

Toward Healthy and Affordable Housing

2015 Report of the Director of Public Health for Montréal

In releasing the report Toward Healthy and Affordable Housing, Montréal's director of public health follows up on past interventions pertaining to housing carried out by health authorities,¹ and aims to accomplish the following:

- *Appraise the housing situation in Montréal*
- *Reiterate his commitment to prioritize public health expertise in this area*
- *Formulate recommendations to protect the health of Montrealers*

Recent Data

The director presents data from a survey on healthy and affordable housing in Montréal* conducted in June 2014 with 1600 households. The survey focused on the physical conditions of dwellings as well as the impacts of the cost of housing on food security and residents' anxiety.

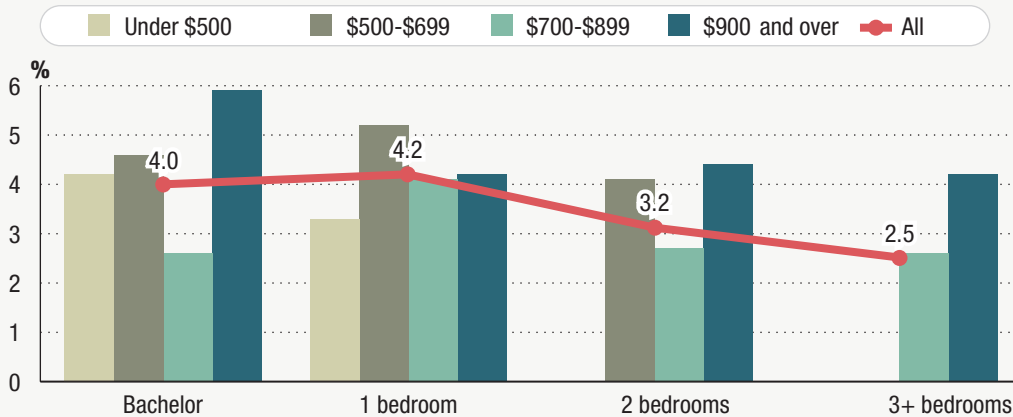
These new data are presented in the report, as are those of other studies led by Montréal's public health department. Statistics from the National Household Survey (NHS 2011), Société d'habitation du Québec (SHQ) and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), as well as from the most recent census are used to construct a portrait of housing-related issues in Montréal. A literature review completes the work.

Portrait of Housing in Montréal

Renters are a majority (61%) on the Island of Montréal. In addition, the rental market has undergone substantial changes over the past few years.² For example, the average rent for a three-bedroom apartment went up 38% between 2001 and 2014;³ inflation rose 28% during the same period.⁴ Housing starts for rental units declined from 3150 units in 2002 to 2300 in 2011.⁵ There was also a shortage of large affordable apartments for families⁶ (Figure 1).

* Enquête sur la salubrité et l'abordabilité du logement à Montréal (SALAM)

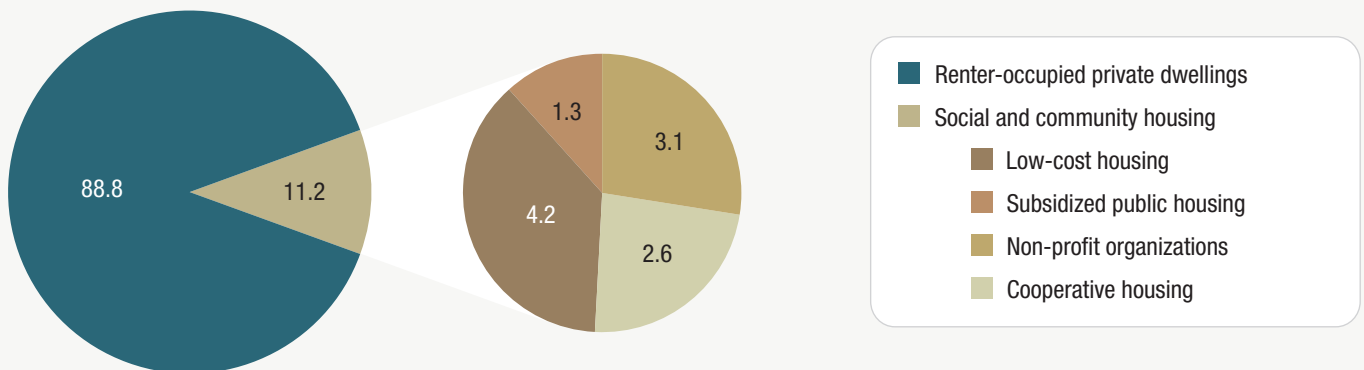
FIGURE 1 – Apartment vacancy rate by price and number of bedrooms, Montréal (%), 2014



Source: CMHC 2014. Rental Market Report – Montréal CMA, p. 11.

The rental housing stock is ageing: 42% of private apartments were built before 1961 and their maintenance is often below par.⁷ While only 11% of apartments are earmarked for social or community housing⁸ (Figure 2), we have observed a marked decrease in federal funding for affordable housing programs. More than 22 000 households are on the waiting list for low-cost housing in Montréal, but only 2 000 dwellings become available each year.⁹

FIGURE 2 – Supply of social and community housing in Montréal (%), 2013



Source: Ville de Montréal. 2014. Répartition des logements sociaux et communautaires sur l'île de Montréal, Faits saillants et tableaux, Direction de l'urbanisme et du développement économique.

Healthy and Affordable Housing

Housing is a significant determinant of health; one example is the increase in respiratory problems affecting residents of substandard homes.^{10,11,12} The cost of housing also greatly affects a household's capacity to eat well and meet other basic needs.¹³

Our survey revealed that 25% of renters who devote more than 30% of their income to rent (50 000 households) reported not having enough food due to a lack of money (Table 1). Food insecurity can have health impacts over the long term. Having a poor diet plays a role in many health conditions, such as obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, cardiovascular diseases and several cancers.

TABLE 1 – Problems reported by households, by condition of the property and rate of effort, Montréal, June 2014

	OWNERS	RENTERS			TOTAL
		Income spent on housing <30%	Income spent on housing >30%	Total renters	
Overcrowding	2.3*	7.0	10.7	7.7	5.3
Difficulty making ends meet every month	11.3	19.2	44.6	26.7	20.5
Food insecurity					
Afraid of running out of food	2.8	9.6	27.7	14.4	9.6
Not enough food	1.8*	7.0	24.6	11.1	7.7
Inadequate quality of food	4.1	13.5	32.5	18.1	12.4
Use of food bank	0.1*	1.6*	19.8*	7.5	4.2

*Significant confidence interval

Source: Centre Léa-Roback, SALAM 2014.

Impacts on Vulnerable or Marginalized Populations

The report highlights serious issues, such as the impacts of household insecurity on children's growth and development^{14,15} and on their educational success.¹⁶ It presents specific challenges faced by new immigrants,¹⁷ Aboriginal peoples,¹⁸ injection drug users¹⁹ and people with mental health conditions (more than a third of the 106 people who died during the heat wave that hit Montréal in July 2010 had serious mental health problems). The report also points out the effects of unstable housing on the risks of HIV and HCV infection transmission,²⁰ and on therapeutic outcomes of people with those infections.²¹ Finally, it sheds light on the fact that an ageing population and the arrival of new immigrants require appropriate social responses to housing, especially in Montréal.

Main Recommendations

The director of public health asks that the federal government adopt a Canadian housing strategy that meets multiple housing needs, and calls on the government to reinvest in social and community housing. He asks that work continue toward providing Québec with a provincial housing policy, in partnership with cities. He puts forward recommendations designed to ensure that all municipalities on the Island of Montréal have regulations and resources to improve interventions targeting substandard housing, and offers to collaborate on implementing such interventions. He also encourages the health and social services network to prioritize housing in interventions with vulnerable populations.

To conclude, the director reiterates his concerns about poverty and social inequalities afflicting Montrealers. At this time, the housing market is part of the problem; however, there is no doubt that government intervention is part of the solution. Such actions can greatly improve the situation for the lowest income individuals, for a congenial social mix and for population health.

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Synthesis Report

The *Synthesis Report* series features highlights from the main studies, research projects, interventions or promotion activities carried out in various fields of public health.

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The full report
Toward Healthy and Affordable Housing – 2015 Report of the Director of Public Health for Montréal, the French versions of the synthesis report and of the full report are available at dsp.santemontreal.qc.ca/publications