



Residential Precarity: *Youth and Housing in Québec's Urban Centres*



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CONTEXT

The tightening rental market in Québec's urban centres presents a looming challenge for young renter households (aged 17–30). With a scarcity in affordable housing and rising rent prices, Québec's youth are threatened with the prospect of living in residential precarity. Residential precarity can be defined as “living in a place that's in a state of disrepair, or living in a spot that's overcrowded or unaffordable” (Pelley, 2017). Urban housing is an issue that affects all demographics, but young tenants are especially vulnerable due to numerous socio-economic factors. Youth populations have the lowest median income of any age group and are more likely to hold temporary or part-time employment (Conseil jeunesse de Montréal, 2021). With their limited resources, they are more sensitive to the rising expenses of the housing market. Young adults are also highly compelled to move to urban areas (Conseil jeunesse de Montréal, 2021). In this period of life, youth flock to cities in search of educational or employment opportunities. They are transitioning to self-reliant housing for the first time in their lives, and may not be well-versed with tenants' issues. As a result of these conditions, Québec's young adults are often the first to feel the effects of a tightening urban rental market. The current housing crisis is also exacerbated by the fact that it is unfolding in parallel with a global pandemic (Schwartz, 2021). The onset of COVID-19 has seen a rise in financial instability, an increase in requests for social housing, and further barriers between renters and tenant advocacy groups. With these dynamics in mind, this policy brief will outline the challenges Québec youth face in acquiring stable, safe, and affordable housing in the province's urban areas.

INACCESSIBLE HOUSING: KEEPING UP WITH RISING PRICES

Young adults are known to be highly reliant on the rental market. In Québec, 70% of households whose primary earner is in the 15 to 29 year old age group live in rented accommodations (ISQ, 2019). With such a closely dependent relationship in place between young adults and the rental market, what occurs when the market goes where its tenants cannot follow? Many urban centres in Québec have been affected by a growing erosion of housing affordability. This erosion refers to circumstances when home prices rise faster than the median income, a dynamic that ultimately affects the rental market. Using Montréal as an example, housing prices in the city grew 190% from 2001–2019 (Teranet–National Bank of Canada, 2019). Would-be homeowners are left with no choice but to rent, resulting in a rising demand in rental properties – and in the long term – increased rents. While this affects many segments of the population, young adults are especially vulnerable due to their limited incomes. For example, in Québec City and nearby Lévis, 84% of students in the area live in rented housing, and over half of this demographic spends over a third of their income on rent. For those students who rely on inconsistent or low levels of income, this proportion is predicted to rise to unsustainable levels (CTV News, 2022). With many young people scrambling to find affordable housing, they are more frequently placing themselves in situations where they may be living in precarious or unsafe conditions. Furthermore, there has been an increase in cases wherein landlords are employing unethical methods to raise the prices of their residential properties (Conseil jeunesse de Montréal, 2021). In these circumstances, we begin to see how a lack of affordable housing is caused by these practices, and how these may be disproportionately affecting young renters.

THE CIRCUMVENTION OF TENANTS' RIGHTS

New housing developments are often aimed at wealthier demographic groups, carrying price tags that exceed what the average Québec youth can afford. However, newly-built residences are not the only reason young people are being priced out of their neighbourhoods. Tenants in pre-existing housing units, previously affordable, are subject to the threat of renoviction. Renoviction is an increasingly widespread phenomenon by which housing is emptied out by the landlord – often forcibly, renovated, and then leased out for a much higher price. In 2018, there were 48 reported instances of this in Montréal. Renovictions have more than tripled to 151 in 2021. According to the Tribunal administratif du logement (TAL), Québec's rental housing board, there has been an increase of 142% in contestations against a notice to “subdivide, substantially enlarge or change the allocation of a dwelling” between 2018–19 and 2019–20 (Thomas, 2021). The Regroupement des comités logement et associations de locataires du Québec (RCLALQ) adds that many renovictions occur without the intervention of the TAL, meaning this data only reflects a small proportion of the actual number. RCLALQ has also reported that a growing number of tenants in Québec have been subject to abusive rent increases (The McGill Daily, 2022). Every year, the TAL establishes a recommended percentage increase for rent in the province. However, it is legal for landlords to go beyond the recommended increases so long as tenants comply. While tenants are urged to reject these inflated increases, they are often intimidated into accepting these unfair terms. Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain (FRAPRU), a tenants' rights organisation, has observed that landlords will prey on renters through “abusive increases, expecting tenants to comply for fear of ... harassment or even eviction” (The McGill Daily, 2022). This presents a harsh housing landscape for young renters, who may be more susceptible to these abusive situations due to their lack of awareness regarding tenants' rights.

INTERSECTIONAL CHALLENGES: THE MANY FACTORS FUELING HOUSING BARRIERS

Québec youth may be subject to further housing difficulties as a result of certain intersecting identities. Young adults that identify as women, Indigenous, people of colour, living with a disability, recent immigrants, or as members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community often encounter more barriers in the housing market (Schwartz, 2021). According to a 2021 report from Table des groupes de femmes de Montréal (TGFM), women are more likely to experience “unsafe housing that threatens women's health and safety” due to “a lack of accessible housing which limits the autonomy of women who live with a disability... and harassment from landlords or neighbors” (TGFM, 2021). In the case of immigrant youth, cities are often the first landing point for recent arrivals to Québec. Benjamin Herrera, the president of the Conseil Jeunesse de Montréal (CjM), reports that “one of the subgroups of young people who have been disproportionately affected by the housing crisis are young immigrants or second-generation immigrants that are victims of systemic discrimination in the context of the housing market” (Obas, 2021). Many recent immigrants are young people – almost 20% of recent arrivals to the province are individuals aged 15–20 years old, according to a compilation of data from the 2011 and 2016 Censuses (ISQ, 2019). That same age demographic also makes up 82% of international students and 53.2% of the recipients of work visas under the International Mobility Program (Beausoleil, 2018). The housing circumstances of these young immigrants are often characterised

by their limited access to financial capital and their reduced resources, making it difficult for them to succeed in a housing crisis. This is coupled with the fact that recent arrivals may be even less well-versed in tenants' rights and responsibilities than their Canadian counterparts, making them vulnerable to abusive landlord situations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What can be done to give young adults access to safe and affordable housing? Tenant advocacy groups have been calling for a number of policy changes, such as:

- The establishment of a rent registry to increase transparency in rental history and curtail excessive increases (Conseil jeunesse de Montréal, 2021).
- In addition to the rent registry, municipalities have also been encouraged to publish a list of residences that have received numerous official complaints against landlords in the past. These measures would increase transparency concerning landlords with a history of abusive or negligent behaviours.
- Another significant hurdle that young households need assistance with to overcome is a lack of information. Municipal governments throughout the province should implement accessible information campaigns aimed at educating young renters about their rights and responsibilities. This would not only protect youth from precarious housing conditions, but also empower them to avoid contributing to these housing issues. Campaigns could involve encouraging renters to transfer their leases to stabilise rents, contesting unlawful increases, etc.

CONCLUSION

Attention must be paid to these issues affecting young renter households. If the housing struggles of today's youth are prolonged, it risks following them into later stages of adulthood and lowering future rates of home ownership, continuing a cycle that will negatively affect future generations of Québec youth. Along with the implementation of new accessible housing initiatives and policies, a change in attitude is essential in ameliorating the current situation. Housing is a human right, not a luxury commodity. Adopting elements of this view in policy work and tenant advocacy may pave the way to a more equitable housing landscape for Québec youth.

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