

AN UPHILL BATTLE: HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA AND QUEBEC AND ITS LIKELY IMPACT ON THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY OF QUEBEC

Homelessness and the housing crisis, two deeply interconnected social issues, are central concerns for contemporary Canadian policymakers. Housing affordability, defined by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Company as the ratio of average housing costs to after-tax income, continues to worsen.

In 2021, households buying average-priced homes in B.C. and Ontario spent 60 per cent of their income, and their counterparts in Quebec, 40 per cent of their income, with a national average of 4per cent. Structural conditions of low supply and cheap credit, coupled with high immigration, have exacerbated the crisis. To restore affordability, an additional 3.5 million affordable housing units are needed by 2030. Despite economic events like COVID-19 and rising interest rates, the housing bubble continues to grow. To tackle the crisis, the current Liberal government has launched initiatives like the Housing Accelerator Fund and removed the Goods and Services Tax (GST) on new rental constructions. However, increasing production costs and higher interest rates have compounded the difficulty of constructing new housing units. Policies have yet to make a significant impact on the crisis, rooted in cuts to social housing programs and a focus on building condos over affordable housing.

All this has had a detrimental effect on homelessness in Canada. In Canada, homelessness figures range from 150,000 to 300,000, and all regions are experiencing increased instances of homelessness. Recently in Quebec, the problem has exploded. As in the rest of Canada, affordability in places such as Gatineau-Ottawa and Montreal has plummeted. In 2018 a provincewide survey found that 5,789 people were visibly homeless. In 2022 the number jumped to 10,000, with nearly half of those in Montreal, according to the CBC. One citizen, Damien Wands, who has been living at the Old Brewery Mission for the past few months, said it was because he couldn't afford his rent in the city. This is a common story given the increased cost of housing.

While the provincial government announced \$20 million for homeless shelters, the CEOs of the Old Brewery Mission and Chez Doris both say it's nowhere near enough. Those suffering from housing insecurity are usually within the intersection of various social determinants, from race, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity to immigration status. These intersections follow system-wide patterns that reflect deep social contradictions which foster inequality. For example, in Quebec, 67 per cent of unhoused people were men, while 13 per cent identified as Indigenous (five times more than the general population), 16 per cent identified as LGBTQ, 11 per cent were immigrants. Fifteen per cent said the recent pandemic played a role.

Unfortunately for the official language minority community of Quebec, demographic and linguistic statistics for those facing homelessness are virtually non-existent. One recent report by Chez Doris, a charitable organization that supports vulnerable and homeless women in Montreal, sheds some light on the linguistic disparities surrounding experiences of precarity for English Quebec. For instance, of the 415 clients who accessed services but were still housed, 40 per cent were self-identified English speakers, compared with 49 per cent French speakers. Of the 854 clients who accessed services and were unhoused, 54 per cent were English speakers, compared with 45 per cent French speakers.

These numbers support the assumption that members of the Official Language Minority Community (OLMC) face higher rates of housing insecurity than their majority language counterparts. This is supported by the well-established data that shows that members of Quebec English-language minority are

economically worse off. According to a recent report by the Provincial Employment Roundtable (PERT), English-speaking Quebecers experience worse economic conditions than their French-speaking counterparts. Specifically, the poverty rate for English speakers is 10 per cent, compared with 5.8 per cent for French speakers. The unemployment rate is 10.9 per cent compared with 6.9 per cent, and the median after-tax income for English speakers is \$2,800 lower, widening from a \$2,648 gap in 2016. The cause of these disparities is often linguistic barriers to labour market integration.

Since poverty and homelessness are linked, it's not surprising that English speakers fare worse in both metrics, although this is very limited data. The housing crisis, and the homelessness it engenders, will not be going away any time soon. This requires close attention to ongoing developments since the effects of these crises on the OLMC community of Quebec will exacerbate the pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities between French and English speakers.