

Research Insight



Moving Insights: Encampments, Hotels, and Cooperatives

Introduction

CMHC completed research looking at housing moves experienced by people living in homeless encampments (encampments), hotels serving refugees, and housing co-operatives (co-ops). Prior research examined moves in and out of core housing need. Less was known about moves between housing types. Moves in the “housing continuum” was a research next step. Understanding how housing types relate to the housing continuum model can impact policy choices. CMHC therefore refocused the research to examine moves between these three emerging housing types.

Project Overview

This study aims to understand how people move between different housing types. We looked at three housing types: encampments, hotels, and co-ops. These findings help us understand distinct paths people take between housing types. Researchers asked the following questions:

1. What do we know about transitions within the housing continuum? What models have been proposed to depict people’s transitions within part or all of the housing system?
2. What do we know about populations that experience different journeys along the housing continuum?
3. What are the gaps in research on transitions within the housing continuum?
4. What are some of the lessons learned from this research that could be used to influence housing policy?

Methodology

Researcher Dr. David Wachsmuth and his team at McGill University carried out the research. They started with a literature review and then qualitative interviews. The team focused on people moving into and out of the following three housing types:

- Encampments
- Transitional hotels
- Co-ops

See participant information Table 1:

Table 1

Case Study Location	Participant	Number
Hotels (Greater Toronto Area)	Housing Service Provide staff (Immigration and Refugee)	17
Encampments (Montréal)	Housing Service Provider staff (Homeless & Encampments)	17
Co-ops (Vancouver)	People who transitioned into a cooperative within the past 5 years	16
Total		50

Key Findings

What do we know about moves within the housing continuum and the three noted housing types?

- The most studied transitions focus on moves between rental and owned housing. Moves between homelessness and formal housing is also well researched. Moving into and out of housing types is varied due to family housing wealth. Access to family wealth enables moves from rental to home ownership.
- Findings show that people don't always move along the housing continuum in one direction to owning a home. This is a limitation of the housing continuum. It assumes one direction moves toward market housing. Diverse people follow complex moving patterns. Sometimes these complex moves are viewed as a failure to follow a 'normal path'.

- Diversity in people, cultures, and practices can result in less traditional housing moves. This challenges the continuum's assumed one direction of "upwards" mobility. A variety of move patterns are seen in encampments, transitional hotels, and co-ops.

What do we know about populations that experience alternative journeys along the housing continuum?

1. Encampments

- The face of homelessness is changing. People living in encampments are now quite diverse. Service providers stated that people living in encampments were often people who had been homeless for a long time. Now residents are described as "anyone who has lost their housing" and can't find a place to live. Front line workers noted that less affordable housing contributed to this challenge. Moving from an encampment to a rental unit is often rare.
- Services provider feedback gave us insights about where residents lived previously. They suggested that residents were in other forms of homelessness (hidden or emergency shelters). For some residents, encampments are preferred over emergency shelters. They also noted many residents moved from institutions like children services, health settings, and prisons.

Quote: "Yes there were a few people who were placed in rental units, but these are the people that are extremely motivated and respect the rhythm. When people are motivated to do the steps to secure a subsidized room, it's a lot of steps, a lot of paperwork. You have to have your taxes up to date. But yes, we have had a lot of people move into subsidized rooms. People [they] have more capacity to do all the steps."

2. Hotels serving as transitional shelters

- Government-sponsored refugees or other migrants moving here have better access to market housing.
- Refugee claimants, because they are not sponsored privately or publicly, must await the results of their claim, and cannot access other federal services and housing supports. More refugee claimants entering Canada are moving to municipal emergency shelters.
- Overall, refugees stay in temporary hotel accommodations longer. They take more time to find stable housing. Lack of affordable housing and discrimination are barriers.

Quote: "There's no plan for what to do when a refugee claimant arrives. We have plans for sponsored refugees and for every other stream of immigrants that arise... Right now [for refugee claimants] the answer is, we have no idea and that's why they end up in the shelter system."

3. Co-operatives

- Case-study households were older than the national average. They were often one or two person dwellings.
- Co-op housing is seen as an “end point” in their housing journey.
- Interviewees stated that they were renters or homeowners prior to moving into a co-op. This counters traditional notions about one direction moves along the housing continuum.
- The process to move into a co-op is often competitive and not clear.

Quote: *When they open up the [application] window, last time they opened it for about a week.... They [had] maybe 1,000 applicants and out of that they interviewed four families. I happened to know one of them that was applying. It was a single mom [with an] 18-year-old and a 13-year-old daughter being renovicted. It's like a horror story out there...she didn't get it but it was really hard on the membership committee to say who wins.*

What are the gaps in research on transitions within the housing continuum?

1. More information about encampments is needed. Service providers warned that many residents would not support this. They would worry data could be used by city planners to tear down encampments.
2. Transitions from institutions (i.e. health, justice, or children services) to the housing system are not shown in the current housing continuum model. But these housing pathways must be studied given the lack of transitions data.
3. Recent research has noted the rise of shared housing (or co-living) as an answer to affordability concerns. But this may also be due to ideology, social, or ecological choices. Less affordable housing has led to new co-living arrangements in other countries. Further research on these new alternatives would be valuable.
4. The co-op case study showed a need for housing designs that are more flexible. This flexible design should focus on the home and the entire housing project. It would help gain an understanding of housing models and financing models.

Implications for Housing Policy

The research draws attention to four main implications for the housing sector.

1. **Encampments:** Invest in homelessness prevention. Rental evictions are playing a role in unsheltered homelessness. Prevention includes building more social housing. Participants stated that diverse social housing types and rent support is needed. Prevention also includes more support services and a broader range of services. A key to homelessness prevention is effective transition planning from institutions.
2. **Hotels serving as transitional shelters:** Commit federal funding for refugee claimant shelter spaces. Provincial funding under the Interim Housing Assistance Program (IHAP) has been very helpful. It reduced the severity of the shelter crisis. Federal government funding to prevent overburdened shelters is also needed.
3. **Co-operatives:** Tie access to new government funding for co-ops to requirements. These include best practices and board training. As well, better standards and open application processes can address potential discriminating co-op membership practices and mismanagement.
4. **Modify the housing continuum model:** Consider models focused on housing stability instead of homeownership. Studies suggest two housing continuum model improvements. One, housing policy could recognize many housing journeys and goals. The focus can be changed to increasing **stable** housing and **autonomy** in choosing space and location.

Recently, the federal government announced additional funding for three overlapping programs to support households in need, and add housing supply.

- The [Canadian Housing Benefit](#)¹, administered through provincial partners, provides additional income support to families in need.
- The [Affordable Housing Fund](#)² has been extended and additional funds added so that more rental and affordable housing units can be added for families.
- The [Coop Housing Development Fund](#)³ was launched this year providing access to forgivable and low-interest repayable loans to develop rental cooperative housing.
- The [Rapid Housing Initiative](#)⁴ was designed to fund the rapid construction of new rental housing units and the conversion/rehabilitation of existing buildings to affordable housing, quickly creating new affordable housing units that serve vulnerable populations.

Together, these initiatives will add supply to the market, and help make housing more affordable to support families who wish to move into a home and remain stably housed.

Key Terms

Co-operative housing: Co-op housing units are managed by housing members through a co-op board. These boards manage maintenance, internal affairs, committees, accounting, fiscal planning, member applications, and procedures. In some co-ops, members own shares of a company that own the building. Co-op owners do not own the unit in which they live.

Encampments include people who lack housing and is one of many forms of homelessness, including hidden and emergency sheltered homelessness. They are not accessing emergency shelters or housing, except during extreme weather. People are staying in places that are not designed for or fit for human habitation (see Echenberg and Munn-Rivard 2020, p. i).

Government-assisted refugees are identified for resettlement by the UN Refugee Agency and sponsored by the GoC, then placed in resettlement programs run by service provider organizations and funded by Immigrations, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada.

They receive resettlement support for up to one year. They also receive temporary accommodations until permanent housing is found.

Housing continuum is a concept used to describe the broad range of housing options available to help a range of households in different tenures to access affordable and appropriate housing. The concept enables a move away from a one-size-fits-all strategy, towards ‘the range of housing options available to different households on a continuum.’ The housing continuum includes homelessness, shelters and transitional housing, community housing, affordable rental, market rental, and homeownership (CMHC, 2018).

Refugee claimants arrive in Canada on their own and file a claim for refugee status at a port of entry or inland office. They have little to no access to resettlement services until their claim is decided.

Unsheltered homelessness: people without housing and who do not access emergency shelters (except during extreme weather conditions). In most cases, these individuals are staying in places that are not designed for or fit for human habitation (see Echenberg and Munn-Rivard, 2020, Appendix A).

¹ <https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/professionals/industry-innovation-and-leadership/industry-expertise/affordable-housing/provincial-territorial-agreements/investment-in-affordable-housing>

² <https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/professionals/project-funding-and-mortgage-financing/funding-programs/all-funding-programs/affordable-housing-fund>

³ <https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/professionals/project-funding-and-mortgage-financing/funding-programs/all-funding-programs/co-op-housing-development-program>

⁴ <https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/professionals/project-funding-and-mortgage-financing/funding-programs/all-funding-programs/rapid-housing>

For Further Reading

Full Report, Dr. David Wachsmuth et al., Urban Politics and Governance research group, McGill University (2024)

Related Reading

Sparrow: Homesharing offers a win-win solution for housing affordability (NHS Innovation Fund)

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