

If you can't count it, you can't manage it

Time for an adult conversation about housing and homelessness indicators and measures

If you cannot count it, you cannot manage it. That common advice in the business sector can also be powerfully important in social policy, including housing and homelessness. Canada is behind other countries in measuring the many dimensions of homelessness and precarious housing. And this means that it's almost impossible to assess the scale of need, the appropriate resources that are required and to evaluate the impact of policy interventions. To help start an adult conversation about indicators and solutions, the Wellesley Institute commissioned housing policy expert Steve Pomeroy to examine British measures to assess housing outcomes, and contrast with Canada. Are we making any difference, his discussion brief, examines housing indicators in Canada and the UK, and includes practical advice on important indicators and data sources.

In his [formal report to the United Nations Human Rights Council](#) following his fact-finding mission to Canada, the then-UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing Miloon Kothari noted that Canada has no national definition of homelessness and no national measure. Some communities do street counts, using various methodologies, to measure street homelessness and others try to collect service utilization numbers (overnight stays at homeless shelters, etc.). Some communities attempt to measure “hidden” homeless – people staying temporarily with family or friends – while others have tried to measure those who are at serious risk of homelessness and living in precarious housing (overcrowded, substandard). The problem with confusing, or non-existent numbers, is that it becomes difficult to measure the scale of the issue, the appropriate level of response that is required, and – most importantly – to monitor and assess whether policy responses are effective in reducing housing and homelessness issues.

In 2009 the BC Auditor General, in [his review of that province's homelessness programs](#), noted:

“Clear goals and objectives for homelessness and adequate accountability for results remain outstanding. Government also lacks adequate information about the homeless and about the services already available to them – this hampers effective decisionmaking. Finally, government has not yet established appropriate indicators of success to improve public accountability for results... Having good information about the homeless in the province helps

inform decision-making and ensure that the appropriate range and quantity of programs are in place, in the areas needed. Counts and other demographic information about the homeless are usually gathered at the local level. We expected government to have an understanding of the causes and patterns of homelessness and to be aware of where key gaps in programs and services exist. Instead, we found that government lacks a clear profile of the homeless population.”

A similar criticism can be leveled at Canada's federal government, and most other provinces. And the concern about poor data gets even worse when considering the far larger number of Canadians who live in precarious housing. Most housing experts are forced to rely on “core housing need” as the primary measure of insecure housing, but there are limitations, as Pomeroy sets out in his discussion brief. In addition, core housing need data has been drawn in the past from Statistics Canada's mandatory long-form census, which was discontinued before the last national census. It remains for statistical experts to determine whether the data that will come from the voluntary long term can be compared to previous data.

Even though the basic data about the many dimensions of homelessness and precarious housing is incomplete or non-existent, the Wellesley Institute's [Precarious Housing in Canada](#) did assemble a number of indicators to create the housing and homelessness iceberg. It provides a graphic portrayal of some of the key dimensions of housing issues in Canada.

The numbers that are available indicate that the high cost of housing is the single biggest concern for more than three million Canadian households – about one-in-every-four households across the country.

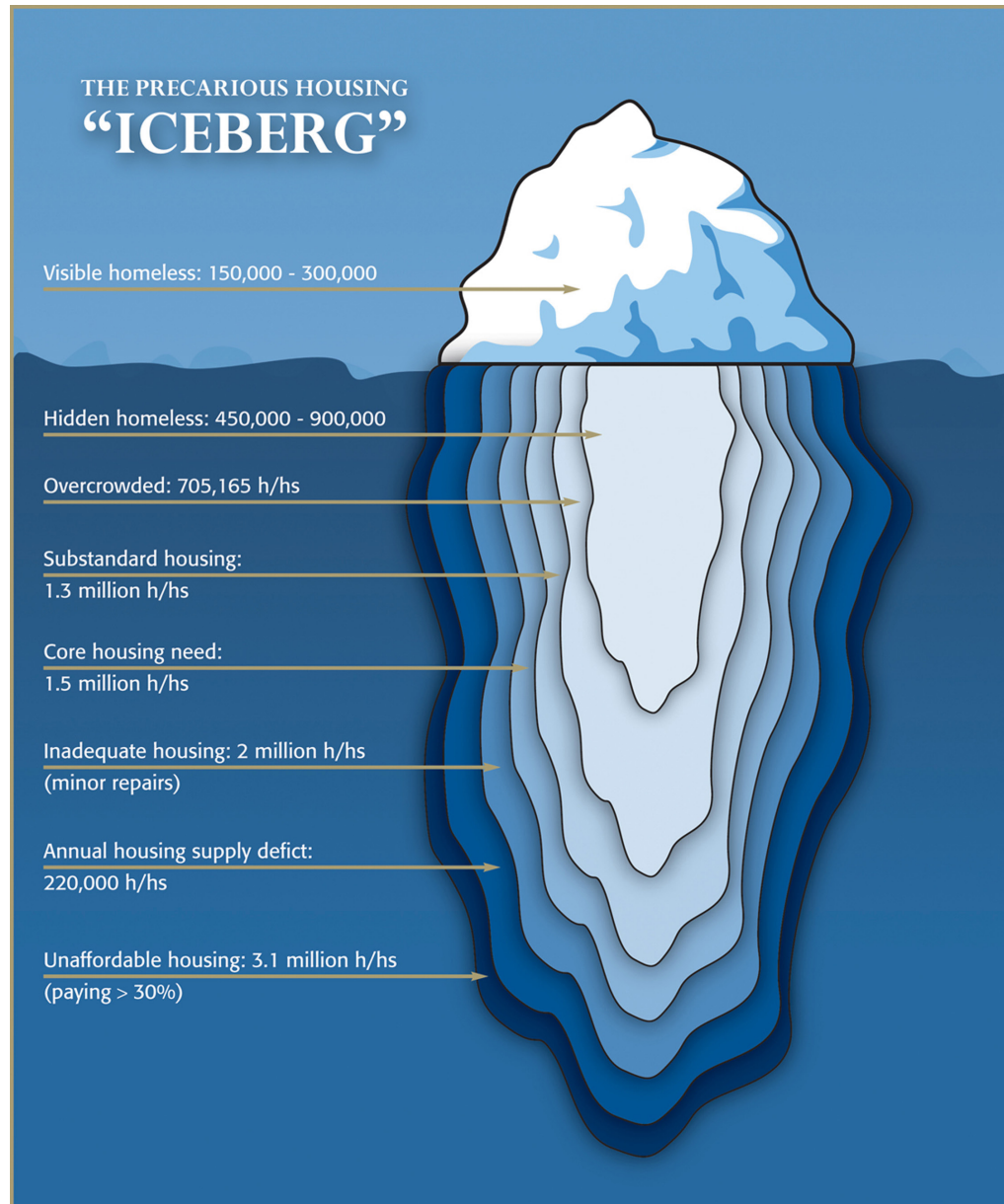
Other countries have developed powerful indicators that link household incomes and housing costs to create affordability indices. For instance, Shelter UK has recently released [research that tracks affordability](#) in the private rented sector. The US National Low Income Housing Coalition publishes an annual series called [“Out of Reach”](#) that also focuses on rented housing. Affordability in the private rented sector is an important concern in Canada as most low, moderate and many middle-income households live in rented homes. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation research indicates that the big gap

between renter households incomes in lower income quintiles and the monthly rent is the single biggest housing issue.

In his discussion brief, Pomeroy notes two important options for developing a more robust affordability indicator for Canada and for provinces and regions across the country:

- A **rental affordability indicator** would compare average market rents from CMHC’s semi-annual rental survey with median renter household incomes. In the Wellesley Institute’s Precarious Housing report, we looked at historical data over the past twenty years and noted the growing gap between what renter households can afford to pay (as determined by the median income) and what landlords are actually charging in rent (from CMHC surveys). Developing a more robust and current rental affordability indicator is clearly a priority.

- **Minimum housing wage** is a more simple calculation that is derived from the CMHC semi-annual rental surveys. It sets out the minimum amount that a household requires in order to afford actual market rents at the national level, and in regions across the country. Comparing the minimum housing wage to actual wages earned by a range of workers would create a measure of affordability.



This discussion brief is one in a series of updates to Precarious Housing in Canada, which include both new data and analysis, and also revisions to the practical and pragmatic policy recommendations. Full details are posted on www.wellesleyinstitute.com

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