The role of housing providers and intermediaries in migrant access to (in)formal housing markets in the New York City

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Outline of the presentation

- Literature on migration industries
- West African migrants in the Bronx
- The study method
- Findings
- Conclusion
Literature on migration industries

• Investigates actors and actions that are involved in shaping mobility patterns and mobile identities (Cranston, 2016). Emerged from the literature on migration infrastructures.

• Help with documents, legal and tax advice, remittances, crossing borders (Ambrosini, 2017) and migrant employment (Groutsis et al., 2015)

• Actors: smugglers, co-ethnic brokers, employers, NGOs, ordinary citizens and civil servants, etc.

*These industries accompany the journey of a migrant before they move, support their travel and help them access resources on their arrival (Alpes, 2012)*
West African migrants in the Bronx

- A long-standing history of West African migration to the US
- High levels of poverty: a median income of $25,000, 35% lower than the citywide median
- 80% of the Bronx' residents are renters
- 79% of the housing stock is rent-regulated
- A high number of recipients of public assistance

Source: Catholic New York, 05/08/2015
The study method

37 semi-structured interviews with actors performing functions related to housing access in the Bronx

**Housing providers**
- (1) non-profit
- (2) public
- (3) private providers
- (4) property management firms

**Intermediary organisations**
- (a) housing advocacy non-profit organisations
- (b) public authorities (providing housing benefits, and constituent service staff from elected officials’ offices)
- (d) religious institutions
Findings: the formal pathway to accessing housing is through a unified application process

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Findings: Informal pathway to accessing housing is through informal referrals

• Referrals are provided by either an existing tenant or a credible intermediary

"[I receive applications] from the same immigrant community, or even tenants who are in the apartment. For example, I have a tenant that’s paying me every month. I would rather that person bring me somebody, a family member, a friend, a relative, than getting someone off craigslist that I don’t even know. [...] so far, I’m happy with the result." (Housing Provider 3)

• Referral through a particular ethnic migrant network and strong preference for West African migrants

"In my building, everyone works; that’s what we like in our tenants. Africans, they always work and go about their business. [...] you do your best so you do better in life financially and mentally" (Housing Provider 6)
Findings: the role of intermediaries

- **Housing advocacy non-profits and public authorities**: failed to reach West African migrants who were fearful of authorities and unwilling to ask for help

"The African community seem to be comfortable with their rights being infringed on. ... if a [non-African] lived in a house and there’s no heat, no hot water that person would, on a legal ground, refuse to pay and then go to court... But the African man will say it just happened in the month for a week or two or maybe it’s just been happening randomly so they’ll contend with that and move on... Landlords are more comfortable having African tenants because they are not problematic. "

(Public Authority 3)
Findings: the role of intermediaries. Religious institutions

- **As space and platform for trust-based connections**: West African nationalities to meet, bond, and share knowledge on employment opportunities and housing offerings

  "When someone is a member and we find they have a need, we sit down and assess it, and see how we are able to help. ... With housing, for example, if someone has a 2-bedroom apartment and wants someone to share it with, **we can help make that connection**. (Religious Institution 3)

- **As arbitrors and facilitators**: the clergy supports informal housing transactions by making connections

  "If you have rented a room from another brother and you think they are overcharging you or something, maybe my solution will be to **help you find another place. Or maybe I will help you get a refund** of some kind. (Religious Institution 4)"
Conclusion

- Housing providers act as key gatekeepers to the formal housing market
- Intermediaries’ roles differ: public and non-profit organisations are barely involved, whereas religious organisations act as gatekeepers and mediators
- The paper opens a broader discussion within the migration industries and urban informality

Formal and informal housing processes. Source: elaboration by authors.
Thank you for attention

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