

Social housing and human rights: Principles and considerations

The goal of the *Social Housing and Human Rights* campaign is to develop a Canada-wide call to action and advocacy plan for a government-funded program to expand and preserve social housing. Social housing is housing that has been removed from the market (so it cannot be used for speculation or to generate wealth) and that costs less than 25-30% of household income or is equivalent to social assistance housing allowances. While social housing is only one strategy to address housing need, and must be combined with supports, resources, and other strategies like rent regulation and liveable incomes, there is currently a gap in Canadian housing policy for households who need stable, good quality, very low rent housing.

The 2019 *National Housing Strategy Act* enshrined the right to housing in Canadian law, but housing is not one-size-fits-all. To ensure that everyone in Canada has access to good-quality, safe housing, we must ensure that social housing programs are implemented in a way that addresses the many factors that shape people's experiences of, and access to, housing.

To be successful, Canada's social housing programs will need to address these factors in all aspects of their implementation, from the distribution of funding to housing design and additional supports, to partnerships with other governments and distribution of housing across the country. This paper begins with five framing principles, then proposes several considerations to ensure Canada's social housing programs address all housing needs for all people. It is not intended to be comprehensive, but to offer a starting point for conversations about the best ways to address the complexities of housing need. It is intended to act as a 'living document' that will evolve over time as needs change.

Principles

1. **Nothing about us without us**

Popularized in the 1990s by disability activists, the phrase *nothing about us without us* today is used by many groups to argue that research, policy or programs should not take place unless the affected community is actively involved in decision-making. This means that people with lived experience of homelessness and housing need must be involved in decisions about social housing policy (CLELN, 2022).

2. **Self-determination and reconciliation**

Inuit, Métis and First Nations have never given up their right to self-determination. Canada, as a colonial nation founded on Indigenous lands, has committed to reconciliation and the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (A/RES/61/295) 2007). This means that Canada must work with and support the leadership of Inuit, Métis and First Nation governments and communities to ensure that all Indigenous people have access to housing.

3. Good quality housing that meets the needs of the household

Housing is a social determinant of health: it shapes our experiences of both physical and mental health (Raphael et al., 2020). Households come in a variety of shapes and sizes, with different priorities at different times of life. This means that housing should be well-built and well-maintained, energy-efficient, and there should be a variety of housing options from small apartments to multi-generational houses to accommodate different household types.

4. Resources, supports, and community planning

Housing alone is not enough; people also need to be able to connect with friends, family and community, and to access the resources they need for a good life. This means that plans for housing should include access to healthcare, education and employment, childcare, food security, transportation, green spaces and other resources close by (Farha, Freeman and Gabarre de Sus, 2022).

5. Transparency and accountability

Too often, it is not clear where government funding for housing has gone, and whether it is resulting in the intended program outcomes. Government funded housing should include accountability mechanisms, including clear and regular reporting on spending and the number of units of social housing available. It should also include mechanisms for leadership and direction from people with lived experience of homelessness and housing need.

Considerations

Building on the four principles listed above, social housing programs will require careful consideration of the housing needs of different populations. Their historical and contemporary housing experiences, as well as social and economic factors, will shape access to and use of housing. Further, housing need—like any other social or economic factor—is intersectional, meaning that overlapping identities and marginalizations may create distinct experiences of housing need. If these factors and experiences are not taken into account in developing social housing programs, they are unlikely to address housing need.

Indigenous peoples

Inuit, Métis and First Nation housing need differs from non-Indigenous housing need and so requires different solutions. Housing has long been used as a tool to assert Canadian ownership and control of Indigenous territories, including through forced resettlement, the imposition of European-style housing, and the underfunding of housing programs for Indigenous people (Hohmann, 2013; Marcus, 1991; McCartney, 2016). As a result, Indigenous people experience housing need at a much higher rate than non-Indigenous people, and a lack of safe housing has been identified as a key factor shaping Indigenous women's, girls' and 2SLGBTQ people's safety (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). For Indigenous people, access to housing is mediated by settler colonial and capitalist interests, resulting in housing need that is connected to a broader dispossession of land, language, community and systems of governance, among other factors (Coulthard, 2014; Thistle, 2017).

As such, the solution to housing need for Inuit, Métis and First Nation households is rooted in self-determination and control of housing, including through the National Urban, Rural, and Northern Indigenous Housing Coalition's *For Indigenous, By Indigenous (FIBI) Strategy* (Indigenous Caucus, 2023). Whether on- or off-reserve, Indigenous nations and communities "have the right to be actively involved in developing health, housing and other economic and social programs and, as far as possible, to administer such programmes through their own institutions" (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (A/RES/61/295) 2007, Article 23). What this looks like in practice will vary by nation and community, but the Urban Native Housing Programs that began in the early 1970s offer a model for off-reserve housing developed and managed by Indigenous non-profit housing providers. Funding was initially provided by the Government of Canada, and despite expiring funding agreements, many Urban Native Housing providers continue to provide good quality, low-cost housing for thousands of Indigenous households.

However, while Indigenous-led housing provision is important, it is only one part of addressing Indigenous housing need. Reconciliation between Canada and Inuit, Métis and First Nations highlights the importance of addressing historic and contemporary colonialism, including residential schools, missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQ* people, and broken treaties and stolen lands. To truly address housing need, housing programs will require action to decolonize housing and land by returning political authority and control of housing and land to First Nation, Inuit, and Métis nations and communities (Yellowhead Institute, 2019).

Poverty

Poverty is a primary cause of housing need. Tenant incomes are about half those of homeowners (Statistics Canada, 2022), and poor people are twice as likely as the total population to live in rental housing (Randall, Thurston and Kubwimana, 2022). Poverty affects all aspects of life, and when a household must spend more on housing, they have less left for other necessities like food, medication and healthcare, clothing, transportation and communications (including phone and internet). People receiving social assistance often face additional barriers, including discrimination based on source of income, higher rates of child apprehension (and resulting loss of housing), and challenges accessing rental deposits (Schwan et al., 2020; Starr, McKinnon and Cooper, 2022). Housing programs must ensure that housing costs are affordable to low-income people.

Women and 2SLGBTQ* people

Women, women-led families and 2SLGBTQ* people are disproportionately represented among those in core housing need. This is in part because this population has lower average incomes, faces discrimination in accessing housing (especially for Indigenous and racialized households), and because they (especially in households with children) may have limited housing options in the event of domestic violence or a relationship ending. These factors may result in poverty and poor housing conditions, which are "frequently conflated with neglect in child welfare investigations," and may lead to child apprehensions, trauma and housing precarity for the family (WNHHN, 2022, 22). Housing programs must specifically address access to housing and

security of tenure for women, women-led families and 2SLGBTQ* people, including their distinct experiences of homelessness and housing need.

Racialized people and communities

Racialized people are more likely to live in core housing need and to live in neighbourhoods with inadequate services, transportation access and employment and educational opportunities. They also experience significant discrimination in accessing housing, including from landlords who screen out potential renters based on names, perceived ethnicities and accents (Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation, 2021). Often, people don't report discrimination because the process is complex and time-consuming, and so official reports of discrimination are likely to be much lower than actual experiences. Housing programs must gather data on experiences of discrimination (including disaggregation of data by race), and provide better resources for landlords and tenants to understand their rights and responsibilities. They must also fund tenant-support agencies and use anti-racist lenses to ensure that housing policies and programs promote equity (including non-discrimination in allocation of units and/or targeted prioritization of racialized people and households in allocation) (Ages et al., 2021).

People with disabilities

Disabled people face challenges of housing accessibility at a variety of levels: finding housing that meets the accessibility and other needs of the household, in a neighbourhood or area that provides accessible sidewalks, transportation, services and necessities. Accessible rental units are hard to find, especially in rural or smaller population centres, and people who require additional supports to maintain their housing often have trouble finding support workers. People with disabilities are more likely to have low incomes and more likely to experience discrimination (especially for BIPOC people with disabilities) from landlords and other housing professionals. As one report stated, "In sum, people with disabilities in Canada are disproportionately homeless, living in poverty, subject to drastically restricted housing choices, subject to housing discrimination and likely to live in substandard housing" (Alzheimer Society of Canada et al., 2017). Housing programs must ensure a variety of housing types that are accessible to disabled people, including wrap-around supports where needed, and must work with advocates to address ableism and discrimination in housing.

Newcomers

Newcomers to Canada often have limited social networks and may be dealing with major life changes in employment and education. They may have larger families than the Canadian average, and so need larger homes. Especially in the first few years, they may have low incomes and uncertainty about their futures. These challenges may be exacerbated for refugees, who may arrive without family or friends, and may have recently escaped traumatic circumstances (Priesler, 2021). Housing programs must include transitional and long-term housing for newcomer households, as well as additional resources and supports to ensure that newcomer individuals and families are able to establish themselves in Canada (Bucklaschuk, 2019).

Seniors

Low-cost housing for older adults includes a variety of types, from independent living to nursing homes. Many seniors' housing complexes include design elements to ensure accessibility, and many offer services such as meals or home care. Seniors often have limited or fixed incomes, making it difficult to adapt to high or increasing housing costs, but long-term care homes and retirement residences are often owned and operated by private companies "with a mandate to maximize returns for external shareholders" (Brown 2022, 3). In particular, long-term care homes have long been criticized for understaffing, inadequate care and inconsistent standards of care—factors which were brutally exposed in the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Aging-in-place, or enabling seniors to continue to live in their communities, requires attention to housing type as well as accessibility of resources in the local area. Housing programs must provide a variety of housing types for households at all ages, and must consider mobility and accessibility as essential elements in housing plans.

Children and youth

In 2021, 8.8% of children under 17 in Canada lived in core housing need, including 20.9% of children living in renter households (Statistics Canada, 2021). Youth between the ages of 13 and 24 make up about 20% of the homeless population in Canada (Gaetz et al., 2016). Youth aging out of care experience additional barriers, including lack of ID and lack of support systems after leaving care (Altieri et al., 2022). Low social assistance rates and a lack of good quality, affordable housing can be grounds for apprehension of children, particularly for Black and Indigenous children, with long-term repercussions for individual and family health (Schwan et al., 2020). Children and youth who experience housing need and homelessness are more likely to experience housing need and homelessness as adults. Housing programs must focus on prevention of housing need and homelessness for children and youth, and must include transition supports and integrated support systems to address homelessness and housing need as part of a holistic approach (Gaetz et al., 2016).

People experiencing mental illness and addictions

Mental health and housing are closely tied: people with mental illness are more likely to face poor housing or homelessness, and those with poor housing or experiencing homelessness are more likely to face mental health challenges. People with mental illness may require additional supports to maintain housing, but these supports are often hard to access because of waitlists, locations of services, or eligibility restrictions (Mental Health Commission of Canada, n.d.). Drugs may be used as a form of self-medication to cope with past or present trauma, but can make accessing and maintaining housing more difficult (Norman and Reist, 2021). Housing programs must include supports to access and maintain housing, as well as access to health care (including substance use treatment options and safe supply for drugs), and inclusion and peer supports (Mental Health Commission of Canada, n.d.; Norman and Reist, 2021).

People needing medical care

Various populations may require supportive housing for medical care: some people with disabilities require supportive housing or assisted living, some people experiencing mental illness may need social and practical supports, and others may require some form of transitional or temporary supportive housing with wraparound supports (including those who must travel to

access health services). Housing programs must include both temporary and long-term housing options for households that require short- or long-term supportive housing.

People experiencing homelessness

A lack of housing can be experienced in a variety of ways: people may be sleeping outdoors, in emergency shelters, in temporary housing (such as a hotel or transitional housing), or staying with friends or family. People may also be at risk of homelessness if their housing is overcrowded, too expensive, or unsafe (including violence within the home). Sometimes people build encampments with communities of tents or small cabins for mutual support and safety. Criminalizing and evicting homelessness does not solve housing need, nor does it respect human rights and dignity (Farha and Schwan, 2020). A housing programs must address the root causes of homelessness by working directly with people experiencing homelessness, building low-rent housing, and providing onsite supports (including income, health, outreach) as needed to ensure that people can access and maintain housing.

People leaving institutions

When people leave institutions like prisons, hospitals, or the child welfare system, they often face barriers to finding and maintaining housing. Incarceration can result in loss of housing and employment, and homelessness can result in incarceration (John Howard Society, 2022). Likewise, people being discharged from hospitals without a housing plan in place may end up being homeless (Buccieri et al., 2017). And youth aging out of the child welfare system face structural barriers, including lack of support, increased criminalization and psychological barriers (Kovarikova, 2017; Altieri et al., 2022). Housing programs must include resources for individual and household housing planning before the person leaves the institution, as well as supports during the transition period and afterwards as needed.

Regional housing need

Rural and northern communities have different housing needs than urban communities. Although frequently perceived as a uniquely urban challenge, homelessness is common in rural and Northern areas as well, though precise numbers are hard to find (Waegemakers Schiff, Schiff, Turner, & Bernard, 2015). Housing need can be exacerbated in rural and Northern areas by limited transportation options and limited access to services including shelters, employment opportunities and healthcare, and households may be forced to relocate to access such services. Provision of housing is also complicated in rural and Northern areas by higher construction costs, and a lack of available land and infrastructure. A higher percentage of households in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and the Yukon live in core housing need (especially overcrowding) (CMHC, 2023). Housing programs must address the disproportionate housing need and higher costs of housing provision in rural and Northern areas, as well as distinct cultural and environmental housing requirements.

Conclusion

There are many more considerations beyond those listed here that should shape Canada's social housing programs. More discussion will be needed once funding for social housing has been secured. Canada already has a substantial infrastructure of non-profit, cooperative and

public housing providers that can undertake the work of developing and maintaining such housing: all that is needed is political support.

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