

Engaged Scholarship and Housing Security

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From the Guest Editors

ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP AND HOUSING SECURITY

Isobel M. Findlay and Lori Bradford

Housing security is the availability of and access to stable, safe, affordable, and adequate housing without experiencing barriers, including gender, race, caste, ethnicity, ability, or sexual orientation among many more (Cox et al., 2017; Findlay et al., 2013). Although housing security has been an issue long in the making in Canada with decades of disinvestment in affordable rental stock in favour of home ownership and market solutions (Careless, 2020; Hulchanski & Shapcott, 2004; Hulchanski et al., 2009; Olauson et al., 2023; Sutter, 2016), the housing crisis was both exacerbated and exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Kunzekweguta et al., 2022). The pandemic redoubled insecurities and vulnerabilities, “amplify[ing] the suffering of being homeless” and having “nowhere to go” (Doll et al. 2022, pp. 11-12).

Even though *housing as a human right critical to human development* is recognized in Canada under the 2019 National Housing Strategy Act (NHSA), the correlation between income and housing insecurity puts those in lower income brackets at the highest health, well-being, safety, and financial risk. Low-income earners typically bear the added burdens of systemic discrimination, which creates significant barriers to receiving the support they need, while exacerbating their vulnerability to exploitation by those who would profit from putting at risk the security and safety of the most vulnerable. Despite the NHSA pledge to act on the best evidence, the Auditor General of Canada (2022) reports that “Infrastructure Canada, Employment and Social Development Canada, and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation did not know whether their efforts improved housing outcomes for people experiencing homelessness or chronic homelessness and for other vulnerable groups” (p. 5). While scholars are growing the evidence, including the list of barriers to optimal outcomes, data on those barriers and other factors shaping our understanding of housing security, people actually experiencing housing insecurity remain the experts in knowing who is housing insecure, what will support their housing security, and how we should be moving forward together to enhance housing security nationwide. The usual



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research methods, like case studies, interviews, focus groups, mind mapping, research-creation, surveys and questionnaires are evolving to be more inclusive of community-based research activities (Mitchell et al., 2016; Quilgars et al., 2009).

In this special issue on Engaged Scholarship and Housing Security, we share the insights of emergent approaches, digital tools, advocate-scholars, and community champions doing the hard work. We recognize, support, and highlight research and researchers of all types who are using engaged scholarship, community-based approaches, and/or community-driven and managed research and activities around housing security, including those using diverse and multiple ways of knowing about housing security.

The article “Toward the Right to Housing in Canada: Lived Experience, Research and Promising Practices in Deep Engagement” importantly addresses the meaningful engagement of lived expertise in housing research consistent with the NHSA’s promotion of lived expertise and participatory processes. The ambitious goals of the NHSA require that “those in greatest need,” including those with lived experience of housing precarity, homelessness, and housing rights violations, contribute to research, help shape policy, and further the operationalizing of housing as a human right. The article draws on a project where the team (with and without lived expertise) probe how lived experts engage in housing research on housing precarity in Canada, while reviewing close to 300 articles in the literature through an intersectional lens. They are mindful too of the colonial history and the need for Indigenous-led and controlled research that may not choose knowledge mobilization in traditional academic fora. They also call for “deep engagement” defined “as meaningful, non-hierarchical engagement geared towards transformative action, informed by the strengths and unmet needs of communities.”

The next article uses community-engaged arts-based methods to shed light on housing insecurity in rural areas and overlapping rural-urban spaces. If homelessness is less visible in those settings, it is no less part of the broader crisis of housing insecurity and homelessness demanding policy and other action. The article complicates and complements official narratives constructed by such means as point-in-time counts, those notoriously undercounting instruments that conceal as much as they reveal in the efforts to quantify the issue for policy intervention. In the process they may well reinforce “a deficit-based understanding of demographic groups more likely to experience homelessness” and thus entrench individualized rather than systemic or structural understandings of homelessness. By contrast, the authors highlight twelve storytellers, including three members of the research team, and eight examples of digital storytelling inspired by the Re•Vision Centre for Art and Social Justice at the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. Theirs is a participant-led process of engaged scholarship that can uniquely challenge power relations and render visible the particular “intersections of individual circumstance and structural factors” that demand policy change. The digital storytelling documents the resilience and skill of those navigating homelessness. Their stories reveal how social assistance policy, rural motels and racism, and anti-immigration and misogyny fuel poverty and illegal evictions which reproduce homelessness, isolate the vulnerable, and render their experiences invisible.

If community proved important in the previous essay in confounding taken-for-granted views of homelessness, “Community of One: Social Support Networks and Low-income

Tenants Living in Market-rental Housing” presents another perspective on the meaning of community for those struggling with housing insecurity. Based on 21 interviews with tenants and housing providers in a community-engaged project, the essay explores the social support networks of low-income renters living in market housing while in receipt of rent subsidies and housing worker assistance. It is especially important to understand the experiences of low-income renters in the context of the housing and affordability crises and of policy and other investments in the private market and subsidies as the solution. Among the most marginalized, low-income renters are often forced by intense poverty to make hard choices between rent and food, medication, or utilities. Those pressures are also felt disproportionately by those facing intersecting oppressive systems, such as Indigenous people, racialized groups, women, seniors, and people living with disabilities. The tenants in the study proved to have few social supports and even avoided social networks that had been harmful to their housing security. They often preferred their own company. Nevertheless, they did seek and receive formal social support (both material and emotional) from the non-profit sector in areas such as harm reduction, youth and women’s centres as well as assistance from housing workers. The findings have clear implications for investments in the non-profit sector—and for research comparing market renters with those in public, co-operative non-profit housing or exploring the experiences of different sub-populations.

An intersectional approach to housing security is the focus of the final essay, “Intersectionality in Housing Research: Early Reflections from a CBPR Partnership.” The essay discusses preliminary findings from a larger project designed to implement “intersectional praxis across the life cycle of community-based participatory research (CBPR).” These preliminary learnings come from a “Co-Learning Workshop” involving both academic and community partners which highlights three key challenges or “promising puzzles” in co-defining and integrating intersectionality into housing research to illuminate “the multi-scaled complexities” of housing security as “both specifically experienced and institutionally produced” and to persuade policy and programme personnel of the value of the approach in disclosing “the specific contexts in which structural housing inequities take root.” The overall aim is through “reciprocal community-driven partnerships and the direct participation of the people affected throughout the life cycle of the partnership” to produce “more relevant, inclusive, and sustained housing outcomes for multiply-marginalized populations” in urban and rural settings. They aim to demonstrate the potential of the intersectional approach to build community capacity, to further housing as a human right, and to fill gaps in knowledge and understanding created by data collection methods and results that take too little account of “equity-seeking groups who face intersecting barriers—e.g., LGBTQ2S+ youth and newcomer women.”

The Reports from the Field features two reports. The first has a strong call to action: “Less Talk, More Builds’: The Mixed-Income Residential Tower Model of the University of Winnipeg Community Renewal Corporation.” In the context of the urgent need for more affordable housing stock and government failure to deliver despite investments in policy and program incentives, the authors describe the potential of a scalable model that needs to be better known and understood: the mixed-income residential tower of the University of Winnipeg

Community Renewal Corporation (UWRC), a non-profit foundation that since 2005 has worked in partnership with community organizations to become Winnipeg's leading social real estate developer. While the role of universities in student housing provision has had some attention (including whether or not the reliance on international students to balance budgets contributes to the housing crisis), less known is this mixed-income, mixed-use residential model developed off-campus.

The model is currently being replicated in Winnipeg's downtown core where close to half the units are affordable rental reserved for "marginalized residents" (low-income immigrants and refugees, Indigenous persons, persons living with disabilities, and others facing multiple, intersectional barriers) in a project that is committed to a four-pillar framework of "multi-dimensional sustainability." While building new units is but one means (Less Talk, More Builds) of addressing the current housing supply and insecurity crisis, it is the one means (with numbers and dollar value) favoured by politicians with an eye to electoral cycles. The report usefully and importantly links this initiative to engaged scholarship and how academics might adapt this model to their locations, deepening NGO and other partnerships to help develop government policies to accelerate scaled replication, assessing the efficacy of different financing mechanisms (mortgages, loans, subsidies, etc.), studying the dynamics of mixed-income groups that choose to live together, and understanding the opportunities and challenges to be navigated by a non-profit entity of a university or college that builds and manages off-campus social housing.

The second report, "Survival and Resistance: A Zine Study with Young Women and Femmes Experiencing Housing Injustice in Canadian Cities," explores housing injustice as a public health issue among young women and femmes between the ages of 18 and 24 (expressing femininity but recognizing diverse gender expressions) in urban settings. This is a group whose lived experience is rarely captured in part because they tend not to use shelters and are more likely to be found among the so-called hidden homeless. Drawing on social constructionism in an arts-based inquiry, the authors aim to answer this research question: "what are the survival and resistance strategies that young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice use to support their wellness and engage with life?" They use reflexive thematic analysis of zine contributions centring the young women's voices and problematizing understandings of both youth ("developmental period" or "structural framing" around which "institutions are built") and resistance as highly contextual to identify five themes: affective and psychological resistance, survival strategies, what good living means to participants, their experience of "organized abandonment" or selective investment/disinvestment, and the importance of human connection and care. The zine contributions fill in some important gaps in understanding of housing injustice among young women and femmes with valuable policy, research, and other implications.

The Exchange highlights a conversation among four academics in nursing, medicine, engineering, and social sciences involved in an interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral group researching ways to improve the built environment in rural, remote, and reserve communities. Through their dialogue, key themes and reflection emerge, highlighting the reciprocal nature of engaged scholarship and its imperative for addressing societal challenges.

The participants define their practices of engaged scholarship as collaborative endeavours characterized by adaptability, reciprocity, informality, and responsiveness to community needs. They emphasize the importance of a community-gifted term, “ReconciliACTION”, wherein research transcends campus environments to catalyze joint commitment to actions in communities, fostering more equitable partnerships. Insights are shared on the challenges of balancing academic goals with community priorities, navigating institutional memory, and promoting interdisciplinarity among engineers; natural, health and social scientists; humanists; and artists. Strategies that they promote to enhance engaged scholarship include addressing language accessibility, advocating for institutional support, and leveraging platforms like policy briefs, graphical art, and peer-reviewed journals to disseminate knowledge and facilitate collective learning. The exchange underscores the transformative potential of engaged scholarship to prioritize researcher humility, campus friendships, research accessibility, and sustained community engagement.

The special issue concludes with reviews of two important new books, *The Tenant Class* by Ricardo Tranjan sheds light on the reproduction of an inequitable housing market, offering both critique of the naturalizing processes that would rationalize the status quo and recommending solutions, not technical but political, and sharing histories of tenant organizing to that end. Andrew Crosby’s *Resisting Eviction: Domicide and the Financialization of Rental Housing* has much in common with Tranjan’s book not least in its powerful critique of the housing system and the construction of the housing crisis. Crosby’s is a compelling tale of the destruction of rental units by financialized landlords in Ottawa’s Heron Gate, the eviction of tenants, the organizing of tenants, and a human rights lawsuit that could have a real impact on housing rights in Canada.

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