

RESEARCH REVIEW

HOUSING: A FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT

THE FEDERAL HOUSING ADVOCATE'S
2021-2022 ANNUAL REPORT TO THE MINISTER

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The 2019 National Housing Strategy Act (the Act) enshrined into Canadian law the internationally accepted tenant of housing as a human right. Committing to address housing need and homelessness, the Act contains accountability tools, including the National Housing Strategy (the Strategy), the National Housing Strategy Council, and the Office of the Federal Housing Advocate. This nonpartisan office supports the Federal Housing Advocate (the Advocate) in fulfilling a mandate to monitor how well the Strategy is working; to provide evidence-based recommendations for improvements to the Minister; and to hold the government to obligations under the Act. Rather than focus on remedies for individual cases, the Advocate concentrates efforts

on addressing issues related to necessary systemic change. To understand the cause and impact of these issues, the Advocate seeks insight through research and engagement with public, private, and non-profit sectors. Such insights inform the recommendations presented in this report.

The COVID-19 pandemic (the pandemic) has pushed several systemic issues related to housing into the national spotlight, as a spike in financialization, homeless encampments and evictions compromise progress in the realization of housing as a human right. Thus, research for the annual report is focused here.

With the destabilizing effect of the pandemic on the economy, real estate became a haven for large investors looking for guaranteed profit in an uncertain market. But buying up and upgrading affordable housing to rent out at a premium significantly impacts already marginalized communities, turning housing into a for-profit investment. This is financialization. The Advocate's research finds ways to reduce this impact and put human

rights and social good first. Future plans include sharing these findings with and engaging stakeholders in developing recommendations for guarding against the impact of financialization on housing as a human right.

Pandemic health and safety issues related to indoor congregate living spaces provided by the shelter system pushed an ever-greater number of Canadians struggling with homelessness into encampments. In addition to substantial threats of exposure, harassment, and violence, the general view of encampments as a nuisance often results in publicly endorsed forceable eviction. Such displacement disrupts tenuous access to any resources or essential services an encampment might provide, driving residents into increasingly unsafe situations. Though tasked with oversight related to encampments, municipalities often lack any ability to influence the driving structural issues of supply, affordability, and accessibility. And in the absence of provision for safe, appropriate, secure housing, forceable evictions pile one human rights violation on another. Research shows work to advance housing as a human right must be led at the federal level while ensuring access to needed resources at all levels of government. A next phase of research planned by the Advocate includes engaging encampment residents, advocates, and governments in identifying permanent solutions to encampments based on the human right to adequate housing.

With the pandemic, a decades-long crisis in security of tenure became a national emergency. Measures such as pandemic income security and eviction moratoriums temporarily slowed the trend. But as these

measures are removed and the cost of living continues to rise, means of resolving arrears, or relocating to more affordable accommodation is needed. Though landlord-tenant law is under provincial and territorial jurisdiction, research shows all levels of government must work together to ensure eviction does not result in homelessness.

Key findings from the Advocate's engagement and research on these topics are presented to the Minister as recommendations to strengthen and improve the National Housing Strategy:

- Developing a whole of government approach to ensure coordination of efforts between levels of government
- Better targeting funding to address the needs of disadvantaged groups
- Addressing the legacy of colonialism and systemic housing inequality, and recognizing the right of Indigenous Peoples to create their own housing strategies
- Preventing and ensuring Strategy programs do not contribute to financialization
- Ensuring the measurement of the Strategy includes standardized human rights-based targets and indicators to be applied across all government departments and agencies
- Learning from the pandemic response, ensuring recovery takes the most vulnerable into account.



The National Housing Strategy aims to reengage public, private and non-profit sectors in affordable housing, building new homes, and renovating existing stock. But realization of housing as a human right will require not just financial reinvestment, but a critical look at systemic issues requiring solutions. The findings from research conducted by the Advocate were shared with pertinent federal departments and central agencies and presented to the Minister, providing evidence-based legislative and policy recommendations. These recommendations must be turned into sustained, coordinated action of all stakeholders, and a whole of government approach to a national housing strategy that achieves affordable, suitable, safe, and secure housing for all.

REFERENCES

Canadian Human Rights Commission (2022). Housing is a human right: The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate's 2021-2022 Annual report to the Minister. Retrieved from: https://housing.chrcreport.ca/pdfs/office_of_the_federal_housing_advocate-annual_report_2021.pdf

