

Staffing the Crisis

The Capacity of Eleven Municipal
Housing Departments Across Canada

Stefan Hodges



ISBN 978-1-77125-535-6

This report is available free of charge from the CCPA website at www.policyalternatives.ca. Printed copies may be ordered through the Manitoba Office for a \$10 fee.

Help us continue to offer our publications free online.

We make most of our publications available free on our website. Making a donation or taking out a membership will help us continue to provide people with access to our ideas and research free of charge. You can make a donation or become a supporter on-line at www.policyalternatives.ca. Or you can contact the Manitoba office at 204-927-3200 for more information. Suggested donation for this publication: \$10 or what you can afford.

The opinions and recommendations in this report, and any errors, are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publishers or funders of this report.



CCPA

CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
MANITOBA OFFICE

Unit 301-583 Ellice Ave., Winnipeg, MB R3B 1Z7
tel 204-927-3200

email ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stefan Hodges is a graduate student in the department of Geography, Planning and the Environment at Concordia University. He is a settler to Turtle Island, born in Winnipeg (Treaty One) but also living for some time in both Tallahassee and Montreal (Tio'tia:ke). His research is concerned with affordable rental housing and its intersecting crises, and he has worked as a housing coordinator and a tenant organizer in Winnipeg's West Broadway neighbourhood.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank the housing staff who lent their valuable time to this study. Additionally, he would like to thank Christina Maes Nino for her thoughtful mentorship, the reviewer for his knowledge and contributions, the Right to Housing Coalition for their support and their patience, and the West Broadway Tenants Committee and others who continue to protect the housing conditions of fellow renters. Finally, the author would like to acknowledge the graciousness of the Treaty One First Nations (Cree, Oji-Cree, Anishinaabeg) the Dene and Dakota Peoples, and the Métis Nation for their conditional permission to be a tenant in Winnipeg.



Right
to Housing



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Executive Summary

AFTER THE CLOSE of a five-year housing policy implementation plan, Winnipeg has yet to have a policy or program that supports the creation of affordable rental housing. In the wake of the City of Winnipeg's Housing Needs Assessment Report and the recent turn-over of the housing department's single staff person, there may be a new opportunity to craft a suite of housing programs that are attentive to the needs of Winnipeg's renting population. However, a question remains: what is the adequate staffing level for the Winnipeg housing department to develop and administer new tools to create affordable housing?

This research turned to ten other Canadian cities to ask how municipal housing departments supported the creation of affordable rental housing, and how much staff capacity was dedicated to the effort. It was surprising to find that every surveyed city (except Winnipeg) had an affordable housing strategy, and that planning documents consistently cited the creation of affordable rental housing as both a key priority and an area where the municipality could play a role. It was equally surprising, and perhaps paradoxical, that nearly half of the surveyed dedicated only one full-time staff towards the creation of affordable rental housing.

While there were similar programs across the board, each city had its own unique suite of programs and policies (found in the appendix) which were constantly shaped and remade to fit changing housing needs and development markets. While housing staff was charged with developing, adjusting, and administering programs and policies, it was clear that

adequate staffing was a necessary component, and indeed a challenge, in maintaining effective housing interventions. The research yielded several findings including the following:

- **Social Mixing.** Rather than building entirely affordable new developments, Canadian cities tend to support developments that include a percentage of affordable units alongside a larger number of higher-rent units. There are financial and moral reasons why municipal housing policy aims for a ‘social mix’ covered in this report, but critics have cautioned that this form of development can spur greater problems to existing residents and rent structures in surrounding areas, especially when used in low-income neighbourhoods.
- **Capital Incentives.** Given that cities have limited revenue sources compared to senior governments, it was surprising to find that capital incentives were nearly ubiquitous in the survey, with only Calgary and Surrey opting not to offer capital contributions towards development.
- **Exchange of Municipal Land.** This was the second most popular intervention that housing departments used to leverage the creation of affordable units. Some cities had strategies to ensure that they did not exhaust their supply. Some cities offered the use, but not sale of city-owned land. Others developed policies to capture land in new developments or to purchase and ‘bank’ land. Montréal had recently implemented a right of redemption to gain first right of refusal on properties that could be used to build affordable housing.
- **Staff labour and fast-tracking.** One of the most important and underacknowledged contributions that cities offered was the labour of their housing staff. Regular program delivery requires the time and expertise of staff, but many departments found that they could contribute by improving the speed and reliability of the development process. Calgary, Montreal, Vancouver, Saskatoon, and Surrey all offered programs that explicitly aim to speed up the development process.
- **Staff capacity.** Every single-staffed department other than Saskatoon faced difficulty ensuring that developers accessed programs for affordable housing. Currently, Winnipeg was nearly equal with Surrey as having the lowest staff capacity relative to its population. The report

makes a case for raising the number of full-time equivalent staff to two, at the very least, to ensure consistency during moments of turn over. The median staff size relative to population was approximately one staff per 100,000 residents, which was roughly embodied by both Regina and Calgary. If Winnipeg should seek to meet this modest standard, it would need to dedicate seven full-time equivalent staff to the creation of affordable rental housing.

Introduction

Assessing Housing Need in Winnipeg

THE YEAR 2019 marked the end of the City of Winnipeg’s five-year Housing Policy Implementation Plan. A central priority of the plan was to create policies and programs that could “encourage the development or retention of more affordable housing” (City of Winnipeg, 2014, p.3) in well-serviced areas of the city. However, at the end of a five-year window, no programs or policies have been created other than a pilot project in the William Whyte neighbourhood which offered city land to non-profit housing providers at a discount. By the end of the year, the pilot program had ended, leaving Winnipeg with no single affordable housing policy or program. Instead, the City reached into its Housing Rehabilitation and Investment Reserve to allocate funds to projects on a case-by-case basis; and an ad-hoc attempt to leverage new funds available through Canada’s National Housing Strategy.

For several years, the Right to Housing Coalition’s Municipal Working Group pushed the City to answer the need for affordable housing. As Winnipeg saw a loss of low-rent units in both the public housing sector and private rental market and rents increased faster than incomes, the need had only grown more desperate in the last decade (Brandon, 2015). Housing affordability concerns were felt across the income spectrum, but low-income renters disproportionately saw their choices disappear due to a steep decline in the availability of rooming houses (Kaufman & Distasio, 2014) and the sale of nearly a hundred Manitoba Housing properties over three years (Grabish,

2019). One year after the provincial government sold a 373-unit downtown high-rise to the private developer Edison Properties (Grabish, 2018), the waitlist for public housing had increased to 8,449 applicants. This marked a 23 per cent jump in ten months.

The City of Winnipeg commissioned a Housing Needs Assessment in the twilight of its Housing Policy Implementation Plan, analyzing 2016 Census data to determine the geography and demographics of housing affordability. The Needs Assessment would take an important empirical look at housing affordability problems across Winnipeg. However, throughout the study, other policy development was stalled in anticipation that the Needs Assessment would offer suggestions for new programs.¹ When the City of Winnipeg was asked to answer for its lack of action throughout the term of its Housing Policy Implementation Plan, councilors expressed a dissatisfaction with the Housing Policy Department, whose recently retired single staff-member had not delivered new programs or policies to support the development of affordable housing. When the City sought to fill the vacant position, Right to Housing's question turned towards asking: how could a single staff person, already charged with a full-time administrative job, also effectively create new housing programs and policies?

This research extended our scope towards a dozen Canadian cities to scan the capacity of municipal housing departments across seven provinces. Specifically, the study asked how municipalities supported the creation of affordable housing, and how many staff were dedicated to this role. It found that Canadian cities had taken on significant roles to support the development of affordable rental housing, but that much of the work was shouldered by small departments. In cities with populations around 500,000 or less, single-staffed departments were common.² Similar planning tools were used, but their particularities varied significantly from city to city, and they were constantly reshaped to remain relevant to locational housing needs and development environments. It became clear that planning tools are not disembodied or abstract concepts. The tools and strategies used to create affordable housing were actively shaped and implemented by the staff bodies that used them. In this vein, staff labour itself was an important contribution to the development process and has been largely disregarded in past studies on municipal housing policy. Two important commonalities were found across Canadian cities: Each municipality acknowledged that it played a role in supporting the creation of affordable housing, and that cities defined 'affordability' near the median rate of current market values. While there is consensus that cities indeed have a role in supporting af-

fordable housing, it is important to consider whom the current affordability criteria serves.

This is a crucial point in time where provincial governments concerned with cutting back social services have increasingly left municipalities to manage the impacts of unaddressed housing needs, and when the roll-out of a National Housing Strategy crystallized the role of social mixing and multi-stakeholder investment in new affordable housing development. At the time of writing this report, Canada was entering its second week of shutdown as the virus COVID-19 spread across all provinces. The pandemic has tragically exposed the dangers of neoliberal governance where states have shrunk their capacity to care for its citizens to a bare minimum. However, state intervention in the opening weeks of the pandemic proved that the state never disappeared under neoliberalism, but “what withered was the state’s legitimacy to act as the Keynesian state” (Gilmore, 2007, p.83). The current crisis will highlight both economic and public health concerns of access to safe and affordable housing, as it will expose the state’s ongoing capacity to help. Perhaps this report will contribute to some consideration into the state’s ability to address the health and housing of its citizens.

Methods

WITH THE RECENT turnover of Winnipeg’s single housing staff-person and the finalization of the Housing Needs Assessment report, Winnipeg may be in a position to develop a set of affordable housing programs. In order to place the city in a greater context, ten other Canadian cities were selected for surveys that asked: What targets did the city have for the creation of affordable rental units, how many full-time equivalent staff members were tasked with achieving these targets, and what planning tools did they have at their disposal?

In 2016, Winnipeg had a population of 705,224. The cities selected for this research were intended to represent a range of mid to large sized cities dispersed across Canadian provinces. Sudbury was added because of its relative isolation from other cities, which would provide an Ontario-based example outside of the industrial heartland of Southern Ontario.³ Some cities in larger Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) were nevertheless included, because the planning tools were developed at the level of the local municipality. For instance, Surrey and Vancouver both fall under the larger Metro Vancouver area. While there exists an affordable housing strategy for the entire region of 21 municipalities and one First Nation, the regional strategy is only meant to “provide leadership on regional housing needs”⁴ and to coordinate planning goals for the metropolitan area. Housing departments in Vancouver and Surrey are charged with developing and administering their own programs and policies to meet their local needs. Likewise, the capacity of Montréal’s housing department is directed to its own municipality. None of the programs or policies overlap with other Cities in the region.

After reviewing planning documents in each city,⁵ the researcher created a short questionnaire that attempted to group the various initiatives into a comparative table. The data included the following responses: the city's role in supporting the creation of affordable housing, targets for affordable housing, co-operative housing, and social housing, planning tools used, departments tasked, full-time equivalent staff, affordability defined by rent threshold, and the period under which units had to remain affordable. To avoid losing data due to the simplified comparative analysis, the researcher administered the survey over the phone in January and February 2020, interviewing key informants in each city's housing departments. This allowed the respondent and the researcher to clarify any questions and to ensure consistency in the responses. For instance, several of the surveyed cities (e.g. Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg, Vancouver) have regional housing authorities that provide subsidized housing funded by foundations and senior levels of government. It was important to 'weed-out' such housing authorities to ensure that the scope was limited to municipal departments and their planning tools for new affordable *rental* housing. The combination of documentary evidence with key informant interviews allowed the study to be grounded in a specific point-in-time across Canadian cities.⁶ At times, during follow-up correspondence with the interviewees, additional information was given as new policies and programs were being developed.

A graphic designer was commissioned to create visual representations of the most crucial quantitative results: staff capacity. This would allow for greater legibility of the results and would help the information to be translated more easily to the public and to decision-makers. The writing of this report is intended to build-in more qualitative data, and to situate the research within a recent historical trajectory of the provision of affordable housing in Canada.

Findings

Tools and Capacity

IT WAS UNEXPECTED to find that every city included in the survey already had an affordable housing strategy, and in nearly every case, planning documents cited affordable housing as a top priority for the City. However, the size of each municipality’s housing department, coupled with the tools

FIGURE 1 Targets and Staffing

City	Targets	Population (2016)	City staff dedicated to new affordable rental housing (FTE)	Ratio per 100k residents	% Rental households (in the municipality)
Vancouver	2,000	631,486	50	7.92	36.3
Edmonton	625	932,546	20	2.14	30.4
Hamilton	300	546,917	9	1.65	29.6
Montréal	600	1,704,694	24	1.41	44.3
Calgary	n/a	1,239,220	14	1.13	27.0
Regina	150	215,106	2	0.93	30.1
Saskatoon	60	246,376	1.2	0.49	30.8
Sudbury	n/a	161,531	0.75	0.45	35.9
Halifax	200	403,131	1.5	0.37	39.9
Winnipeg	n/a	705,224	1.1	0.16	32.7
Surrey	n/a	517,887	0.75	0.15	28.8

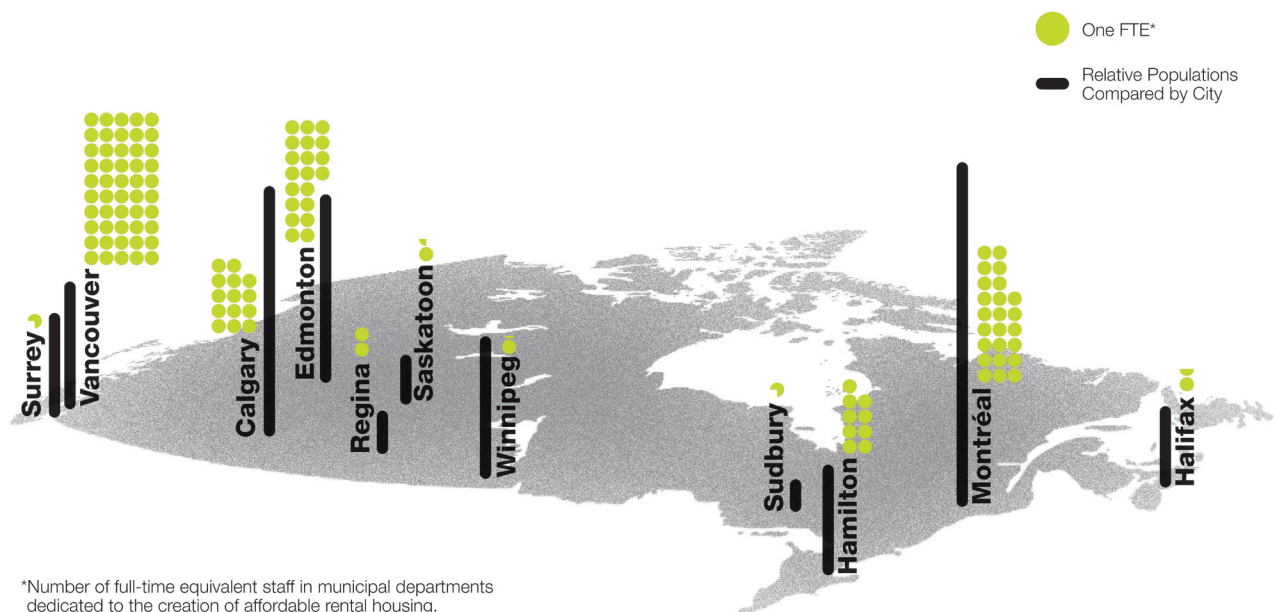
Source: Statistics Canada (population and rental households)

planners used to leverage unit-creation, provided greater detail in to how these priorities were actually carried out. The research intended to use yearly targets for unit creation to compare the level of importance that each City dedicated towards their interventions. However, this measurement was found to be limited since many cities opted not to have targets or spread their goals for unit creation over longer multi-year plans. Targets can offer hints of an administration’s goals for unit creation, but should not be taken as reliable comparisons across the board. The following section will discuss the intersections between staff bodies, goals for unit-creation, and the tools used by planners to achieve these goals.

Staff: Numbers

It was not uncommon for municipal housing departments to dedicate one person towards the development of affordable rental housing. In fact, 5 of the 11 surveyed cities had fewer than two full-time-equivalent (FTE) staff working towards the development of affordable rental housing. In Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and Halifax, a single housing staff-person required some administrative support from another planner or intern in order to tackle their workload. In both Surrey and Sudbury, only one staff person was

FIGURE 2 Staff Bodies

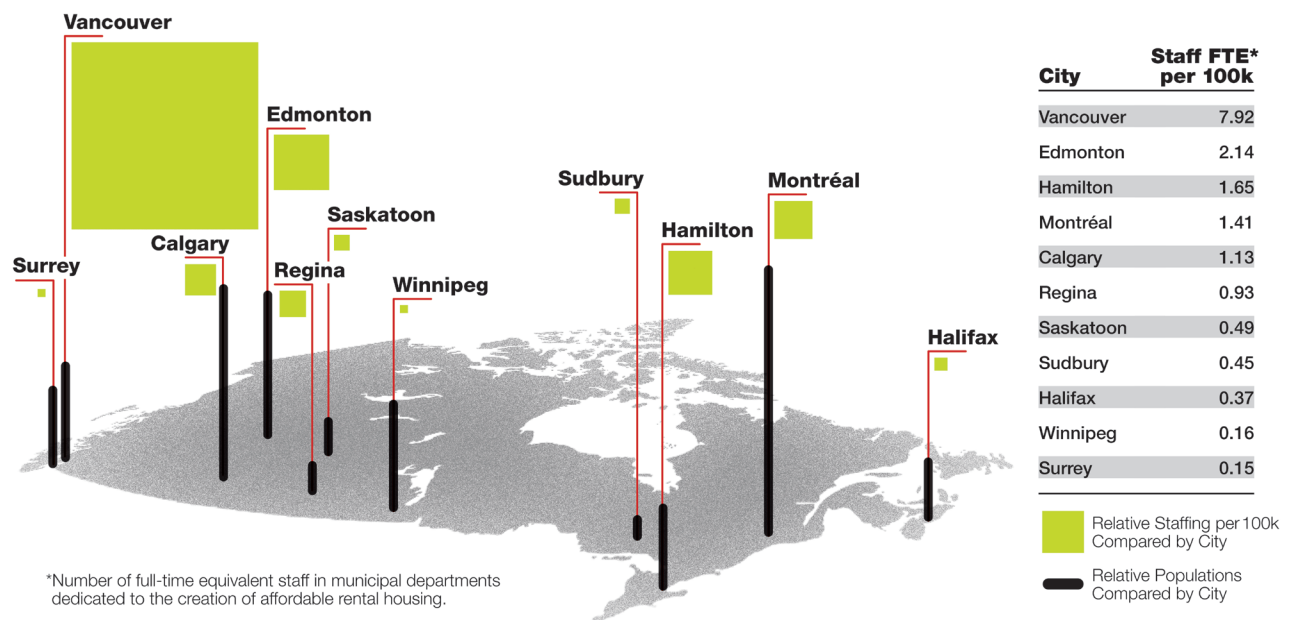


responsible for encouraging affordable rental housing development, and these employees dedicated about three quarters of their time towards the effort. Apart from Regina, all Cities that had more than a single staff person working towards affordable housing development had a large population base within the municipality itself (Calgary, Edmonton and Montréal), or were part of a large urban region (Vancouver, Hamilton). These housing departments ranged from 9 dedicated FTEs in Hamilton to approximately 50 in Vancouver.

Staff: Relative Capacity and Targets

To better compare the housing departments in relation to the size of each city, a basic ratio was calculated to understand how many dedicated FTEs existed for each 100,000 residents.⁷ As expected, Vancouver remained an outlier with nearly 8 FTEs per 100,000 residents, but the ratio also distinguished Surrey and Winnipeg as exceptions on the bottom-end. In Surrey, 29 per cent of households are renters, only three points below the national average of 32.2 per cent, and housing affordability was reported to be a concern for 96 per cent of renters (Surrey, 2018, p.14). However, the City’s response has been less interventionist than the other cases. The

FIGURE 3 Staff Relative to Population



single staff person primarily assisted the development approval process by working directly with proponents to expedite affordable projects, and by offering instructional workshops. Although Surrey has an affordable housing strategy, it has no programs currently in place to stimulate more development. Instead, it is building an affordable housing reserve by charging fees on any development that does not include rental units. This aims to encourage purpose-built rental through fee-exemptions (though with no specific affordability criteria), while simultaneously putting money aside for future programs.

Halifax, which has a larger team of dedicated FTE in both real and relative numbers, should offer a warning to Winnipeg's housing department, as it has followed a strikingly similar trajectory. Five years ago, the City of Halifax commissioned its own Housing Needs Assessment. The report found that housing needs were being sufficiently met for most rental and ownership households, but that 20 per cent of all households needed non-market units, and the need for affordable rental options was rising (SHS Consulting, 2015). Despite implementing a range of tools, to leverage development, Halifax's staff person admitted to feeling stretched. The respondent explained that meeting the housing targets has taken longer than originally anticipated. As such there had been a "refocus on priorities." The development environment had changed considerably and previous targets became lofty goals for the single staffed department.

Other than Saskatoon, the lower-staffed cases generally indicated a more difficult time ensuring developer buy-in, and usually did not have targets for unit-creation. In Saskatoon, a well-established capital grant program is offered on a point-based system⁸ that is very similar to the National Housing Strategy's own Co-Investment fund. Saskatoon's program pre-dates the Co-Investment Fund, but the fact that it can be streamlined to match federal contributions may have helped to simplify the work of the housing staff. Nevertheless, their targets are modest relative to other cities, and Saskatoon's programs have been active since the City's first *Housing Business Plan* was developed in 2008. At the end of their first plan, Saskatoon had surpassed their targets (City of Saskatoon, 2013, p.1).

Cities with housing departments containing more than one staff had a wide range of targets for unit-creation, other than Calgary which did not use targets. The targets obtained from Montréal's housing department are not concrete public commitments within a housing strategy, but rather 'yearly average administrative targets' which served as internal guidelines for meeting broader housing targets.⁹ Vancouver's ambitious targets and relatively

large staff body were deployed in response to the city’s severe “problem of affordability [which] has spilled over to residents with higher income levels” (Metro Vancouver, 2016, p.4). Even the middle-class have been squeezed by the greater financialization of Vancouver’s housing market. Accordingly, the housing staff employ a wide range of interventions that deal directly with the city’s struggle to maintain affordability, which will be discussed in the tools section below.

Staff in Hamilton reported a difficulty (similar to Halifax) in ensuring developer buy-in from year to year, shaped especially by a changing development environment. However, rather than scrapping their targets for unit creation, they adjusted programs and delivery to focus on a more incremental approach to achieving targets. While it was more difficult to secure affordable units in large developments, they had noticed success in leveraging the development of secondary suites as affordable units, and planners shifted their attention towards achieving their targets through these units.

Staff: Regina as a Modest Standard

At the middle of all these data sets sits Regina, which reports to have regular success with its affordable housing program. The City’s two housing staff do not follow targets, but attempt to allocate all of their funds through a capital incentive program. This year, their program is fully-subscribed, and should yield over 150 new affordable rental units. The department includes one staff person who is relatively new, and another who carries more institutional memory. Like their provincial sister-city, Regina’s Housing Incentives Policy is well-established and has been adjusted in recent years to focus primarily on affordable rentals.

The fact that Regina has had such success with two FTE at may signal a significant lesson for other mid-sized cities. Having two staff can ensure that institutional memory remains during a turnover, permitting programs to continue seamlessly between staff transitions. Winnipeg’s Housing Policy Coordinator, who has recently moved into the position after working extensively as a planner with the City in other areas, reported an awkward transition as the position had remained vacant for several months. This left a gap in the role where the new staff member’s orientation went without the benefit of mentorship between himself and the outgoing staff. Maintaining teams of more than one staff could have significant impacts for delivery of housing programs in mid-sized cities. For Winnipeg, the bump from 1.1 to 2

FTE would require little investment; it would still only represent 0.28 staff per 100,000 residents and it would remain at the bottom of these datasets. If the City chose instead to bolster its housing department to a size relative to Regina's, it would need to employ an additional 6.5 staff dedicated to the development of affordable rental housing.

Planning Tools: New Roles for Creating Affordable Housing

Only recently, Canadian cities were found to rely largely on ad-hoc, and uncoordinated agreements to secure affordable housing in new developments (Moore, 2013), but this study has uncovered a new moment for municipal housing programs. Nearly every surveyed city implemented formal programs to create affordable rental units. Since the Liberal Federal Government divested from social housing construction in 1993, city councils have struggled over the question of adopting new roles to manage housing need. By 2020, Canadian cities had streamlined their approaches, offering formal programs that trade concrete incentives for affordable units. Once the Federal Liberal Government returned its interest in supporting affordable rental housing construction through the 2017 National Housing Strategy, the new state policy took municipal contributions as a given. The main source of construction financing offered through the National Housing Strategy's Co-Investment fund required contributions from other levels of government.

With new authority granted from the province of Québec in 2017, Montréal is developing a by-law that will require the inclusion of affordable and social housing units in large developments. The mandated inclusion of affordable units is a bold regulatory power that has not been seen in other Canadian cities.¹⁰ In most provinces, Cities have not been granted the legislative power to mandate the inclusion of affordable units, so they have instead found ways of encouraging or assisting the development of affordable housing by offering incentives. This study found that the most common incentives were capital grants, land allocation, and fast-tracking. A full list of contributions and regulatory tools can be found in the appendix. The following sections will place the surveyed cities in conversation and will explain how planning tools relate to human labour. It was found that planning tools are not disembodied, and their successes hinge on the staff bodies that put them to use.

Planning Tools: Municipal Contributions of Capital and Land

All cities except Calgary and Surrey had some sort of capital grant program offered,¹¹ where the City allocates project-funding to a housing development that would include affordable units. Since cities do not have the same access to spending as more senior levels of government, municipal governments can be hesitant to intervene through cash-transfers. Despite these limitations, it was surprising to see that capital grants were almost ubiquitous across the board. Under the recent National Housing Strategy, proponents must secure a financial contribution from another level of government in order to unlock federal financing through the Co-Investment Fund. In cases where there are not ready-formed provincial programs that offer incentives for the development of affordable housing, or where austere governments are less likely to open their purses, Cities are key partners for activating access to federal funds.

In Regina, grants were offered through the City's Housing Incentives Program as standardized rates per-door: \$20,000 per affordable unit for a bachelor or one-bedroom apartment, or \$25,000 for two-bedroom and three-bedroom apartments. In Edmonton, the Affordable Housing Investment Program contributed 25 per cent of a project's total cost but stipulated that 30 per cent of the units must be below the affordable rate. In Vancouver and Saskatoon, proponents would be awarded grants based on the greater contribution of the project: deeper affordability meant more funding. While most Cities offered funding to private and non-profit developers, Vancouver's capital grants were only offered to non-profits. In Hamilton and Montréal, housing departments allocated funding from senior levels of government, acting as ground-level mediators for development funding.¹² In fact, ground-level project coordination is one of most important (and time-consuming) roles that housing staff take on. This will be expanded upon in the next section.

The second most common contribution that cities offered was the exchange of land.¹³ Cities, even more than senior levels of government, have large collections of unused properties, which makes land-allocation a common municipal tool for stimulating development. However, the decision to lease or sell city land is divergent across the country. Halifax and Saskatoon offered the sale of city-owned land at below-market rates, as did Montréal and Calgary, however these latter two cases only offered to sell to non-profit housing providers. Without a complimentary purchasing program, City-owned properties are finite resource, which explains why Vancouver

and Hamilton opted for the use, but not sale, of city-owned land. In order to replenish its stocks, Montréal frequently purchases land from private owners, to then re-sells at a discounted rate to non-profits. In order to meet its ambitious targets for affordable units, Montréal has even implemented a new policy of that allows them a first right of refusal to purchase private properties for the purpose of building affordable housing. In both Montréal and Edmonton, inclusionary policies allow the Cities to capture housing units in new developments, which then become City property.

After capital grants and land-allocation, the other common practice was to waive development and planning fees.¹⁴ This was a simple way for Cities to remove some of the cost-burden associated to a development, and can also function as a financial contribution, which leverages federal financing through the Co-Investment Fund.

Planning Tools: Staff Labour and Fast-tracking

One of the most important (and under-acknowledged) contributions that municipal housing departments offer is their own labour as assistance throughout the development process. Time spent in the development process is expensive if it has to be purchased. As proponents confront unexpected delays, costs go up, and by extension — so do rents. Hyde (2018) found that developers in Toronto and Vancouver usually expected a return of 20 per cent on their investments, but that they also made distinctions between ‘hard-earned’ projects that took more time, and ‘easy-money’ projects that were expedient and reliable. In almost every city, the survey respondents indicated that a large part of their time is spent guiding proponents through the development process and connecting projects with other sources of funding. Although Vancouver’s SHORT program offered capital funding, the major selling point was its goal “to grant permit approvals in half the usual time.”¹⁵ In Montréal, all proponents are obliged to work with ‘Technical Resource Groups’ in order to streamline projects to meet the criteria of multiple assistance programs, to oversee the development process, and to establish ties with local organizations (LaFerrière, 2019). To speed up the delivery of subsidized housing, the City of Montréal even implemented a ‘NIMBY-override’ policy that makes it impossible for public engagement processes to block social housing developments.

In Calgary, Halifax, Surrey, Sudbury, Hamilton, Vancouver, Saskatoon, and Hamilton, respondents all indicated that some part of their role involved

educating proponents around the development approval process or expediting proposals that include affordable housing. Housing staff in Surrey offered workshops on development, Calgary paired proponents with ‘development specialists’ who could expedite proposals, and Hamilton admitted that a lot of their work simply meant ‘mentoring’ proponents. Even departments that did not have the staff bodies to provide such specialized assistance found ways to fast-track affordable housing. In Saskatoon, the housing staff-person simply applied a yellow sticker to any proposal that included affordable housing, giving it priority attention at each stage of the approval. A similar approach prioritizing affordable housing in City approval processes should be adopted in Winnipeg.

In the cases where austere governments are reluctant to free up resources for programs, staff capacity and fast tracking represents almost no-cost to Cities and can lead to significant benefits for proponents. Fast-tracking tools point to a more crucial resource: they rely on staff bodies for rapid and reliable processing speeds. Although municipal housing departments represent an important point of action where cities can intervene with different tools to support the development of affordable housing, they are also a bottleneck. Across Canada, development approvals are done on a case-by-case basis which factors a significant amount of risk and timeliness into the approval process. Housing staff can contribute by enhancing the predictability and the speed of the approval process and can connect developers with incentives that offset the cost of affordable units or achieve deeper levels of affordability. Nevertheless, the flow of proposals can only be managed according to the number of staff on hand. Not only does short-staffing result in burn-out and turnover, it can mean missed opportunities to create affordable housing.

Conclusion

Towards Careful Planning for Affordable Housing

THIS RESEARCH HAS attempted to understand, and to some extent, to quantify the embodied relationship between an affordable housing strategy, planning tools, and the staff who use and adjust these tools to attend to housing needs. For decades, senior levels of government across Canada have divested from their responsibilities as social service providers, leaving public health and housing sectors running at and above capacity. In Manitoba, this was made particularly visible through the sale of social housing units while waitlists accelerated. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the tragic social cost of redlining health and housing sectors, but the current crisis only exposes and exacerbates on-going harms created by austerity régimes.

The housing crises of the 2010s were informed by global phenomena such as economic restructuring in the wake of deindustrialization (Skarburskis, 2004) and the growing financialization of housing (August and Walks, 2018). They were made specific by local factors such as vacancy rates, supplies of affordable housing, and intersections with health crises (Fast & Cunningham, 2018). In the last decade, Cities took on new responsibilities to manage the need for affordable housing, but no city used the same strategy. Rather, these strategies were created, and recreated to fit their own local contexts. As housing needs and development environments changed rapidly, housing departments adjusted their approaches in order to better support the creation of affordable units. Even while the research was conducted, several

departments were in the process of creating new policies or had just recently adjusted their strategies according to changing contexts. Montréal had just implemented its right of first refusal on the sale of private properties and was in the midst of passing a remade and far more ambitious inclusionary zoning policy. The housing staff-person in Sudbury had created a proposal for a land-banking program that would allow the city to acquire and exchange land to leverage affordable housing. Hamilton had shifted towards leveraging smaller, more incremental development in order to meet its targets, and Vancouver had passed an empty-home tax that would target capital from hoarded investment condos and Airbnbs, and redistribute funds back into its own affordable housing incentives.

The devolvement of housing responsibilities has left municipal housing departments in impossible and paradoxical positions. As many have remarked (e.g. Gilmore & Gilmore, 2008; Peck & Tickell, 2002), the neoliberal shift has relied on the private market to solve social problems, such as housing affordability, that are also created by capitalism. With capitalism operating as both the call and answer of social havoc, we have likely entered what Eric Cazdyn (2012) calls ‘a chronic time of crisis.’ For low-income tenants, the ever-shifting grounds of private investment are felt viscerally through their own health and housing security (Fields, 2017). As cities become increasingly dominated by real estate and finance sectors (Stein, 2019), municipal housing departments have little power to steer the ship towards healthier futures for their housing stocks. Despite this, staff in municipal housing departments continued to innovate programs and policies in attempts to ensure greater developer buy-in and to yield more affordable units.

A major way that cities have sought to leverage affordable housing through the private market was through ‘social-mixing’ initiatives, that would include a percentage of affordable units alongside luxury or market-rate units. Critical literature on social mixing has been far from supportive, explaining that it can serve to push through unwanted development by undermining grassroots criticism (August, 2016) and that it usually makes surrounding properties and rents less affordable (Stein, 2019). This leads us to the ever-important question: affordability for whom? With affordability criteria hovering around median market rates (see appendix), and the risk of mixed-income projects spurring gentrification, will municipal interventions really serve low-income renters? Municipal housing departments must tread carefully to avoid intervening in ways that could meet targets for creation, but nevertheless result in net-losses of affordable housing. For any hope that this work could be done with care and attention to local needs and factors,

Cities must adequately staff their housing departments. The scholarship has shown that social mixing need not result in gentrification, and considerate programming can avoid harmful spillovers.

Perhaps the most unexpected – and seemingly contradictory – finding was that every city surveyed (other than Winnipeg) had an affordable housing strategy, but nearly half of the cities had only one full-time staff dedicated towards supporting the development of affordable housing. Is the development of affordable housing truly a priority if planning departments only have one dedicated staff-person? Cities usually offered capital or land to leverage the inclusion of affordable units and to unlock federal funding, but one of their most impactful contributions was supporting proponents through the approval and development process. Having a project approved is an expensive and uncertain time for developers, where “negotiations and compromise are common aspects of the process” (Tsenkova & Witwer, 2011, p.72). By streamlining and expediting proposals, housing departments can help proponents cut costs and access other funding streams, thereby opening up possibilities for greater levels of affordability and meeting their targets more quickly. Housing departments play an important role in the processing applications, but without capacity they become a bottleneck, slowing the flow and the feasibility of affordable projects.

Therefore, cities must recognize that targets for unit-creation hinge on the staffing capacity of their own departments. A wide range of planning tools will not sufficiently leverage units without an adequate staff body to comfortably wield those tools. This should be taken as optimistic news to ‘entrepreneurial’ governments, for staff salaries are much less expensive than capital incentives for unit-creation and appear to have greater impact. With little additional investment, single-staffed housing departments could be raised to two-person staff, ensuring greater consistency in moments of turnover and a retention of institutional knowledge. A more balanced standard could be to raise housing departments towards a ratio of one staff person per 100,000 residents, which was roughly the median rate of cities surveyed for this research. In Winnipeg, this would mean dedicating seven full-time staff towards the development of affordable rental housing.

Further, it has been acknowledged that new affordable unit creation can lead towards a net loss of older affordable units in surrounding areas. This research had the limited scope of asking what cities were doing to create new affordable units, but it is important to understand how cities have attempted to prevent the loss of affordable units. In studying municipal interventions towards a net gain of affordable housing, we might find that housing depart-

ments are better equipped to slow the loss of affordable housing rather than spur new development. By focusing on targets for unit-creation, municipal interventions and progressive lobbying efforts have, perhaps unfortunately, taken for granted a growth-machine discourse that only fuels capitalist development. In what ways would our analysis change if instead we asked how Canadian cities have retained affordable housing?

Appendix

FIGURE 4 Municipal Tools and Criteria Creating of Affordable Rental Units

City	Tools Used	Affordability Criteria	Age-out (how long unit must remain affordable)
Calgary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discounted sale of city-owned land to non-profit housing providers. Expediting proposals with development specialist Development fee rebates and ideation grants 	90 per cent of median market rent	40 years
Edmonton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capital incentives (up to 25 per cent of the total capital cost) Mandatory turn-key (In qualifying developments, must offer to sell 5 per cent of units to the City at 85 per cent of market value, which are retained as affordable) Cash in-lieu option for above: 15 per cent of market value of those units Below-market sale of city land 	80 per cent of area median market rent (CMHC)	20 years
Halifax	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Land donation Capital incentives Tax exemptions for non-profit developers Density bonuses 	80 per cent of area median market rent (CMHC)	Dependant on provincial or federal agreement, must combine other source of funding.
Hamilton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capital incentives Planning and administrative fee rebates Use of city-owned land (case-by-case basis) 	80 per cent of area median market rent (CMHC)	Determined by request for proposals, generally 20–25 years
Montréal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capital incentives Land capture: City purchases land to be resold for social housing, captures land through inclusionary Strategy, and has first right of refusal on properties put up for sale Mandatory inclusion of affordable units qualifying developments Article 89.4: NIMBY override (for social housing) 	90 per cent of area median market rent	No means of monitoring inclusionary strategy. For incentive and innovation programs, 15–25 year conventions.
Regina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capital incentives (\$20,000 per door) Five-year tax exemption 	2019 SHIM provincial standard: Rooming House: \$555 1 BR: \$925 2 BR: \$1,125 3 BR: \$1,390	5 years

City	Tools Used	Affordability Criteria	Age-out (how long unit must remain affordable)
Saskatoon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Below-market sale of city land • Capital incentives (point-based system) • Tax abatement • Expediting proposals (yellow sticker) 	2019 SHIM provincial standard (same as above)	5 years
Sudbury	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Density bonuses and lowered parking requirements • Capital incentives • Development fee rebates • Land banking proposal (currently before council) 	Below median market rent	Consistent with federal or provincial funders, generally 20 years
Surrey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fast-tracking and assisting development process • Establishing an Affordable Housing Reserve by charging affordable housing contributions to non-rental developments 	No criteria (must be rental)	No criteria
Vancouver	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capital incentives to non-profit developers • Use (but not sale) of City-owned land • Fast-tracking development process • Density Bonuses • Fee exemptions • Empty Homes Tax recirculated into capital incentives for affordable housing 	80 per cent of area median market rent (CMHC)	60 years or life of building
Winnipeg	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land donation (case-by-case basis) • Capital incentives (case-by-case basis) • Planning fee exemptions (case-by-case basis) 	2019 Provincial thresholds: Bach: \$669 1 BR: \$964 2 BR: \$1,204 3 BR: \$1,267	No criteria

Works Cited

- August, M. (2016). “‘It’s all about power and you have none:’ The marginalization of tenant resistance to mixed-income housing redevelopment in Toronto, Canada.” *Cities: The International Journal of Urban Policy and Planning*, 57, 25–32.
- August, M., & Walks, A. (2018). “Gentrification, suburban decline, and the financialization of multi-family rental housing: The case of Toronto.” *Geoforum*, 89, 124–136.
- Brandon, J. (2015). “The More Things Change: Low-Income Housing in Winnipeg Today.” In J. Brandon & J. Silver (Eds.), *Poor Housing: A Silent Crisis* (pp. 27–46). Fernwood Publishing.
- Cazdyn, E. (2012). *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness*. Duke University Press.
- City of Saskatoon. (2013). *Housing Business Plan 2013 to 2022*. City of Saskatoon.
- City of Surrey. (2018). *Surrey Affordable Housing Strategy: A focus on rental housing*. City of Surrey.
- City of Winnipeg. (2014). *City of Winnipeg Housing Policy Implementation Plan*. City of Winnipeg.
- Fast, D., & Cunningham, D. (2018). “‘We Don’t Belong There’: New Geographies of Homelessness, Addiction, and Social Control in Vancouver’s Inner City.” *City and Society*, 30(2), 237–262.
- Fields, D. (2017). “Unwilling subjects of financialization.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 41(4), 588–603.
- Gilmore, R. (2007). *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. University of California Press.
- Gilmore, R. W., & Gilmore, C. (2007). “Restating the Obvious.” In M. Sorkin (Ed.), *Indefensible Space: The Architecture of the National Insecurity State* (pp. 141–61). New York: Routledge.
- Grabish, A. (2018, May 17). Manitoba Housing Sells downtown highrise that’s been vacant for 3 years. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/manitoba-housing-highrise-sold-winnipeg-1.4667151>
- Grabish, A. (2019, December 2). Province has sold off 94 Manitoba Housing properties since 2016, documents show. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/manitoba-housing-properties-sold-off-1.5381628>
- Hyde, Z. (2018). “Giving back to get ahead: Altruism as a developer strategy of accumulation through affordable housing policy in Toronto and Vancouver.” *Geoforum*.
- Kaufman, A., & Distasio, J. (2014). *Winnipeg’s Vanishing Rooming Houses: Change in the West Broadway and Spence Neighbourhoods*. Institute of Urban Studies In-Brief Series.
- LaFerrière, S. (2019). *Montréal: Building an Inclusive City*. Ville de Montréal Habitation. Report provided by author.
- Metro Vancouver. (2016). *Regional Affordable Housing Strategy: Services and solutions for a livable region*. Metro Vancouver.
- Moore, A. (2013). *Trading Density for Benefits: Toronto and Vancouver Compared*. Institute on Municipal Finance & Governance.
- Peck, J., & Tickell, A. (2002). “Neoliberalizing Space.” *Antipode*, 34(3), 380–404.
- SHS Consulting. (2015). *Halifax Housing Needs Assessment: Final Report*. SHS Consulting.
- Stein, S. (2019). *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State*. Verso.
- Tsenkova, S., & Witwer, M. (2011). “Bridging the Gap: Policy Instruments to Encourage the Provision of Affordable Rental Housing in Alberta.” *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, 20(1), supplement, 52–80.

Endnotes

- 1** The Institute of Urban Studies Comprehensive Housing Needs Assessment was released in 2020 <https://www.winnipeg.ca/ppd/Documents/CityPlanning/Housing/ComprehensiveHousingNeedsAssessmentReport/Comprehensive-Housing-Needs-Assessment.pdf>
- 2** Of the eleven cities surveyed, Saskatoon, Sudbury, Halifax, Winnipeg, and Surrey each had once staff working towards the creation of affordable housing. With a population of 705,224, Winnipeg was the largest city with a single-staffed housing department.
- 3** Toronto was ruled out as an outlier because its population was one million above the second largest city, Montréal. Ottawa was ruled out because of the capital's connection to federal governance and funding.
- 4** Metro Vancouver. (2016). "Regional Affordable Housing Strategy." p. 4.
- 5** This was relatively straightforward because each city already had an existing housing strategy. However, it was clear from the later interviews that the housing policies and programs had changed considerably in recent years, and some housing strategies were more dated than others.
- 6** Policies and programs were found to be in flux, and if the researcher had relied on planning documents alone, the data would have been scattered across timelines of publication and rough relevancy.
- 7** This was particularly important for Winnipeg's context. The city tends to see itself as an underdog, which can downplay the size of the city and give greater buy-in to the idea that Winnipeg cannot afford or offer the same services found in medium-to-large Canadian cities.
- 8** City of Saskatoon. 2013. "Housing Business Plan 2013–2022."
- 9** In recent years, Montréal has taken on new powers to manage provincial programs that develop social housing, and has committed to an ambitious goal of creating 12,000 social and affordable housing units between 2018 and 2021. This target includes provincially funded social and co-operative housing, and includes the preservation of units towards a net gain. The target of 600 included in figure 1 only applies to newly-created rental units that do not require a regular provincial subsidy, and is more comparative to the targets in other cities. The City of Montréal's total housing department exceeds 100 people, but this includes roles related to the development of social housing, inspections for building conditions, and loss-prevention through rehabilitation. The 24 staff included are directly associated to leveraging the development of non-subsidized affordable units.
- 10** Winnipeg was granted the legislative authority by the provincial government to mandate the inclusion of affordable units through Inclusionary Zoning, but this hasn't been implemented in any program. Edmonton's Developer Sponsored Affordable Housing provision is another example of an active Inclusionary Zoning (IZ) program. In developments that include more than 12 units, or where the proposed development exceeds regular zoning (maximum density or floor/area ratio) the City is able to purchase 5 per cent of the units at 85 per cent market value, or the developer may pay the City cash-in-lieu at a value of 15 per cent of those units. Mandatory IZ programs are coded orange in the appendix.
- 11** Coded green in the appendix.
- 12** In Montréal's case, the City does pay a significant proportion into AccèsLogis, a provincial fund to stimulate the development of affordable and social housing.
- 13** Coded blue in the appendix.
- 14** Coded yellow in the appendix.
- 15** Retrieved from <https://vancouver.ca/people-programs/social-housing-or-rental-tenure-program>



CCPA

CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
MANITOBA OFFICE