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Article

A Healthy Environment for a Healthy Mind: Mental Health Risks Attached to Poor Housing among Congolese refugees living in Yeoville, Johannesburg

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Abstract

This article explores spatial inequality as a conceptual framework to understand the link between poor housing, environmental degradation, and mental health. The dire housing conditions are one of the many struggles that refugees face in South Africa. This paper emerged from fieldwork carried out between 2020 and 2022 among Congolese refugees in Yeoville, a suburb of Johannesburg. They were included in a research project investigating the existing association between displacement, gendered violence, and mental ill-health among internally displaced persons, refugees, and asylum seekers. The article highlights that while mental health challenges can result from various factors, poor housing adds profound psychological distress to Congolese refugees in South Africa. Drawing on 83 interviews with male and female Congolese refugees, this article highlights how precarious housing disrupts traditional, social, and cultural structures. It also weakens parents' control over their children, invades privacy, exposes women and girls to sexual violence, and contributes to the fragility of family bonds. The findings of this paper emphasize the importance of spatial inequality in examining the precarious housing conditions experienced by refugees in South Africa. These conditions, which occur in seemingly abandoned environments, have a detrimental impact on the mental health of Congolese refugees.

Keywords: inadequate housing, spatial inequality, mental health, Congolese refugees, South Africa

Introduction

After the demise of apartheid in 1994, South Africa became a popular place for people from different African countries who were in search of safety and better opportunities (Schockaert et al., 2020; Misago et al., 2015). Many people were fleeing their home countries due to economic problems and political instability. However, in South Africa, there is a debate regarding whether these migrants can be considered "real refugees" or if they are simply economic migrants seeking asylum in order to take advantage of the benefits, such as access to basic services that refugee policies theoretically provide to asylum seekers and refugees.

This article looks at the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in South Africa. While terms like migrants, non-nationals, or similar concepts are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to this group, the main emphasis of this article is on asylum seekers and refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The DRC has been in conflict for a long time, causing many people to flee to South Africa for safety. This is why they were selected in the initial phase of this research project on the link between displacement, gendered violence, and mental ill-health among internally displaced persons, refugees, and asylum seekers.

Although there are no official statistics on the number of Congolese people in South Africa (Groot, 2004 in Masuku & Rama, 2020), there is ample evidence to suggest that South Africa is home to a significant population of Congolese asylum seekers and refugees. Refugees, in general, face many problems in South Africa, like discrimination and lack of access to jobs, healthcare, and proper housing. Numerous studies on refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa have shown significant inequalities that hinder their integration and affect their mental wellbeing (Amit and

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Kriger, 2014; Vearey, 2017; Walker, 2021; Walker and Vearey, 2022).

This article looks at how poor housing affects the mental health of Congolese refugees in Johannesburg. Although acknowledging that factors such as economic, social, cultural, and security can influence individuals' abilities and freedoms within a specific space, the argument presented in this article contends that assessing these factors falls short in fully capturing the profound psychological distress that arises from the precarious environment (Walker et al., 2023). This article explores a specific aspect of spatial inequalities that has been overlooked in scholarly discourse: the effects of inadequate housing on the traditional, social, and cultural structures of Congolese asylum seekers and refugees in South Africa (Folmer & Oosterhaven, 1979). The argument being made is that housing plays a crucial role in defining a person, as it serves as a shelter that supports both their life and wellbeing (Evans et al., 2003).

Finding a place to live is hard for refugees in South Africa, and they often end up in expensive and poorly maintained places. Some landlords take advantage of them because they know that their rights are limited. Also, refugees with large families struggle to find housing, on top of dealing with other problems because of their legal status (Yusuf & Umejesi, 2024).

As a result, many refugees end up subletting, which means renting part of someone else's home. However, these places are usually poorly maintained and unsecured, which can expose people to a greater risk of violence, criminality, and health problems.

The World Health Organization (2018) says that good housing is important to mental health. Habitat and housing are crucial parts for the impact of the physical environment on mental health and recovery (Sanmuhanathan & Kandasamy, 2023). This study examines how living in poor conditions like overcrowded, noisy, unmaintained, and unsafe housing (Knight et al., 2014, p. 556) affects the mental health of Congolese refugees in South Africa. The study also seeks to see how these housing problems are connected to other challenges refugees face in South Africa. Although the primary focus is on Congolese refugees, the housing issue also affects refugees from other countries living in South Africa.

Spatial (In)Equality and Mental Health

The lack of access to appropriate housing exposes refugees to sociocultural vulnerabilities. Tickamyer (2000) offers three meanings of space: place (a particular locale or setting), relational unit (organization of ideas and comparing locations), and scale or the size of the unit to be compared (p. 806). Place refers to specific locations with unique characteristics, including geographic, built, and cultural features. It involves tangible elements like neighborhoods or cities. Relational unit, on the other hand, focuses on social interactions within a space, highlighting connections, roles, and identities. Finally, scale refers to the range of spatial organization, from micro to macro levels, examining how spatial scales intersect and influence behavior, inequality, and social change. Migration is associated with spatial inequalities and health since space constitutes an "important source of differential access to resources and opportunities" (Lobao et al., 2007, p. 3). Various areas in South Africa where migrants settle are disadvantaged spaces characterized by multiple forms of inequalities. Apart from the struggles to attain legal status, migrants also reside in a cramped and shabby environment marked by lawlessness, violence, and uncertainty. These spaces, often overlooked by public authorities, portray a sense of precarity that intensifies migrants' suffering and contributes to poor mental wellbeing (Wilhelm-Solomon, 2020).

The conceptual framework presented by Tickamyer (2000) emphasizes the importance of studying inequalities across different levels or dimensions: individual, household, community, regional, and even global scales. Comparative advantage explores discrepancies in opportunities, resources, and outcomes between certain groups. Additionally, the framework underscores the significance of understanding the way inequalities are socially constructed and the way they influence the meaning attributed to diverse identities and social positions. Moreover, it touches upon power dynamics and control mechanisms that either withstand or contest these inequalities, thereby exploring the ways in which they are perpetuated or altered through social processes.

For its part, South Africa is characterized by urban migration, and some areas of the cities, which are densely migrant dominated, are poorly maintained and equipped. Spatial inequalities experienced by foreign nationals in South Africa reflect the policies of racial segregation that were in place during the apartheid era. These disparities can be traced back to historical injustices, such as the Bantu Homelands Act of the 1970s, which forcibly relocated millions of South Africans to underdeveloped rural areas far away from urban centers (Shahaboonin et al., 2023). Residential segregation policies further exacerbated these divisions by creating racially segregated townships on the outskirts of cities. Even after the end of apartheid, approximately 43% of black South Africans still live in these former homelands, leading to high poverty rates, with over 75% of rural households relying on government social grants. Furthermore, there is a significant mismatch between the location of the workforce and job opportunities, with urban areas having a disproportionate number of jobs compared to their population. In 2020, a report from Gauteng province, which includes Johannesburg, revealed that 60% of households allocate more than 10% of their disposable income to public transport, marking an increase from 55% in 2014 (Moeti, 2023). Former President Thabo Mbeki highlighted this persistent economic disparity in 1998 and deplored the division of South Africa into two nations—one with access to developed infrastructure and the other grappling with poverty and underdevelopment, primarily among black communities.

Israel and Frenkel (2018) argue that social justice is important in understanding the dynamics in a spatial context but offer little or no explanation on how social justice could be measured. In response to the question of justice, Israel and Frenkel (2018) suggest a more integrating conceptual framework in which a metric notion of justice can be employed in different spatial contexts. The metric is a person's capabilities and his/her liberties to live in an environment offering opportunities or life chances (Israel & Frenkel, 2018, p. 648). In this framework, there is particular emphasis on two sociospatial structures: the living environment and the basic means through which individuals form their personal liberties (Israel & Frenkel, 2018, p. 654).

Policies and patterns of spatial inequalities are produced and reified in migrants' and refugees' access to housing. Substandard housing quality is associated with psychological distress affecting not only parents but also children (Evans et al., 2003).

Psychological symptoms are notably pronounced based on factors such as housing location, occupancy density, limited private space for children, and rental affordability (Evans et al., 1991). Issues encompassing safety, hygiene, crime rates, and cultural disruption in housing disadvantage contribute to anxiety, emphasizing the significance of personal experiences in comprehending the psychological impact of spatial inequalities (Vojnovic et al., 2019).

Migrants' Access to Housing in South Africa

It is often stated by South African government officials that their objective is to remove discriminatory barriers by ensuring equal access to shelter and basic services for the entire population, regardless of personal characteristics or status (UNCHS, 1996, Chapter 3, Sections 39–40). However, migrants in the city of Johannesburg face challenges in accessing housing, compelling a great number of them to reside in "hijacked buildings." Former Mayor Herman Mashaba, who held office from 2016 to 2019, labeled these buildings as a blight on the city, claiming that they house criminals and undocumented migrants (Wilhelm-Solomon, 2020, p. 404). According to the figures of the City of Johannesburg, there might be over 90,000 people living in unlawful occupations (Wilhelm-Solomon, 2020, p. 408). The National Housing Finance Corporation (state entity) created the Trust for Urban Housing Finance in 2003 whose mission was to revamp the inner-city buildings (Bethlehem, 2013). The city has also witnessed an emergence of private housing companies that embarked on refurbishing large numbers of buildings (Bethlehem, 2013, p. 204). However, the rent in these buildings, which are equipped with technological security systems and basic amenities, notably water and electricity, is unaffordable for a great number of refugees.

The major challenges that migrants are confronted, such as documentation and unemployment, have a direct impact on their access to housing. Migrants in South Africa are not entitled to any social assistance from the government. South Africa's refugee regime encouraging a self-settlement system "has been criticized for how it speedily places a greater need on refugees to independently become self-sustenance and economic autonomy" (Masuku & Rama, 2020, p. 86). Predominantly, migrants settle in urban areas that seemingly look like abandoned areas and where housing is not only expensive but also ruinous and general absence of service delivery. The primary requirement for housing access is South African green identity documentation, which many migrants, who are mainly refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented, cannot produce.

Migrants' access to documentation is strained, and many are forced to become illegal in terms of their stay in the country (Amit & Kriger, 2014). Many have never been recognized as asylum seekers as the process of getting documentation takes too much time and is challenging due to corruption, poor home affairs services, and abuse of basic rights (Wilhelm-Solomon, 2015). Some asylum permits have been expired for several months and attempts to renew permits have remained unsuccessful. Many foreign nationals who have applied for asylum wait in limbo for years (Alfaro-Velcamp et al., 2017), and this is compounded by xenophobia against migrants. Migrants frequently fall victim to confiscation of permits, unauthorized raids, police harassment, and arrests conducted by the South African Police Service and officials from the Department of Home Affairs, leading to their unlawful detention (Alfaro-Velcamp & Shaw, 2016, p. 987; Demeestère, 2016, p. 165). Migrants have always been portrayed as job stealers, disease carriers (burdens to the health care system), and crime promoters in the South African landscape (Akinola, 2017). The presence of these unsubstantiated myths further contributes to the adverse mental health outcomes experienced by migrants. Consequently, migrants often face marginalization and discrimination in their quest for housing.

South Africa's housing crisis is a direct consequence of rapid urbanization, with more than 65% of the population residing in urban areas. In Johannesburg alone, the population has increased by 30% since 2011, exacerbating the shortage of 3.7 million housing units. The majority of low-income households face significant challenges in finding safe shelter. As of 2016, nearly half of Johannesburg's residents lived on less than R2000 ($105) per month (Moeti, 2023). Migrants, who are predominantly low-income earners, endure precarious living conditions and have limited access to basic services. In the labor market, black African asylum seekers and refugees face discriminatory attitudes from employers, who often deny them job opportunities, regardless of the validity of their legal permits (Crush & Tawodzera, 2017). Black Africans experience xenophobic violence for multiple reasons. One reason is that their precarious permit compels them to accept poorly paid jobs without any extra perks. Additionally, black South Africans and black immigrants face similar socioeconomic and geographical challenges, especially in townships, where they reside and work in economically disadvantaged regions (Mlambo et al., 2024; Tewolde, 2020). Asylum seekers and refugees, who are

frequently excluded from the workforce, are forced to accept poorly paid and insecure jobs, which further marginalize them due to the unaffordability of secure housing. Consequently, they are compelled to live in substandard conditions and are often subjected to police raids. Tragic incidents, such as fires in poorly maintained buildings, have resulted in loss of life in South Africa. Some notable examples in Johannesburg include the Cape York building fire in 2017, the Doornfontein wall collapse in 2018, and the recent fire near Johannesburg's Central Business District in 2021 (Moeti, 2023). In a particularly devastating fire in August 2023 at 80 Albert Street in Marshalltown, Johannesburg, 77 lives were lost, primarily immigrants. This building, originally constructed in the 1950s, served as a "pass office" during apartheid. This was the place where people collected internal passport systems that aimed to racially segregate the population, restrict individual movement, and allocate low-wage migrant labor. Subsequently, the building functioned as a shelter for abused women and children before eventually being abandoned by municipal authorities.

Yeoville Landscape

Gauteng, the province where Johannesburg is situated, experiences a significant influx of cross-border migrants. A large population of Congolese citizens resides in Yeoville, an inner-city neighborhood of Johannesburg. Wa Kabwe-Segatti and Palomaresm (2009) suggest that certain areas in Johannesburg, such as Hillbrow, Berea, and Yeoville, have undergone a process of "ethnicisation." This process is characterized by the high concentration of migrants from African countries, resulting in Yeoville being commonly referred to as "Congolized" due to its significant population of Congolese residents, as well as the presence of Congolese-owned businesses, bars, and restaurants. Similarly, parts of Berea and Hillbrow are described as having been "Nigerianized." The Congolese population who cannot afford the overpriced rental is compelled to live in overcrowded properties under poor conditions, often sharing their living spaces with fellow Congolese or migrants from other countries to ease the burden of rent.

Yeoville is plagued by a range of social problems that greatly impact the quality of life. These include high crime rates, drug use, and the presence of numerous criminal gangs (Clark, 2023). Unfortunately, as mentioned above, the police themselves contribute to the prevailing atmosphere of fear by engaging in harassment and illegally detaining migrants. As a result of this insecurity, major corporations have left Yeoville, leaving the area even more vulnerable (Katsaura, 2013). Gangs have taken advantage of this situation and resort to violence to forcefully take control of buildings from landlords. They then proceed to collect rent payments from residents (Clark, 2023). Additionally, the area is dotted with abandoned buildings, often referred to as "bad buildings" or "dark buildings." These not only serve as hideouts for criminal activities but also highlight the absence of basic facilities, such as electricity. Moreover, they are associated with spiritual vulnerabilities known as "*Umnyama*" (Zulu & Wilhelm-Solomon 2015, p. 135). These abandoned buildings convey the idea that insecurity affects the people living in them. The living conditions of the occupants in the dark building also reflect this insecurity. Umnyama is crucial in understanding the social, economic, and spiritual insecurities experienced by migrants in inner-city Johannesburg (Zulu & Wilhelm-Solomon, 2015). Given the numerous complaints from residents regarding drug-related crimes in Yeoville, the government, in particular the police department, has made promises to address the issue. However, as of now, no concrete actions have been taken.

Water and electricity shortages have become common in many households, leading to miserable living conditions and a heightened sense of uncertainty. In addition to the nationwide problem of electricity crisis referred to as loadshedding, residents in Yeoville also face water crises due to unrepaired damaged pumps. Regrettably, it seems that the lack of service delivery in this densely migrant-populated area is intentional. Moreover, garbage collection in the neighborhood is sporadic at best, with *Pikitup*, the state-owned waste management enterprise in Johannesburg, only making intermittent appearances. The uncollected waste decomposes, emitting unpleasant odors and posing health risks while contributing to environmental pollution. Furthermore, homeless individuals throughout the neighborhood burn garbage, including tires, to keep warm at night, particularly during winter, exacerbating air pollution issues.

Methodology

Population and Recruitment

This article's fieldwork is part of a larger research program that explores the connection between displacement, gender-based violence, and mental health issues among IDPs, refugees, and asylum seekers. The researcher chose to use the term "fieldwork" instead of "interview" because he believed it encompassed a broader range of data collection methods, including participant observation. During his time in Yeoville, he extensively explored the neighborhood and was struck by its severe deterioration. To document his findings, he took photographs of the dilapidated areas. His observation was further enriched by conducting interviews with participants in their homes, which allowed him to establish a correlation between the neighborhood's conditions and the living situations of the participants. Although he was unable to take pictures of the participants' houses, the extensive deterioration of the neighborhood at large reflected the substandard housing in which Congolese asylum seekers and refugees reside. The researcher documented instances of infrastructure decay and observed homeless individuals using dirty blankets for warmth at night.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, it was decided during the program's design phase that underage children would not be included. The selection criteria specified that participants must be at least 18 years old and asylum seekers and/or refugees from the DRC.

A total of 83 interviews were conducted with Congolese forced migrants, consisting of 44 males and 39 females, ranging in age from 18 to 60 years old. The interviews focused on participants from the DRC, specifically those who were of working age. Many of them were refugees or asylum seekers, while others became undocumented after failing to access and/or extend their permits. These individuals had lived in South Africa between 5 and 30 years. The interviews were conducted in French, Lingala, or in some cases, Swahili, and a mixture of languages, depending on the participants' preferences, and each interview lasted at least 1 h.

The researcher's familiarity with the community can be attributed to his personal background. Hailing from the DRC, a country ravaged by war and political instability, he was forced to flee and seek refuge in South Africa. During this process, he experienced the same challenges as many members of the Congolese community. Sharing a linguistic affiliation with them, he lived among these refugees, sharing in their moments of both pain and joy. Additionally, his involvement in religious activities and the security industry strengthened his social connections. It was through this involvement that he became more aware of the challenges faced by asylum seekers and refugees in South Africa, which ultimately motivated him to pursue a migration and displacement study program at the African Centre for Migration and Society, University of the Witwatersrand. This established trust and rapport with the participants in turn allowed him to be welcomed into their homes. This relationship-building process was crucial in gathering authentic and rich data, particularly given the sensitive nature of the study.

The researcher initially recruited participants from his own social networks, using snowball sampling techniques to reach as many people as possible. The most reliable sources of recruitment were church, religious, or community leaders who served as important gatekeepers.

Data collection for this article took place between 2020 and 2022. The severity of the pandemic causing a total lockdown forced the researcher to initially collect data via online interviews. However, the digital fieldwork yielded limited results due to participants' reluctance to engage via platforms like Zoom or WhatsApp and the inability to conduct participant observation. Fortunately, as COVID-19 restrictions eased, in-person interviews in Yeoville became possible while adhering to health protocols and social distancing measures. In-person interviews took place in small rooms of homes, open spaces of lodges, and sometimes on pavements beside busy streets.

The interviews were conducted as open discussions. However, the researcher also prepared an interview guide that focused on sociodemographic profiles, migration history, and important issues surrounding mental health. The discussions focused on the living conditions of Congolese refugees in South Africa, their perceptions of mental health, and, most importantly, the triggers of mental problems were mainly associated with the socioeconomic challenges faced by Congolese refugees in South Africa that contribute to a precarious existence (Walker et al., 2024; Walker & Vearey, 2022), were particularly highlighted, as having a significant impact on mental wellbeing. The issue of accessing housing was also raised in this context.

Ethics Approval

The study was approved by the University of Witwatersrand Research Ethics Committee—nonmedical (protocol number R14/49). Verbal consent was obtained from each participant before conducting the interviews, which were then audio recorded. During the ethical review process, there was compliance with ethical principles, including safeguarding the privacy and dignity of participants, preventing retraumatization, and establishing approaches to handle any critical issues that may arise during the data collection phase. In order to prevent revictimization, the researcher created a referral list of institutions that offer psychosocial support to asylum seekers and refugees. He then encouraged individuals experiencing psychosocial issues to seek assistance from these organizations. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the participants' identities remained protected.

Data Analysis Technique

Thematic analysis, a method of data analysis, was used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clark & Brown, 2015). The thematic analysis offers theoretical freedom and serves as a flexible and useful research tool, capable of providing a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). The process involved the summary of each participant's story and the coding of themes and subthemes. The coding aimed to identify significant attributes of the data, both semantic content and latent and to refer to the fundamental segments or elements of the raw data or information that could be meaningfully assessed in relation to the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998, p.63). The study also incorporated elements of discourse analysis (Parker, 1999) to achieve a nuanced understanding of communication within a specific context, uncovering implicit meanings and shedding light on the social and cultural dimensions of substandard housing and its impact on the mental wellbeing of Congolese refugees.

Findings

Congolese Refugees and Spatial Inequality in Yeoville

All participants reported residing in substandard housing in South Africa due to financial constraints. The COVID-19 pandemic heavily impacted their reliance on informal activities, affecting their ability to fulfill basic needs. This situation provided an opportunity for the researcher to investigate the connection between migration, socioeconomic instability, and mental health. Observations in Yeoville revealed homeless individuals using ill-fitting blankets to stay warm at night, as well as the obsolescence of infrastructure, as shown in the accompanying image.

During fieldwork, many houses were found to be in deplorable condition. Issues included open roofs that allowed rodents to nest, broken tiles, peeling paint, and unhygienic bathrooms—each a potential source of infection and in need of repair. These conditions greatly affect the mental health of the residents.

Adverse Environmental Conditions

Kelly, a Congolese man and asylum seeker in his early fifties, had been living in South Africa for more than a decade and working as a security guard. He emphasized the unhealthy conditions of Yeoville and provided his view of the neighborhood in the following statement.

Yeoville is a dirty environment. There are many taverns. People just pass the time drinking in shebeens. Our kids are getting lost in drugs which turn them to become violent. They don't even hesitate to lay hands on the parents. They smoke strong weeds. The girls get pregnant and have children in a disorderly way; so, life in Yeoville is not good at all. (Interview Kelly, Nov. 2021)

Taverns in Yeoville often operate in violation of regulations, contributing to noise pollution in the area. They are also venues where drug use and sales are rampant. Patrons drawn to these establishments frequently engage in violent behavior when intoxicated and unable to control their actions. Additionally, some criminals seeking to evade police capture find refuge in these taverns, further compounding the problem.

Sanctuary of Homelessness

Yeoville also serves as a sanctuary for homeless individuals, primarily consisting of young people who cannot afford to rent housing. Homelessness often leads to the development of antisocial behaviors. For example, a Congolese man over the age of 50 who is unemployed, holds refugee status, and has been living in South Africa for 20 years, pointed out that excessive stress drives some people to the streets, causing them to resort to substance abuse as a way to numb their stress.

I have seen many people who became overstressed and ended up sleeping in the street. Like now, a lady just died. She was very stressed and became homeless. She started drinking too much because she was overstressed. She died a day before yesterday and her body was found in the street. (Interview John, Nov. 2021)

The absence of stable housing and exposure to inclement weather conditions during nocturnal periods expose individuals to detrimental health outcomes with a pronounced impact on their mental wellbeing (Walker et al., 2024; Makandwa and Lakika, 2024). Those who resort to sleeping rough are susceptible to developing hostile tendencies, thereby posing a collective hazard to the community (Katsaura, 2013). Moreover, homeless individuals often exhibit heightened aggression, which poses a significant risk to public safety. Simultaneously, many of them resort to substance abuse, which further deteriorates their already vulnerable health condition.

Poor Housing Effects on Mental Health

Mado, a 45-year-old Congolese woman, married and mother of two, has been living in South Africa with an asylum permit for more than 8 years. Apart from the stress of being unemployed, in the following statement, she clearly drew the link between overpopulated and poorly maintained housing and mental health.

Whenever I'm at home, I feel like my mind is blocked. Seeing how many of us are fully packed into such a small space makes me uncomfortable. Sometimes, the hygienic conditions are very poor. The kitchen is always occupied, and there's no way to arrange things as I'd like. The noise is too much, and it's impossible to rest. In the midst of all this chaos, I easily lose my temper. Even for small things, I become irritated and end up shouting at everyone. I only find a bit of relief when I'm out. Otherwise, the poor conditions of my housing always drive me crazy, and I can easily feel overwhelmed. (Interview Mado, Oct. 2021)

A 40-year-old Congolese female asylum seeker and mother of two, who was involved in petty trading, described the difficulties of sharing and living in an overcrowded space and how this affected them physically and mentally.

In our flat, we occupy an open space. At night, when we sleep, people come in and go out. Since it is an open space, we worry a lot about our safety particularly for our kids. We need to pay attention to any movement of people, and there is no proper sleep. The lack of privacy affects us greatly, making us more anxious. Since we don't have money to find a better place, we are obliged to stay in this cramped area. It is painful because I wake up in the morning with a heavy head due to the lack of quietness and good sleep. (Interview Peguy, Sept. 2021)

In the quotes above, the participants allude to a relationship between inadequate housing and mental health issues affecting refugees in South Africa. Based on the observations during interviews with participants, it became evident that certain three-bedroom flats were accommodating more than 15 individuals. In order to create separate living spaces for each family, curtains were utilized. Unfortunately, this overcrowding situation severely hampers proper ventilation within the house. What's more, the issue of overpopulation can give rise to stress, anxiety, and depression as individuals become increasingly concerned about their safety and the safety of their possessions. Moreover, living in such unsafe conditions only serves to heighten worry and disrupt sleep, exacerbating levels of stress and anxiety. The cramped living quarters can also contribute to antisocial behavior, necessitating constant vigilance, particularly for those with children. Furthermore, the resultant sleep deprivation has detrimental effects on mental health.

These issues highlight the inequities faced by asylum seekers and refugees, perpetuating a cycle of mental health challenges and poverty. Socioeconomic precarity and the inability to afford rental accommodations subject them to spatial stigma, which, as described by Knifton and Inglis (2020), involves the negative portrayal and labeling of

socioeconomically disadvantaged environments, as evidenced in public discourse, official narratives, and policy frameworks (Halliday et al., 2020). The lack of adequate housing and amenities results in homelessness, exacerbating stress, social exclusion, and environmental degradation (Garman, 2020). Poor housing quality, overcrowding, lack of privacy, and noise further deteriorate mental and physical health, particularly among asylum seekers and refugees in Yeoville (Knight et al., 2014, p. 556).

Inadequate Housing, Criminality, and (Sexual) Abuse

Poor Living Conditions

Johannesburg is commonly portrayed as a city with inadequate housing, resulting in overcrowded living conditions.

Drawing attention to the hardships of Congolese refugees, a woman in her fifties, who had spent over a decade in South Africa as an asylum seeker and was engaged in a small business, shared the following observations.

Sometimes I sell the doughnuts, but it is nothing at all and during the 10 years I'm here, I only live in a room. With a child of 12 years and my husband we only subrent a room. It is painful. (Interview Aline, Nov. 2021)

Inability to Afford Exorbitant Housing

In the same vein, another female participant, aged 35, who had held an asylum seeker permit for over 9 years and worked as a hairdresser, underscored the financial constraints that prevented people from affording adequate accommodation.

It is finances and shelter. Shelter is killing Congolese people. Accommodation is a very serious problem. Some people may have three, four children who are of age now, but they all stay in a room. This overcrowding situation is disturbing Congolese too much. (Interview Star, Oct. 2021)

The living conditions of Congolese refugees and asylum seekers contradict moral and cultural values and have a negative psychological impact on them. Unfortunately, the high cost of housing in the city prevents many from being able to afford it, forcing them to share accommodations with roommates in order to reduce expenses.

Sexual Violence and Criminal Activities as a Result of Overcrowding

Kelly, a 50-year-old Congolese woman who had held an asylum seeker permit for 7 years and traded small items at the market, brought attention to instances of sexual exploitation resulting from living in cramped quarters and associating with unscrupulous individuals.

I live in Yeoville. The living conditions are very poor. We sleep in precarious conditions. We share rooms in flats. But it happens that a man in the flat is sleeping with a little girl and the mother does not know, because the mother leaves very early in the morning; sometimes she spends the night at work to look for something to support the family. But while she is at work her daughter is being sexually abused without her knowing it. (Interview Kelly, Nov. 2021)

Ruth, a Congolese woman in her forties and an asylum seeker who has been living in South Africa for 7 years and is currently unemployed, indicated that Yeoville was a hotbed of violence and criminal activities.

Yeoville has become a remote and abandoned neighborhood. I have not been a victim, but I know people who have fallen victim to bandits who have taken their money or phones. (Interview Ruth, Nov. 2021)

Another male participant, aged 50, who has been residing in the country since 2005 and holds refugee status, emphasized the dangers of cramped living conditions, highlighting instances of frequent robberies and a case of unaddressed sexual violence involving teenagers.

Among migrants, there are those who take advantage of the vulnerability of their fellows who are vulnerable because they are not as protected as citizens. And so, a case of crime or a case of threat of insecurity that happens to a migrant, it's easier to threaten a migrant than a South African, and the migrant criminals have understood that. They take advantage of this vulnerability to cause much harm to their own brothers. They steal their property or money through mechanisms they have developed, but there are even cases of rape in migrant communities. But migrants are also oppressed by some citizen criminals from whom they rent houses. We even had a case here; I know of a case that I personally followed to the police where minor children, teenagers of 12, 15 years old were raped by the landlord who is South African and the mother [of the victims] is a widow. Well, the case was taken to the police, but it didn't go any further despite our effort. And you can't get out of this area because that's the place where you can stay; you can't dare to go where you can't afford. (Interview Bola, Sept 2021)

This quote underscores the heightened vulnerability of migrants, who face further risks from their fellow citizens. Unsafe housing places many individuals at risk of physical harm and the loss of their valuables. Yet law enforcement often disregards human rights violations, especially when migrants are the victims, contributing to the persistence of these injustices.

Discussion

This paper explores spatial inequalities among asylum seekers and refugees in South Africa, focusing specifically on Congolese refugees and their mental wellbeing. Through face-to-face interviews and observations in Yeoville, a neighborhood hosting a significant number of Congolese refugees, the study investigates how environmental degradation impacts their mental health, with a focus on inadequate housing. The findings demonstrate that substandard housing worsens the mental wellbeing of Congolese refugees, exposing them to various dangers and

exacerbating mental health crises. Financial constraints force many Congolese refugees to live in dehumanizing conditions, leading to challenges such as overcrowding, insecurity, noise pollution, privacy violations, and instances of abuse. The detrimental environment in Yeoville has wide-ranging effects on the physical, psychological, social, and cultural wellbeing of Congolese individuals. In essence, the research sheds light on the complex challenges faced by refugees in South Africa and underscores the critical link between their poor living conditions and mental health instability.

The environmental challenges identified by Congolese asylum seekers and refugees align with Tickamyer's (2000) three-dimensional framework, reflecting an environment characterized by degradation and lacking infrastructure. Participants acknowledge that their living environment in South Africa has progressively deteriorated since their arrival, leading to a negative impact on their mental wellbeing. The persistent water and electricity shortages in their neighborhood worsen these challenges, creating an atmosphere of injustice, resentment, uncertainty, and violence between migrants and the local population. This further exacerbates the existing mental health problems. The housing crisis deepens existing inequalities, leaving many vulnerable due to their foreign status and economic hardship. Overcrowding and illegal living conditions are common in Johannesburg due to rapid demographic growth (Wilhelm-Solomon, 2020, p. 408), leading to detrimental social and environmental consequences such as noise exposure, lack of privacy, mental ill-health, and increased violence (Nkosi et al., 2019). The study emphasizes the importance of robust infrastructure, aligning with previous research on social determinants of mental health (Allen et al., 2014), advocating for access to essential amenities and improved housing to enhance mental health and functioning among refugees. Similar conclusions emerged from studies on the socioecological analysis of psychological distress in Sierra Leone, underscoring the importance of adequate infrastructure, especially housing, in alleviating mental health disorders (Horn et al., 2021). Additionally, privacy concerns are emphasized, as the bedroom is regarded as a sacred space that should be off-limits to strangers. In certain Congolese cultures, a young girl's transition into adulthood includes private rituals held in a bedroom, where men are prohibited from entering. This practice underscores the cultural importance of privacy and respect associated with the bedroom (Lembe-Masiala, 2007). The lack of seclusion can result in feelings of humiliation, underscoring the cultural significance of this space's sanctity. Overcrowded living conditions negatively impact physical health, as studies indicate a higher prevalence of respiratory symptoms, fever and chills, and diarrhea in densely populated households (Nkosi et al., 2019, p. 5). Overcrowding enhances the spread of diseases, especially through airborne droplets, which is particularly concerning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there were rumors about elevated transmission rates among asylum seekers and refugees living in cramped spaces, confirming these claims was difficult due to insufficient evidence.

The neglect of housing issues affecting refugees in South Africa by the body corporate highlights a relational conflict rooted in spatial inequality. Many homes occupied by migrants are infested with rats, mice, and cockroaches, which pose serious health risks and cause property damage. A notable incident involved a building manager who dismissively told a Congolese tenant complaining about a rodent infestation, "Just eat them," illustrating the indifference toward the living conditions of non-South Africans despite their consistent rent payments. While residents may contribute to the deterioration of their living spaces, the responsibility for maintenance ultimately falls on the property owners. Although assessments are typically conducted when tenants change, many issues remain unresolved. Interactions with participants revealed both positive and negative aspects; the researcher's community involvement helped build rapport, but the lingering stigma surrounding mental health within the Congolese community hindered open discussions. Despite these challenges, the study provided valuable insights into the significant connection between mental health issues and the poor environmental conditions faced by Congolese refugees in South Africa.

Walker and Vearey (2022) quoted a social worker who stated, "Everything can impact mental health." This highlights the lack of safety in environments that do not promote acceptance of others. Equally, there is no safety in an environment exposing the vulnerable groups to more vulnerability due to the dehumanizing conditions in which they are forced to live. The government's policies about refugees—which appear very protective on paper—are often ignored or outright rejected in practice. Instead, the prevailing belief is that refugees are scapegoats and are frequently depicted as political issues that impede the country's economic progress. Those fleeing war and persecution find themselves in a state of limbo, with their hopes for a safe haven becoming increasingly difficult to realize. Yeoville seems to be intentionally neglected due to its significant migrant population. The harsh living conditions faced by "Yeovillites"—or residents of Yeoville – adversely impact their mental health.

The article highlights the spatial inequality faced by Congolese refugees in South Africa, emphasizing how permanent conditions of stress, overcrowding, lack of privacy, and violence negatively affect their mental health. Many individuals arrive with the unwavering hope of starting anew after fleeing violence and conflict in their homelands. However, their basic right to a safe environment and adequate shelter is frequently denied. The quality of the physical environment—encompassing housing conditions, urban design, exposure to pollution, and access to green spaces—serves as a significant social determinant of mental health. This unequal distribution is influenced by socioeconomic factors and structural discrimination (Kirkbride et al., 2024).

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Figure 1

Photograph captured by the researcher in Yeoville, November 2021.



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Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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