

Social Housing in Canada, 2010: A Patchwork Quilt

International Housing
Exchange Partnership

Berlin, Germany
October 19-22, 2010



Summary: The Canadian constitution separates the authority required to meet the housing needs of low-income households from the resources necessary to do so. The provincial governments, responsible for natural resources, control housing development through land use planning and building codes. The federal government holds the more sweeping monetary and financial tools required to get the job done.

When the federal government left the social housing field in the 1990's, provinces were left to manage the pieces. Ontario went one step further and downloaded social housing to municipalities.

One consequence of devolution is that no one keeps track anymore. For example, the federal government subsidizes 48,000 fewer social housing units than it did in 1998. While it is probable that most of these units continue to house low income Canadians, it is impossible to confirm. Most provinces don't report on social housing stock on a regular basis.

With the exception of Quebec, British Columbia and Nunavut, social housing is in decline across Canada. Housing poverty or core housing need has increased since 2001 and, given the recession, its growth is likely to continue.

While the 47,000 affordable housing units, announced or committed, will add to the stock of modestly priced rental and ownership housing, they do not deal with the household's ability to afford even a modest housing cost. The ability of social housing in Canada to deal with housing poverty has become a patchwork quilt reflecting provincial willingness and resources.

1. Housing in Canada's Federal State

Canada is a federated state, meaning that the two senior levels of government have separate but interdependent jurisdictions. The Canadian federal constitution assigns responsibility for monetary policy, including money supply, interest rates and control over mortgage lending to the federal government. Provinces control natural resources, including land use planning, building codes and housing development. The federal government has more tax room and greater spending powers than the provinces.

Thus, when the federal government ended its involvement in social housing in the 1990s, the provinces took over. But it is difficult to track what has happened, as there is no requirement to publish information about the social housing stock.

One researcher estimated in 1998 that the total stock of social housing in Canada was about 661,000 units, contained in 48,000 projects.¹ Since that time, federal assistance for social housing has declined. In 2010, the number of social housing units receiving federal assistance dropped to 612,700, a loss of over 48,000 units or 7.3% of the social housing stock.

Co-incidentally, the 47,000 new affordable housing units announced or committed by the federal

¹ Jeanne M. Wolfe, Canadian Housing Policy in the Nineties, Housing Studies, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp121-133, 1998

government is almost the same as the social housing units that lost federal subsidy. The difference is that social housing provided rent geared-to-income. Households paid no more than 25 to 30% of income for rent. Affordable housing is designed to operate at the low end of market rents; there is no rent geared-to-income component, unless the province or a municipality adds one on.

Questions arise. What happened to those social housing units? How has housing poverty changed? How are provinces responding to their newly found responsibilities? This report checks out what the provinces are reporting about their performance in social housing and related initiatives.

The picture shows a crazy quilt pattern has replaced a former national program with uniform standards and processes.

2. Uneven Data Reporting

Provinces are not required to report on the social housing stock and the internet research method used here may, of course, not uncover reports available only in hard copy. For the most part, information was found in Annual Reports, external documents, the occasional press release, etc. The result is a uneven picture. There is no such thing as a consistent time series.

Devolution has been unkind to developing a comprehensive view of the state of social housing across Canada in 2010. Most provinces provide limited information about the state of social housing. Ontario, for example, experienced a double devolution; municipal reports have not been consolidated into a provincial picture. Quebec may have more information available than most, but it is largely inaccessible to those without working French language capabilities. On the other hand, British Columbia leads the nation in providing clear, comprehensive reports.

3. Cross-Canada Checkup: From East to West

Most provinces seem to manage what they've got. Generally, however, the data available from the provinces doesn't answer the question of the 48,000 "lost" social housing units. Anecdotally, there are no media stories about demolition or conversions of social housing at such a scale. On balance, most of these units likely still exist and still provide rent geared-to-income assistance.

The Atlantic Provinces, except for tiny PEI, have witnessed small declines in rent geared-to-income housing assistance.

Quebec leads the country in providing almost 130,000 housing allowances while it has also modestly increased social housing.

The Ontario picture is unclear. Possibly, the level of social housing has declined somewhat, but not a lot. It is entering the field of housing allowances, but its commitment is uncertain over the longer term.

The situation in the Prairie Provinces is also unclear. Saskatchewan has about the same number of social

housing units as it did in 2005. Manitoba and Alberta do not provide enough information to establish a trend.

B.C. clearly has something to talk about – increased production of social housing, expansion of housing allowances, an dynamic agency capable of addressing a broad range of housing needs, and a provincial commitment that creates the foundation.

Finally, in the Arctic territories, where housing means survival, overall levels of social housing remain unchanged. The decreases in Northwest Territories have been offset by the increases in Nunavut.

Certainly the need for assisted housing still exists. Core housing need², or housing poverty, increased at the national level. At the provincial and territorial level, larger changes were evident, particular for Ontario, Saskatchewan and Alberta. The three Arctic territories continue with the highest levels of core need among all the regions of Canada. On the other hand, Nova Scotia, Quebec and British Columbia saw significant decreases.

The outlook for core need in 2011, the next census period, is not promising. Unemployment rates have increased from 6.1% as we entered the recession in 2008 to 8.1% in August 2010. Personal bankruptcies have also increased. As decreased household incomes are unlikely to be matched by decreased housing costs, core housing need will likely grow.³ Unless, of course, the recession ends in a year.

All provinces and territories participate in the federal government's Affordable Housing Initiative. While not directly addressing housing poverty, it adds new moderate cost rental and ownership opportunities that would otherwise not be available. The federal government has acted to ensure that housing markets provide affordable housing, even as it backs away from income security in the housing field.

For low-income Canadians, their ability to find decent housing at a price they can afford is no longer a matter of national interest. Instead, they are dependent upon highly unequal provincial willingness and ability to fill the vacuum left by the federal government. The "provincialization" of housing policy has created a ragged quilt of unequal opportunities.

2 Core housing need measures the number of households not living in and unable to access acceptable housing. Acceptable housing means housing that is adequate (not requiring major repair), suitable (not over-crowded) and affordable (costs less than 30% of gross income). A household is in core need if its housing does not meet one or more of the above conditions and the household would have to pay 30% or more of its income to pay the median rent for housing that meets acceptability standards.

3 Further complicating the measurement of core need will be the discontinuity in data collection techniques by moving to a voluntary census in 2011. If, as some predict, lower income households are less likely to participate in a voluntary census, the 2011 core need measure will under-estimate incidence at a time when it is likely to have increased.

Jurisdiction	Size of Social Housing Stock	Households in Core Need	Recent Initiatives	Observations
CANADA	Declined by 48,300 (7.3%) from 661,000 in 1998 to 612,700 in 2010	Increased: 12.7% of households, or 1.494 million in 2006, vs. 1.485 million in 2001	46,983 affordable units announced or committed	Number of social housing units losing federal funding about the same as new affordable units
The Atlantic Provinces				
Newfoundland & Labrador	Declined from 10,600 in 04/05 to 10,160 in 08/09	Increased: 14.2% of households, or 27,300 in 2006, vs. 26,600 in 2001	1,395 affordable housing units announced Rent sups increased by 186 to 1,186	
Prince Edward Island	Stable – 1633 provincial and 900 federal stock fairly constant	Increased: 12.6% of households, or 6,400 in 2006, vs. 6,200 in 2001	166 affordable housing units announced	PEI did not agree to transfer of federal Social Housing
New Brunswick	Declining: hhlds. receiving RGI benefits dropped from 17,000 in 1999 to about 16,000 in 2010	Decreased: 10.3% of households, or 29,400 in 2006, vs. 30,000 in 2001	1,150 affordable housing units announced. 500 of the first 750 targeted to low income	
Nova Scotia	Declined from about 12,000 units in 2005, stock has decreased to 11,300 in 2009	Decreased: 12.1% of households, or 43,800 in 2006, vs. 51,600 in 2001	1468 affordable housing units announced	Nova Scotia has one of the highest rates of unmet needs to social housing stock
Central Canada				
Quebec	Growing. 85,000 units in 2002 grew to 90,000 units in 2005. Almost 130,000 households receive housing allowance.	Decreased: 10.6% of households, or 324,600 in 2006, vs. 352,400 in 2001	9,085 affordable housing units announced	Quebec leads the rest of Canada in housing allowances
Ontario	Unclear: stock of about 255,000 units shifted to municipal level in 2001; consolidated municipal results not available	Increased: 14.5% of households, or 627,500 in 2006, vs. 599,700 in 2001	19,931 affordable housing units announced Modest housing allowance program (20,000 households) to decline starting 2013	Lack of information prevents meaningful conclusions.

The Prairie Provinces				
Manitoba	Unclear: 35,000 units reported in 2008/09. Historical data not found.	Increased: 11.3% of households, or 46,900 in 2006, vs. 45,400 in 2001	2,506 affordable units announced Annual Report (08/09) indicates more rent sups and "public housing"	Lack of information prevents meaningful conclusions.
Saskatchewan	Stable - 30,000 units reported in 2010/11 about the same as in 2005, despite a small tenant-buy program	Increased: 11.8% of households, or 40,800 in 2006 vs. 37,200 in 2001	1,437 affordable housing units announced	
Alberta	Not determined. 67,000 Albertans helped in 03/04; 40,000 households through 130 private & non-profit providers in 08/09	Increased: 10.1% of households, or 119,100 in 2006, vs. 106,300 in 2001	4,093 affordable units announced Housing allowance program established in 2007 for 5,700 households	Affordable housing goal is 11,000 units by 2012
British Columbia	Strong growth: social housing 40,100 in 02/03, 65,200 in 09/10 Housing allowances almost doubled to 27,800 households during that same time and future growth is planned.	Decreased: 14.6% of households, or 221,500 in 2006, vs. 223,700 in 2001	4,817 affordable units announced	Most positive growth of all provinces; BC Housing integrates emergency, transitional and permanent housing programs under one roof. Reports lead the nation for clarity and comprehensiveness.

The Arctic Territories				
Yukon	Stable: 511 units in 02/03, 518 in 2007	Increased: 16.3% of households, or 1,900 in 2006, vs. 1,600 in 2001	350 affordable units announced	
Northwest Territories	Declining: 2,700 units transferred from federal government; 2008 Auditor's Report identified 2,400 units	Increased: 17.5% of households, or 2,400 in 2006, vs. 2,100 in 2001	344 affordable units announced	Despite decline in social housing, ratio of social housing to core need (excluding on reserve) is 1:1
Nunavut	Growing: 3,600 units transferred from federal government; 4,086 units in 07/08	Increased: 37.3% of households, or 2,900 in 2006, vs. 2,700 in 2001	241 affordable units announced	Despite the addition of new social housing, Nunavut had the highest % increase in housing poverty.



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