


RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

VANCOUVER ISLAND PUBLIC
INTEREST RESEARCH GROUP

BY ANUREET LOTAY AND DAKOTA MCGOVERN



VICTORIA'S STUDENT HOUSING CRISIS

Background

Finding affordable housing on and off-campus is becoming increasingly difficult for post-secondary students in Victoria, British Columbia. In 2014, nearly 11,000 students were on residence waitlists between the University of British Columbia (UBC), Simon Fraser University (SFU), and University of Victoria (UVic) (ABCS, 2016). Students who migrate from places outside Canada are also significantly impacted by the housing crisis. Lack of affordable housing has far-reaching impacts for both individual health and wellness and society in general.

Objective

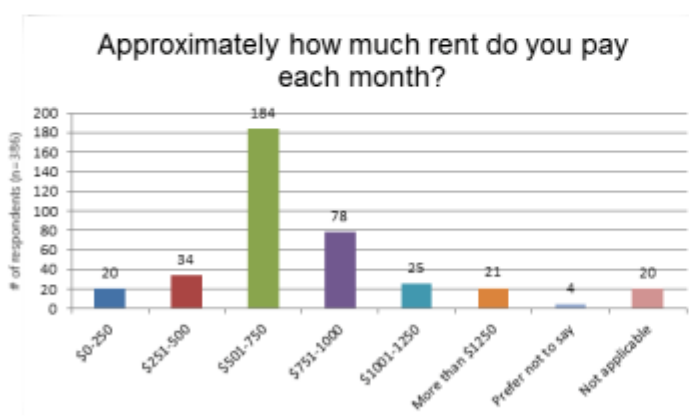
The intent of this study was to explore the experiences of students as they relate to rising housing costs in Victoria and beyond. Specifically, there is a gap in the literature regarding student health and wellness as it relates to housing.

Methodology

We carried out a mixed-methods study from June 2017 to August 2017 on student housing in Victoria. The study involved a quantitative survey of 386 post-secondary students from the University of Victoria, Camosun College and Royal Roads University, along with semi-structured interviews with 8 students from the University of Victoria. The survey questionnaire and qualitative interviews consisted of questions regarding housing status, financial status, the effects of housing on academics and physical and mental health, along with students' experiences with housing in Victoria.

Key Findings

- The vast majority of students (77.46%, n=299) indicated that **finding a place to live in Victoria was difficult or very difficult**
- **36.79%** (n=142) of respondents indicated that they **live with 3 or more people**
- Almost all of the respondents (93.78%, n=362) **live off campus**
- Students' primary source of income includes **employment** (39.38%, n=152), **family support** (25.39%, n=98) and **loans** (22.02%, n=85)
- A majority of students (58.29%, n=225) reported that **most of their total income is used for rent/housing costs**; almost half of all respondents (47.67%, n=184) pay **\$501-750** in monthly rent, with 11.91% (n=46) students paying **over \$1000** per month
- Approximately 70.46% (n=272) reported yearly income that places them **below the national low-income cut-off (LICO)**, also known as "the poverty line" (UFCW, 2009)
- **45.72%** (n=176) indicated that housing had a **negative or very negative impact on their finances**.
- **42.23%** reported that they had experienced **difficulty paying rent** in the last six months
- Most students **rely on the bus** (59.64%; n=229) to get to campus
- More students indicated that housing had a **negative impact on their diet** than a positive impact
- More **racialized students** indicated that housing had a **negative impact on their diet and mental health**



Key Findings (cont.d)

A total of 8 interviews were conducted with students from the University of Victoria and, based on the analysis of their responses, the following themes emerged:

Finding housing in Victoria is difficult

"I know [quite a few people] who have been looking for a place for months"

"I know people who are going to house viewings every day and 20 people just for a one bedroom...in a basement suite"

"On campus is really expensive and bad, they're making a profit"

Devising strategies for finding and acquiring housing

The high competition for housing meant that participants found themselves in precarious situations having to use tactics such as multiple applications with different groups of potential roommates, and agreeing to potentially illegal rental agreements and housing arrangements.

Illegal, unethical, and discriminatory practices by property owners/managers

Participants encountered illegal, unethical and/or discriminatory rental practices: "renovictions" racist rental ads, illegal bedrooms, overcrowding, damaged living spaces, and lack of rental contracts or agreements, along with identity based discrimination, especially due to race, gender, sexuality, and/or disability.

"9/10 horror stories I've heard are about landlords being bad to [people of colour]"

"I think [identity] really affects who you can live with...if you are a white-passing or a straight-passing student you might not have those worries"

Lack of affordable, accessible and culturally-appropriate food options

Participants also mentioned lack of affordable food choices on campus, not being able to afford food due to high rental costs, lack of grocery stores nearby, and lack of culturally appropriate food sources as an added stressor affecting their quality of life.

Ill effects on academics

Housing conditions and difficulties finding housing also had a negative impact on participants' academic life, especially distance from campus, noisy roommates, and stress associated with finding housing during exams.

Ill effects on mental and physical health

Participants stated that finding and paying for housing the city was a stressful or extremely stressful experience, affecting physical health, mental health or both: stating • "It's definitely stressful not being able to find a place in time or having to downgrade constantly"

High rental costs and financial stress

All of the participants mentioned the high cost of housing in the city. As reflected in the aforementioned themes, the financial impact of housing affects many aspects of student life.

- "When your housing is taking more than half 50% of your finances, that's criminal; plus dealing with all of the stress of school..."

- "I come from an upper-middle class family but this is the first time I'm supporting myself and it's been really difficult...I don't have grocery money right now"

- "I've been homeless and I've slept in my car and I'm terrified of having to go through that again."

Recommendations



- The priority for UVic administration should be the **construction and organized management of affordable student residences**
- Student residences should include **spaces for cooking and storing culturally-appropriate foods**
- UVic/UVSS should aim to provide transportation for students living on and off-campus to **purchase groceries**. Such programs are found at other universities in Canada, including the University of Alberta, University of Manitoba, and University of Regina
- UVic/UVSS should **create a reliable housing database** to ease the burden of finding off-campus housing for students and allocate **funding for emergency housing** and shelters for students in need
- UVic/UVSS should also aim to conduct seminars and provide information to students regarding their **tenancy rights** to ensure that students feel empowered to advocate for themselves and/or others in cases of tenancy disputes and illegal/unethical/discriminatory practices
- The City of Victoria must do more to **prohibit and prevent illegal units, rental agreements and discriminatory practices**, including harsher fines and other punitive measures
- The City of Victoria must also invest in the **construction of affordable housing** or legislate the construction of some low-income units in new developments
- The City of Victoria must invest in **more direct bus routes to and from the University of Victoria campus**
- The City of Victoria must also **limit the construction of new high-end developments** that are being used primarily for profit as short-term rental units (such as those usually advertised on Airbnb and other sites)

References

Alliance of BC Students (ABCS) (2016, April 9). White Paper on Student Housing. Retrieved September 24, 2017, from <https://bcstudents.ca/2016/04/09/whitepaper/>

UFCW Canada. (2009). By the Numbers: Income distribution and the poverty line -- Canada's Private Sector Union. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.ufcw.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2433:by-the-numbers-income-distribution-and-the-poverty-line&Itemid=306&lang=en



We would like to acknowledge the connection between ongoing settler colonialism and the forms of capitalism that produce the working conditions we are addressing in this report. This work has been conducted on unceded and unsurrendered Coast Salish territories, specifically of the Lekwungen and WSÁNEĆ people.

The Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group (VIPIRG) is a non-profit organization dedicated to research, education, advocacy, and other action in the public interest. The full version of this report can be found at vipirg.ca. Information concerning this report or any other report produced by VIPIRG can be obtained by contacting research@vipirg.ca or:

Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group
University of Victoria
Student Union Building B122
Box 3035, Stn CSC
Victoria, BC
Lekwungen and WSÁNEĆ Territories
V8W 3P3
info@vipirg.ca
www.vipirg.ca

