



CPRN RCRPP

Housing is a Children's Issue

Today more than half a million Canadian children suffer from a lack of affordable or adequate housing. Thousands more are homeless.

It's time the penny dropped. Housing is a children's issue. The conditions in which children live, particularly the affordability and quality of their housing have clear consequences for their health, safety and security, success at learning, and social engagement and responsibility – the four key goals of the National Children's Agenda, established by the federal, provincial and territorial governments in 1999.

In the early 1990s, the federal and provincial governments began their withdrawal from social housing. Overall, this meant slashing spending by 25 percent, with cutbacks of 68% in Alberta, 41% in Nova Scotia, and 27% in Ontario, where so much of Canada's social housing is located. The result? In 1989, there were almost 10,000 social housing units developed across Canada. By 1998, that number had fallen to 1,500 units. Much of what spending remains simply goes to maintain the existing stock.

When those cuts were made, the assumption was that private developers would build suitable housing, if only governments got out of the way. This has not happened. Developers find it more profitable to build at the top end of the market, with high-density bachelor and single bedroom rental units or condominiums. Almost no one has taken responsibility for building affordable rental housing suitable for modest and low-income families with children.

Tight rental markets in many Canadian cities, the cutbacks in social housing, and years of high unemployment and slow growth in incomes have left a costly legacy. More than fifteen percent of Canadian children are in "core housing need," according to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) definition. That means their homes are either in need of major repair, are overcrowded, or cost more than 30% of family income. What's more, by 1999, families with children were the fastest growing segment of the rapidly expanding homeless population.

On the positive side, Ottawa and the provincial and territorial governments are investing increasing amounts of money in early childhood initiatives, the National Child Benefit and other programs that are part of the National Children's Agenda (NCA). Yet, poor quality housing undermines all four of the NCA's objectives and threatens its success. Simply put, poor housing puts children at risk.

Poor housing means poor health. It is more likely to harbour mould, lead, and asbestos, all of which contribute to high rates of respiratory disease. Dust mites and cockroaches increase the risk of asthma. We know lead is associated with neuro-behavioural disorders. And lead is more readily absorbed by children suffering from poor nutrition, common among those who are poorly housed.

Crowded housing, where several families share a unit meant for one, can subvert the positive effects of investment in pre-school programmes. There is, for example, no space or quiet time for reading to pre-school children – the kind of nurturing that studies of brain development teach us is crucial to school readiness by age 6. Crowding also makes it difficult for school-aged children and their parents to ensure that homework gets done.

And the lack of affordable housing means children are going hungry. A major reason families give for using a food bank is that, once the rent is paid, there is not enough money for food. Poor nutrition affects health and school achievement. And there is certainly not enough money for the recreational and cultural activities so important to social engagement and health.

Parents who struggle to pay the rent are parents who are working long hours, stressed by time crunch and anxiety. They may be parents living in constant fear of homelessness, only one bad month away from eviction. We know the consequences of stress for good parenting. Yet, doing something about high rents and low vacancy rates is still not a priority when officials responsible for the Children's Agenda get together.

Housing *is* a children's issue and it is time we dealt with it as such. It is time to ask hard questions about the consequences for children and families of the decisions by all levels of governments to cut back their spending on social housing in the 1990s. It is time to ensure that low-cost rental housing designed for families gets built once again. Seniors and singles need social housing, to be sure, but their needs cannot be allowed to take precedence over those of families with children when units are designed and built. It is time to respond to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In 1998, it argued that Canada's federal, provincial and territorial governments should treat the shortage of affordable housing and homelessness as urgent national problems.

Investment in the NCA represents an important step forward for Canada's children. But if that investment is to be truly effective, housing affordability and quality must be part of the equation. Children deserve no less; policy coherence requires no less.

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