



FROM THE FOUNDATION UP: UNDERSTANDING HOUSING (IN)STABILITY IN THE CITY OF EDMONTON

LAURA MURPHY, LAURA TEMPLETON and LAURIE SCHNIRER

Every year, tens of thousands of people move to the city of Edmonton, eager to secure a foothold in a city synonymous with opportunity and prosperity. There exists, however, an incongruity between popular perception and the lived reality in this “land of plenty.” On the one hand, Edmonton is cast as an economically thriving city, a place where young families can put down roots and invest in their futures. On the other, sobering statistics reveal that families are struggling—even during the good times. While many prosper when oil is flowing in Alberta, an economic boom increases the cost of living, widening pre-existing income disparities.

Using findings from Families First Edmonton (FFE), a study of 1,200 low-income families, we reveal how boom times actually made things worse for families living near the poverty line. Housing barriers intensified, as public policy was unprepared to protect low-income families from a surging economy and low vacancy rates. Here, we explore how low-income families were impacted by Alberta’s (and Edmonton’s) boom time, and what housing (in)stability looks like in a prosperous Canadian city and province.

Alberta experienced an economic boom from 2003-2008 due to energy sector investment and oil revenues. During this time, researchers at the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families engaged with low-income families about basic needs (including housing) in a community-based longitudinal study. Many of the families who participated in FFE were living paycheck to paycheck, with little to no room to buffer any unforeseen or additional costs. Without

caps on rent increases, landlords quickly raised rents to reflect market demand. Many families experienced rental increases, some up to \$800/month—not just once, but two times within one year. (As of 2007, landlords can only raise rents once annually). Discriminatory practices abounded. Rents were variably increased between units within the same apartment block, a mechanism used by landlords to “weed out” particular tenants in favour of those perceived more desirable. Large families as well as newcomer and Indigenous families were more likely to experience this form of discrimination. Refugees, often dependent on landlords for character references in landed immigrant claims, were left especially vulnerable.

The power differential between landlords and their financially and often politically marginalized tenants meant that landlords could neglect necessary repairs, resulting in unsafe and unhealthy conditions. Faulty plumbing for one family resulted in hot water gushing down the bathtub drain, consequently increasing the family’s water and heating costs. One single mother erected a piece of plywood to cover a hole where a back door should have been. Some families, in particular those who received large rent increases, fell behind in their rent. For those who received eviction notices the situation was even worse. Facing homelessness, and without security deposits or personal references, these families had to find affordable homes in a market where the average monthly rent for a two-bedroom apartment shot up 41% between 2005-2008 from \$732 to \$1,034. With affordable units already in short supply, the housing stock for renters

was further diminished when landlords converted entire apartment blocks into privately-owned condos.

Families resorted to a number of strategies. Some families “doubled up” and lived with friends, partners, or family but often at the cost of over-crowding and straining family relationships. Others became more reliant on social assistance and housing subsidies. Another tactic was to move to areas with less expensive rent, which often meant living in areas that were less safe (higher rates of criminal activity) or less convenient. Moving to areas farther from the downtown core presented new challenges, such as increased difficulty accessing social supports, transportation barriers (expensive, poor service), children having to change schools, and a lack of familiarity with a new neighbourhood.

In the absence of a national housing policy, and the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation’s end of operating agreements, local and provincial levels of government need to work collaboratively and creatively on housing strategies.

In consideration of the recent proceedings at the 2015 Canadian Housing and Renewal Association’s Congress, as well as the Mayor of Edmonton’s commitment to eliminating poverty in the city of Edmonton, we propose the following as next steps on how housing inclusivity can be improved:

- Ongoing needs assessments on affordable housing shortages, inclusive of all low-income households, such as larger/multi-family households, seniors, students/youth, and availability of physically-accessible units. These assessments should also consider the source of the shortage (i.e. stock versus affordability, as well as current condition).



In the absence of a national housing policy, and the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation's end of operating agreements, local and provincial levels of government need to work collaboratively and creatively on housing strategies.



- A better understanding of the mechanisms of housing (in) stability for low-income families to promote speedier exits, and to support those entrenched in poverty.
- Rental caps to preserve existing affordable housing.
- Continued support of repair programs for landlords with affordable units and low-income homeowners. This is vital for maintaining current stock and reducing utility costs.
- Expanded incentives for respectful infill developments—including private owners building secondary suites or developers investing in mixed-use projects—to expand and integrate affordable housing. For example, Winnipeg's provincial and city tax increment financing grants have sustainably increased downtown affordable housing stock alongside market housing and commercial developments. Further, this creates housing options for families transitioning toward stability and wanting to remain in the same neighbourhood.
- Prioritization of pedestrian travel in conjunction with accessible public transportation initiatives to improve neighbourhood inclusivity and community cohesion.

These steps are critical as recent estimates suggest 42% of Albertans are living paycheque to paycheque and are at greater risk of housing instability or eventual homelessness. Contributing to the overall well-being of individuals, families, and communities, housing stability is ultimately an issue that concerns all citizens.

For more information, please contact Families First Edmonton at www.familiesfirstedmonton.ualberta.ca or Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families at www.cup.ualberta.ca

Laura Murphy is a Ph.D. Candidate in Sociology at Western University. Laura Templeton, Ph.D., is a researcher with the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families in the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta. Laurie Schnirer, Ph.D., is the Interim Director of the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families in the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta.

Further Reading

Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation. (2014). *Canadian Housing Observer 2014: Recent Trends in Housing Affordability and Core Housing Need A Chapter from the Canadian Housing Observer*. Ottawa, Canada: CMHC. Retrieved from: http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/corp/about/cahoob/upload/housing_affordability_and_need_68193_w.pdf

Edmonton Social Planning Council. (2015). *A Profile of Poverty in Edmonton*. Edmonton, Canada: ESPC. Retrieved from <https://www.edmontonsocialplanning.ca/index.php/resources/digital-resources/a-espcc-documents/a06-newsletters/a06c-research-updates/243-a-profile-of-poverty-in-edmonton/file>

Shapcott, M., Blickstead, R., Gardner, B., & Roche, B. (2010). *Precarious Housing in Canada*. Toronto, Canada: Wellesley Institute.

