers interviewed were characterised by increasing residential mobility, as they sought to move house in a bid to resolve problems that emerged with their accommodation and/or to seek out more preferable situations. These respondents often relied on informal, word of mouth communications for information about housing opportunities. Linked to this fact, evidence of a local Pakistani 'accommodation circuit' emerged, with respondents disengaged from formal access routes into housing and relying instead on informal alternatives. Respondents talked about news of rented properties travelling by word of mouth through friendship and family networks and of this being the main way in which they identified and accessed accommodation:

'Someone told my husband's aunt about it [the rented property] and she recommended' it to us.'

The disengagement of Pakistani new immigrants from formal channels and procedures was also facilitated by the reliance of some respondents on informal arrangements with Pakistani landlords (without a formal tenancy agreement). In these cases there was a tendency for respondents to move frequently between different properties owned by the same landlord. The benefits of these informal arrangements were reported to include ready access to affordable housing, with potential barriers, such as the requirement that tenants provide character references and proof of identity in the form of bank account details or household bills, being absent:

'I didn't have my bank account, I didn't have bills with my name, I didn't have any kind of reference...it would be very difficult for me to find a house because you need to have a reference...I remember I went to two property dealers ...and when they ask me if I need a house they say "have you got employment letter". I said we haven't got a job, we want to find accommodation first and then get a job....they said "no sorry can't give you...'

Problems were also reported to be associated with living in the informal rented sector, however, with poor conditions and limited security being two particular concerns and the risk of eviction hanging over tenants, given that there was "nothing signed, nothing on paper, nothing agreed, the tenancy was by word of mouth".

Pakistani respondents admitted to knowing little about the social rented sector, although a degree of understanding and awareness did appear to accumulate with time:

I was not aware of [the council or housing association]. It takes you some time to know about the ins and outs of any city or any country. If you ask me now I know so many things.....and I'm meeting people every day, where at the time I was new, so I was very innocent, when I think about it.

Other respondents had become aware of the sector but were remained convinced that they had no right to access it, even in cases where people appeared to actually meet eligibility criteria. Limited knowledge and understanding was in some cases compounded by limited English language skills.

About the Study Team

The study was undertaken by Rionach Casey, Kesia Reeve and David Robinson from the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University. The Pakistani interviews were conducted in partnership with Aisha Siddiqah.

For more information

The full report - The Housing Pathways of New Immigrants - by David Robinson, Kesia Reeve and Rionach Casey is available free to download from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation; www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop. The summary reports profiling the experiences of the different new immigrant populations surveyed (Liberian, Somali, Pakistani and Polish) are available to download free from the CRESR website; http://www.shu.ac.uk/cresr/publications/publication_downloads.html.