



**The Housing Struggles of Undocumented Immigrants Served by WAWAC in
Snohomish County:
Addressing Systemic Barriers and Solutions**

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Summary of the Problem

Undocumented immigrants served by the Washington West African Center (WAWAC) in the Greater Seattle area face significant obstacles in accessing housing due to a range of systemic factors, including legal biases, economic disparities, and cultural barriers. This population, primarily consisting of West African undocumented immigrants, experiences heightened vulnerabilities related to their legal status, which severely limits their access to essential resources and services.

Legal biases manifest in discriminatory practices that exclude undocumented immigrants from fair housing opportunities and subject them to higher risks of exploitation and eviction. Economic disparities further exacerbate these challenges, as undocumented immigrants often work in low-wage, unstable jobs that do not provide sufficient income for housing costs in a high-rent market like Seattle.

Cultural barriers, including language differences and a lack of culturally sensitive support services, add additional layers of difficulty in navigating housing systems and advocating for their rights.

- Undocumented immigrants served by WAWAC in Greater Seattle face housing access barriers due to legal biases, economic disparities, and cultural obstacles.
- Legal biases lead to discriminatory practices, while economic challenges and cultural barriers compound difficulties in securing stable housing for this vulnerable population.

Summary of the Community

WAWAC serves over 20,000 West Africans in Snohomish, King, and Pierce counties, promoting cultural awareness, providing educational resources, and bridging gaps with the wider community. WAWAC's mission is to connect West Africans in Washington with local resources, promote their culture, and empower individuals through education and the arts.

The community faces significant challenges, including limited job opportunities due to undocumented status and lack of formal education, difficulty accessing information in native languages, and confusion from misinformation in English. Employment is predominantly in low-wage, high-risk jobs affected by COVID-19, with older adults reducing work due to health risks.

In 2020, WAWAC provided grocery and logistical assistance to 30 college students and 223 K1-K12 students. COVID-19 has further impacted the community, exacerbating economic instability and health risks.

- WAWAC serves over 20,000 West Africans in Snohomish, King, and Pierce counties, fostering cultural awareness and providing educational resources.
- The community grapples with challenges including limited job opportunities, language barriers, and the impact of COVID-19, highlighting the need for support and advocacy.



Formative Research

Overarching Question: What barriers do undocumented immigrants served by WAWAC face when accessing housing?

Why 1?: Racism/Xenophobia

Why 2?: Exclusive/Intrusive/Biased questions on legal documents that ostracize undocumented immigrants rather than promote a smooth integration into American society

Why 3?: Undocumented immigrants have a harder time obtaining housing loans due to a lack of financial history in the US and distrust from landlords.

Why 4?: Undocumented immigrants have a lack of documentation and difficulty navigating the US documentation system due to an overall lack of economic and cultural capital.

Why 5?: Lack of governmental and non-governmental services that bridge undocumented immigrants to capital-building resources and immigration services.

Scope of the Assessment: Aims to identify key barriers to housing, document existing resources, and gather insights to inform actionable solutions. The study will cover housing availability, affordability, discrimination, and legal challenges, using methods such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

Formative Research

Methods of Assessment:

We utilized two primary methods: interviews and online research. These methods allowed us to gather both qualitative insights and relevant background information on housing accessibility issues.

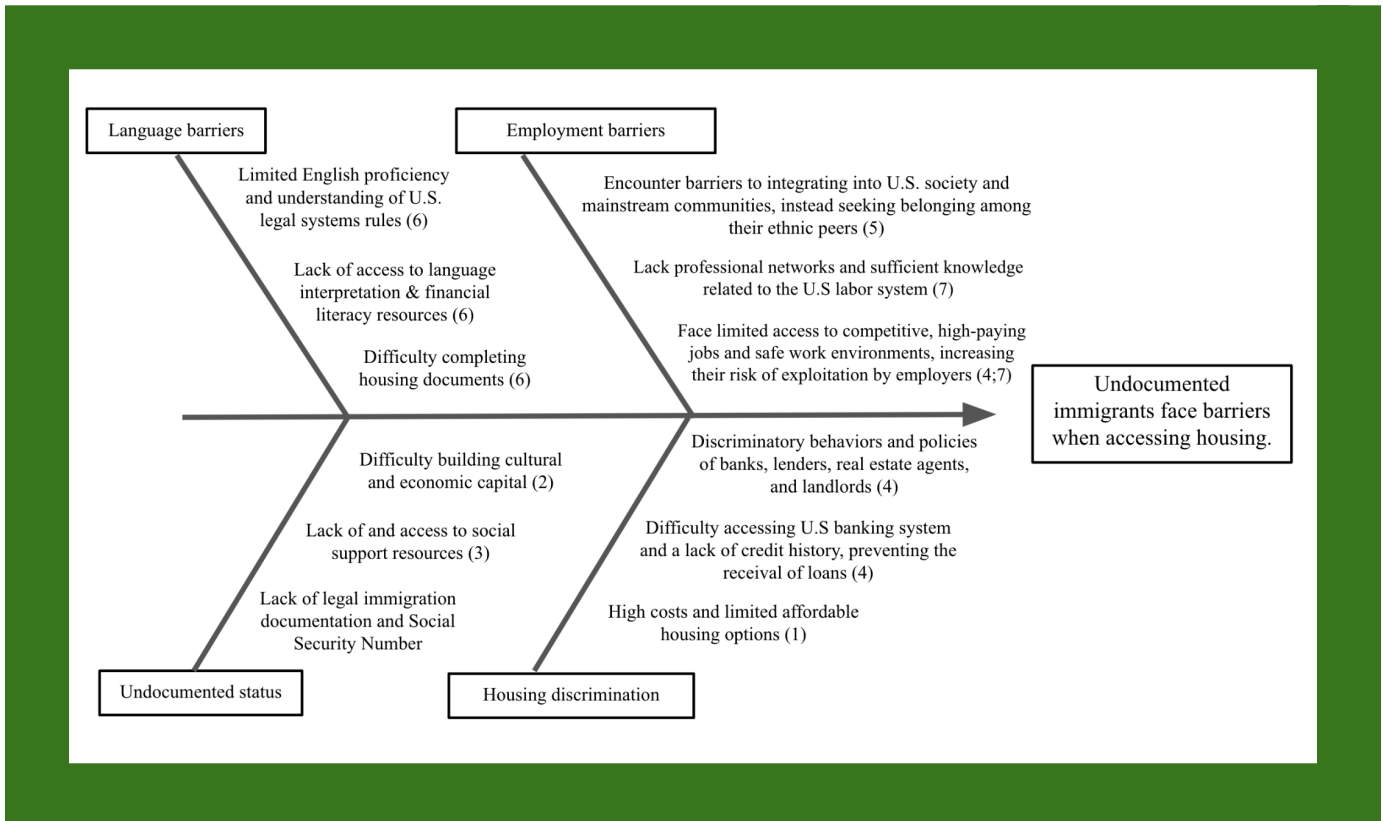
- Interviews: To gather in-depth, qualitative data on the personal experiences and perspectives of community members and key stakeholders regarding housing accessibility.
- Online Research: To collect quantitative data and background information on housing policies, demographics, and existing literature on housing accessibility issues affecting undocumented immigrants.
 - Services: translation, interpretation, legal services
 - Housing: emergency housing, details on types of housing

By combining interviews with thorough online research, we were able to obtain a comprehensive view of the housing accessibility issues impacting undocumented immigrants associated with the Washington West African Center. These methods ensured that our assessment was both grounded in personal experiences and informed by relevant data and existing literature.



- Undocumented immigrants face discrimination and xenophobia, exacerbating housing barriers and hindering their integration into American society.
- Exclusive/Intrusive Legal Questions: Legal documents often contain biased questions, ostracizing undocumented immigrants and impeding their smooth integration into society, worsening housing challenges.

Root Cause Analysis



- Identifying systemic issues such as racism and xenophobia as root causes of housing barriers for undocumented immigrants.
- Investigating how biased legal questions and difficulty obtaining housing loans contribute to the exacerbation of housing challenges within the community.

Community Engagement Strategy

Step 1: Conduct preliminary research: Conducted a comprehensive review on housing accessibility issues faced by undocumented immigrants, focusing on challenges and potential solutions.

- Analyzed demographic data to understand the composition and distribution of the undocumented West African immigrant community in the Greater Seattle area.
- Identified key factors affecting housing accessibility, such as legal barriers, financial constraints, and discrimination.

Step 2: Document pre-existing assets and resources: identify and leverage existing community assets that can support efforts to improve housing accessibility.

- Food: African grocery stores that serve as cultural and community hubs, providing essential food items and social connections.
- Transportation: Community transit options and the WAWAC van, which offer reliable transportation for community members, facilitating access to services and resources.
- Religious Spaces: Churches and mosques that not only provide spiritual support but also serve as important gathering places for community members, offering additional resources and networks.

Community Engagement Strategies

Step 3: Engaged directly with the Washington West African Center (WAWAC): gather in-depth insights into the housing accessibility challenges faced by the community.

- Interview: Conducted an in-depth interview with Pa Ousman Joof, a prominent leader at WAWAC, to gain a deeper understanding of the housing issues and the community's needs.
- Curated Questions: Developed a set of targeted questions to guide further research and community engagement. These questions focused on:
 - Specific housing challenges faced by undocumented immigrants.
 - Existing support systems and their effectiveness.
 - Community perceptions of current housing resources.
 - Suggestions for potential improvements and initiatives.



- Conducted preliminary research to understand housing accessibility challenges and potential solutions for undocumented immigrants.
- Engaged directly with the Washington West African Center (WAWAC) to gather in-depth insights into housing accessibility challenges faced by the community.

Summary of Secondary Strategies

Methods

We developed research questions aimed to delve into various aspects of the community served by WAWAC, focusing on language services, demographic profiles, housing options, and access to community resources. These questions seek to understand the needs and challenges faced by undocumented immigrants, informing targeted interventions and support services.

Findings

The West African community, consisting of over 20,000 individuals, confronts various challenges, including limited access to education and employment primarily in frontline industries. Language proficiency varies among immigrant groups, potentially impacting accessibility to services. WAWAC addresses housing needs through emergency assistance and partnerships with local organizations, while also leveraging social media platforms for communication. In King County, less than 1 in 6 households earning less than the poverty level had affordable housing costs. Undocumented immigrants comprised 23% of the immigrant population in Washington in 2016. During this same period, 1 in 12 children in Washington was a U.S. citizen living with at least one undocumented family member (*Immigrants in Washington*, 2020).

Summary of Secondary Strategies

Limitations

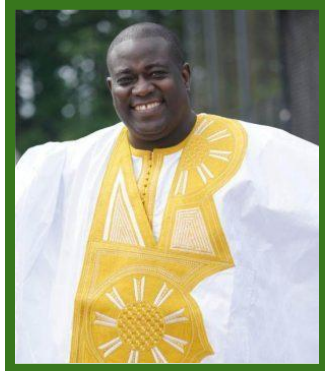
Due to their undocumented status, these individuals often remain invisible in official records and surveys, leading to gaps in understanding their needs and experiences. Consequently, the available data may not fully capture the nuances of the challenges faced by this population, particularly in areas such as healthcare access, housing options, and employment opportunities.



- Developed research questions aimed at understanding various aspects of the community served by WAWAC, including language services, demographic profiles, housing options, and access to resources, to inform targeted interventions and support services.
- The West African community, comprising over 20,000 individuals, faces challenges such as limited access to education and frontline employment. Variations in language proficiency impact service accessibility. WAWAC addresses housing needs through emergency assistance and partnerships while utilizing social media for communication.
- Undocumented status hinders visibility in official records, leading to gaps in understanding needs and experiences. Available data may not fully capture challenges, particularly in healthcare, housing, and employment.



Summary of Primary Data Collection



Pa Ousman Joof

Founder and Executive Director of the Washington West African Center (WAWAC), Snohomish County Racial Equity Housing Advisory Board



WASHINGTON
WEST AFRICAN
CENTER

 **Snohomish County**
Washington

Key Informant Interview with Pa Ousman Joof, May 7, 2024

Zoom Interview

- Experiencing barriers helping undocumented immigrants attain housing
 - 70% underfunded
 - Took years of advocacy to get their first housing grant from the county (\$500,000)
 - Planning for a goal of creating a local West African Village
 - The result of the disparities experienced while trying to obtain housing for his community
 - Collaborating with University of Washington Architecture Department to create a “shovel-ready” project
 - Provides access to newly arrived undocumented immigrants to WAWAC’s resources and support services
 - WAWAC staff are from various West African countries
 - Provides language interpretation services
 - ESL classes are offered 4 days a week
 - Empowering individuals to thrive in all aspects of life
 - Mental health
 - Cooking classes
 - Housing
- Pa Ousman Joof identifies ongoing hurdles in securing housing for undocumented immigrants, with 70% of efforts underfunded and significant advocacy required.
 - WAWAC plans a local West African Village in collaboration with the University of Washington, aiming to address housing disparities and provide comprehensive support services, including language interpretation, ESL classes, and empowerment programs.



Context to Action Plan



		Assets		
Collaborating with legislators to advocate for inclusive housing policies that provide tenant protections, ensure access to affordable housing regardless of immigration status, and eliminate housing discrimination faced by West African undocumented immigrants.		<p>Services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rent assistance • Documentation assistance • Free interpretation services 		
Working with UW Architecture to develop a shovel-ready project to create a West African village. Organizing fundraisers, community advocacy, and public-facing cultural events. Subleasing/contracting with local landlords and NGOs to increase available housing units.		<table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top; width: 50%;"> <p>Churches:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everett Muslim Community Center • Islamic Center of Puget Sound • Bilal Ibn Rabah Islamic Center • Masjid Umar Al-Farooq • Bailey A.M.E Church • LiveLife Church </td> <td style="vertical-align: top; width: 50%;"> <p>African Grocery Stores:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African Supermart • Dizayus African Market • Binet's African Groceries & More </td> </tr> </table>	<p>Churches:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everett Muslim Community Center • Islamic Center of Puget Sound • Bilal Ibn Rabah Islamic Center • Masjid Umar Al-Farooq • Bailey A.M.E Church • LiveLife Church 	<p>African Grocery Stores:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African Supermart • Dizayus African Market • Binet's African Groceries & More
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Developing workshops aimed at empowering community members to assert their housing rights. Continue WAWAC's ongoing efforts to provide legal support services.		<p>Services (WAWAC):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free interpretation services • English and Arabic classes 		
Empowering community members to speak up about their personal experiences with housing discrimination and accessibility to Congress and City Council.		<p>Transportation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WAWAC 15-passenger van • Bus routes and public transportation in Snohomish County 		

- Socioecological Model Overview: The project adopts a socioecological model approach, recognizing that individual health outcomes are influenced by multiple levels of interconnected factors, including individual characteristics, interpersonal relationships, community contexts, and societal structures.
- Application in the Assessment: By examining factors such as language access, housing options, community partnerships, and policy advocacy, the project aims to understand how these various levels interact to shape the health and well-being of undocumented immigrants served by WAWAC, thereby informing comprehensive and multi-level interventions to address housing accessibility issues.



Action Plan

Health Gap	Activities	Deliverables	Outcomes	Actors	Timeline
Limited safe spaces for West African undocumented immigrants	<p>Work with UW Architecture students to develop a "shovel-ready project"</p> <p>Form partnerships the churches and mosques</p>	Blue-print and plan to submit to the government for grants to build WAWAC's West African village that includes apartment units, daycare center, event hall, and grocery mart.	<p>Addressing the housing need by 40%¹</p> <p>Collaboration community gathering events with local mosques/churches and grocery stores</p>	<p>WAWAC community, leaders, UW Architecture students</p> <p>African Food Markets</p> <p>Churches and mosques</p>	5 years
Limited funding	<p>Continue inviting stakeholders</p> <p>Garner increased support</p>	<p>Tax and financial reports</p> <p>Grants from local and federal governments</p>	Increase money available for WAWAC to serve the community and put back into the organization	<p>Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network</p> <p>WAWAC stakeholders</p> <p>Washington State Department of Social and Health Services</p> <p>US Representative Rick Larsen</p> <p>Snohomish County Mayor Linda Redmon</p>	2-3 years
Not enough housing units for undocumented immigrants	<p>Sublease/contract with local landlords and non-profits (YWCA)</p> <p>Create housing agreements from YWCA/other organizations that WAWAC can pay for</p>	Contracts, agreements	Increase affordable housing ability by 40%	<p>Landlords, contractors, current tenants</p> <p>Rick Larsen</p> <p>Snohomish County councilmembers</p> <p>Policymakers</p> <p>Everett Housing Authority</p>	12-15 months
Lack of political will to create equitable housing and employment policies	Work with legislators to create and advocate for policies making housing more accessible and eliminating housing discrimination	<p>Empower community members to speak up about their experience to Congress/City Council</p> <p>Continue to provide legal support services, along with developing workshops aimed at empowering community members to assert their housing rights</p> <p>Set up meetings with legislators and other stakeholders</p> <p>Meeting minutes/agenda with legislatures</p>	<p>Increase the number of community advocacy events</p> <p>Creation of housing rights workshops</p> <p>Increase affordable housing ability by 40%</p> <p>More accessible housing (that doesn't require legal documentation (e.g. SSN, and credit history))</p>	<p>The legislature, council rep members, community activists/educators, WAWAC external affairs directors</p> <p>Washington State Department of Social and Health Services</p> <p>Rick Larsen</p> <p>Linda Redmon</p>	5 - 10 years

- Develop a "shovel-ready project" in collaboration with UW Architecture students to address limited safe spaces for West African undocumented immigrants, aiming to build WAWAC's West African village with apartment units, a daycare center, event hall, and grocery mart.
- Advocate for policies to make housing more accessible and eliminate discrimination, empowering community members to speak up about their experiences and increasing affordable housing ability by 40%.

Interpretation and Dissemination of Findings

1. Community Forums and Interactive Workshops

Organize a series of community forums and workshops where the CHA findings are presented in an accessible and engaging format. These events will provide opportunities for WAWAC members to ask questions, provide feedback, and discuss implications.

Implementation Steps:

- **Event Planning:** Schedule multiple workshops at different times and locations convenient for the community to maximize participation. Partner with local organizations and religious groups to promote these events and encourage attendance.
- **Presentation Materials:** Develop clear and concise presentation materials, including slides, handouts, and visual aids that summarize the key findings. Ensure materials are translated into relevant languages spoken by the community.

Value to Stakeholders:

- **Accessibility:** Ensures that findings are communicated in a straightforward and understandable manner.
- **Engagement:** Encourages active participation and dialogue, fostering a sense of ownership and investment in the findings.

Interpretation and Dissemination of Findings

2. Digital and Print Media Campaign

Utilize a mix of digital platforms (social media, websites, email newsletters) and traditional print media (brochures, posters, community newsletters) to disseminate the CHA findings.

- **Social Media:** Create a series of posts and infographics summarizing the CHA findings for social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Use hashtags and tagging to increase visibility and engagement.
- **Print Materials:** Distribute printed summaries of the findings in community centers, places of worship, local businesses, and during community events. Ensure materials are visually appealing and translated into relevant languages.

Value to Stakeholders:

- **Broad Reach:** Ensures the findings are disseminated widely across different segments of the community, including those with limited internet access.
- **Accessibility:** Provides information in multiple formats to cater to different preferences and literacy levels.
- Utilize community forums and interactive workshops to present CHA findings in an engaging format, fostering dialogue and understanding among community members.
- Implement a digital and print media campaign to disseminate CHA findings widely, ensuring accessibility across diverse segments of the community and promoting engagement with the results.

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