

Key findings:

- ◆ **Neighbourhoods with high proportions of residents living in rental housing have high rates of COVID-19.**
- ◆ **The rental housing market is under stress from many landlords using tactics to increase rents and/or evict tenants during the pandemic.**
- ◆ **People experiencing housing instability and homelessness have endured even more isolation and stress during the pandemic.**

Housing and health have always been closely linked. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, research has shown that physical health can be affected by the conditions of housing: units in disrepair (such as poor air quality and ventilation, mold, pests, or exposure to hazardous materials like asbestos and lead) can expose tenants to undue health risks. Overcrowded housing also increases risks to physical and mental health outcomes. Lack of housing has dire impacts on physical and mental health, with persons experiencing homelessness often having life expectancies of half the years of people who are properly housed.

COVID-19 has magnified these connections between housing and health.

Chart 1 shows that neighbourhoods with the highest rates of renters have had an average rate of 2,342 COVID-19 cases per 100,000, while neighbourhoods with the highest rates of owners have an average of only 1,528 COVID-19 cases per 100,000. Renters more often live on lower incomes, are racialized, have disabilities, amongst other social and physical determinants than their home-owning counterparts (Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario, [We Can't Wait: Preserving Affordable Rental Housing in Ontario](#)). This is another example of the "intensification of inequalities" that COVID-19 is wreaking, as described in bulletin no. 21 in this series.

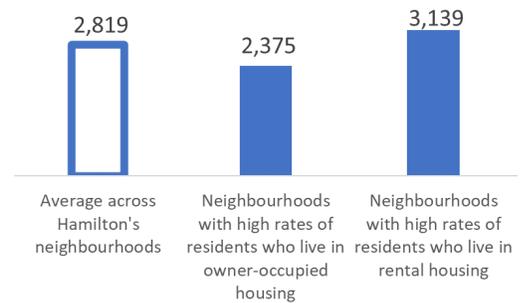
Rental housing is also often in multi-residential towers, which may increase the risk of infection via common spaces such as laundry rooms, elevators, mail rooms and lobbies, if precautions are not adhered to. Engineers studying COVID-19 have also [explained](#) that poor ventilation and air quality in some multi-residential towers may be exposing residents to a higher risk of infection. Public Health has recently declared outbreaks at [three rental housing buildings in downtown Hamilton](#), and many residents have pointed to poor building state of repair including elevators out of service that make it hard to maintain social distance which may be putting them at higher risk of infection. These buildings are all in the L8R postal code, which has [not been prioritized as a hotspot](#), so initially residents were not eligible for vaccinations if they didn't already meet the criteria for vaccination otherwise. After [advocacy](#) by [tenants](#), Public Health set aside [vaccination appointments during limited timeslots](#) for these tenants. An equity analysis that recognizes how tenants may be at higher risk due to their demographics, their occupations, and their housing would give a higher priority in the vaccination distribution strategy to these residents, both to help tenants individually, but also help reduce transmission in these buildings and further in the community.

RENTAL HOUSING MARKET

According to housing service providers in Hamilton, illegal evictions have risen since the pandemic. Due to the temporary closure of the Landlord Tenant Board, landlords were facing few to no repercussions for illegal actions, coupled with their own pandemic-related loss in income, landlords had greater incentive to evict tenants and raise rents. Home visits from support workers were also paused, meaning that youth and adults in need of such support to maintain stable housing are struggling, resulting in increased damages to housing and deteriorating relationships with landlords. Tenants in both social housing and private rental units faced, for long periods, a hold on maintenance and repairs except for emergency situations. Tenants have expressed concerns to service providers that the COVID-19 pandemic is being used as an excuse to delay maintenance so that housing providers can save money.

In October 2020, Ontario legislated a [rent freeze for 2021](#), which will help some tenants, however the eviction freeze for housing tenants was also lifted, while commercial tenants continue to be protected from evictions. Tenant advocacy

Chart 1. COVID-19 infection rates per 100,000 population in neighbourhoods with the highest rates of ownership and rental housing, City of Hamilton, cases up to April 19 2021. (City of Hamilton Public Health and 2016 Census data)



groups like the Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario have pointed to the pressing issue of closing gaping loopholes in the Residential Tenancies Act (RTA). A rent freeze exacerbates the major flaw in the RTA – unlike in Quebec, there are no Ontario regulations that limit rental increases between tenancies. Ontario’s landlords are essentially [incentivized](#) to use active or passive measures to get rid of long-term tenants to reap increased profits from new tenants because they can charge whatever rental fees they want for new tenants. In contrast, in Quebec new tenants are informed of the previous rent and can appeal if the increase is too high (SPRC’s 2018 report: [Out of Control: Ontario’s acute rental housing crisis – Lessons from Hamilton and Quebec City](#)).

Homelessness and COVID-19 and mental health

The connection between housing insecurity and mental health challenges is complex, interwoven, and exacerbated by the challenges of the pandemic.

Reports on youth housing/homelessness and COVID-19 show that for youth that are currently in housing, “the challenges of staying stably housed are made greater by an increased need for resources around mental health support and coping with social isolation” (A. Buchnea, M.-J. McKitterick, D. French (2020). [Summary Report: Youth Homelessness and COVID-19: How the youth serving sector is coping with the crisis](#), Toronto ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press and A Way Home Canada).

Many supports that would usually be available for youth in crisis, such as in-person programs and drop-ins, have had to adapt to pandemic restrictions. The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness report cited above found that “meeting basic needs, navigating the housing and income support systems, staying connected to education/training, and receiving mental health supports are ongoing priorities for youth that are made all the more vital and difficult during this national state of emergency in Canada.”

The pandemic has had a negative impact on the mental health of young people experiencing homelessness. A preliminary report, [Youth Homelessness: Mental Health and Substance Use During COVID-19](#) published by A Way Home Canada, shows that service providers believe that over 90% of the youth they serve are experiencing increased isolation, loneliness, and boredom, 85% note increased anxiety, 75% increased depression, and 36% increased suicidal ideation. But the ability to access supports is significantly limited.

Overall, housing instability and unaffordable homes have negative impacts on mental health. A [UK survey](#) found that 33% of people feel that housing costs are causing stress and depression in their family, and a further 25% say that housing costs are causing arguments with their partner or other family members. Main worries included affordability, and the conditions of their property. Canadian data on housing stress is not readily available, but other Canadian research has well [documented](#) how mental health problems such as stress and depression can also manifest into physical illnesses, such as an increase in cardiac disease; these issues will only be exacerbated as the rental stock continues to age and funding is not secured to make adequate improvements. People with lived experience of mental illness and addictions are disproportionately impacted by housing instability and homelessness. Stable housing improves the quality of life and is a key component of recovery for people with mental illness. Affordable and supportive housing reduces hospitalizations, psychiatric symptoms, and substance use while increasing freedom, privacy, dignity, and safety. Supportive housing has been [shown](#) to improve recovery for people with serious mental illnesses. The community is able to thrive when a multitude of housing options are available, safe, and affordable for people from all walks of life and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Homelessness and Encampments

Homelessness has increased in Hamilton during the pandemic, evident in the growing number of encampments in the city. Encampments reveal a clear need for increased affordable housing and are often the only option for people experiencing homelessness who don’t meet requirements for admittance by shelter providers or a choice by people to avoid COVID-19 transmission, theft, violence and substance use that may be higher in shelter facilities ([Public Health Ontario, Environmental Scan, February 3 2021](#)). A [report from the United Nations](#) investigating homeless encampments in Canada states that “encampments are a reflection of Canadian governments’ failure to successfully implement the right to adequate housing.” And while encampments aren’t a solution to homelessness, the authors write that “it is critical that governments uphold the basic human rights and dignity of encampment residents while they wait for adequate, affordable housing solutions that meet their needs,” especially during a public health crisis.

In the shelter system, capacity has decreased to allow for adequate physical distancing, and hotels are being used as temporary shelter spaces to adjust for this limited capacity. However, people with safety concerns or in need of increased support are not typically offered hotel space, so shelter residents are often solely those with higher needs. Combined with the closure of shelter common spaces, single-serving packaged meals, greater isolation, and longer stays due to fewer intakes at supportive housing, shelters can be a particularly difficult environment right now for people already experiencing the increased stress of homelessness in a pandemic.