

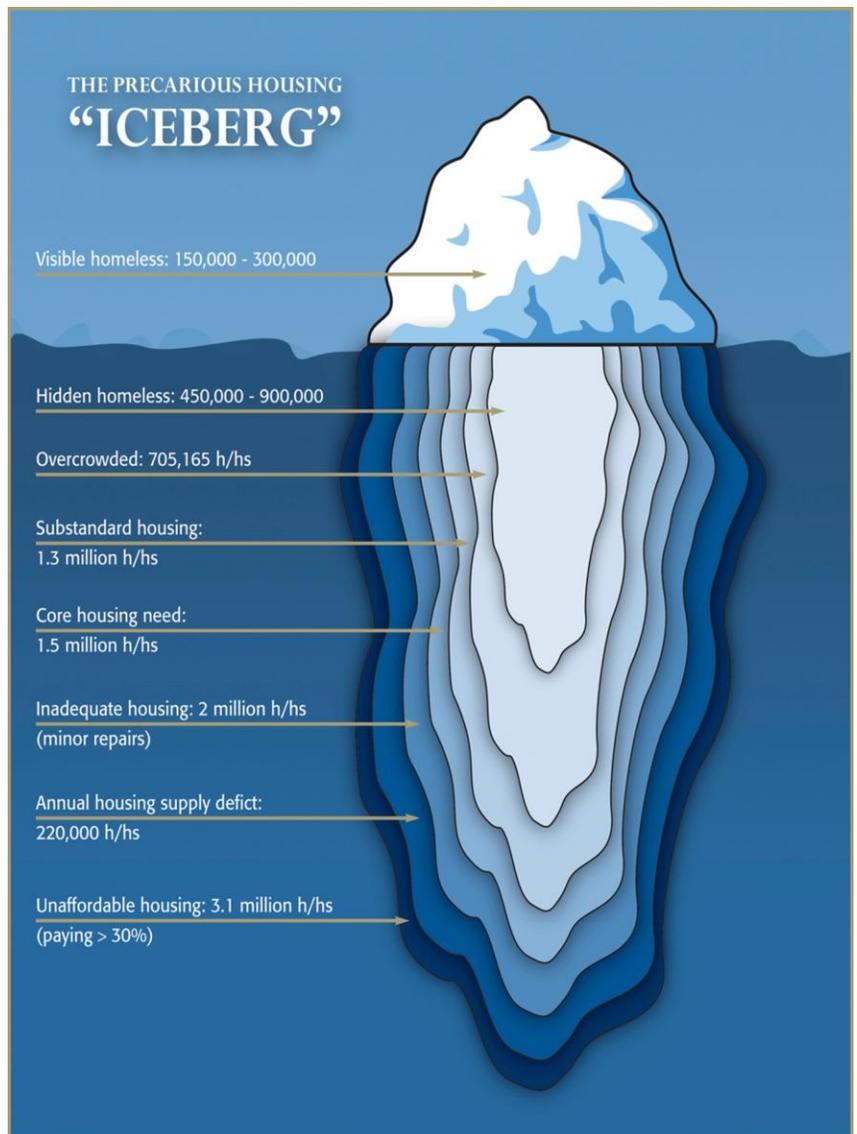
Home + income + food = health: Wellesley Institute submission to United Nations Special Rapporteur on Right to Food

9 May 2012

1. Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to Olivier De Schutter, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, as part of his fact-finding mission to Canada. The Wellesley Institute is an independent, community-based institute that engages in research, policy and community mobilization to advance population health.
2. The internationally-recognized framework of universal human rights indivisible and interconnected. At the Wellesley Institute, we understand that the fundamental social determinants of health – including housing, income, food, access to health care – are strongly linked and that the intersections among these human rights and fundamental human needs represent important points for understanding and action. While much of our work is a deep exploration of specific social and health policy issues, we also work at the systems level to develop a better understanding of the links – the vicious and virtuous cycles – between health, housing, income, food and many other basics.
3. A systems-level approach not only helps to create a better understanding of inequality and inequity issues facing Canadians, but it also allows for more effective policy interventions. Practical initiatives in which we have collaborated, along with our research and analysis of effective practices by others, demonstrates that community-based, multi-sectoral collaborations that draw on the expertise of people with lived experience, plus a range of other expertise, offer the best hope for the progressive realization of the right to food, along with other fundamental human rights including the right to housing and the right to an adequate standard of living.
4. Numerous research reports from across Canada and internationally note the strong links between housing, income, food and health. The Wellesley Institute's *Precarious Housing in Canada 2010* provides a high-level summary of some of those links. A copy of Precarious Housing is appended to this submission.
5. The Wellesley Institute was pleased to provide practical assistance in 2007 to Miloon Kothari, the then-United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, during his fact-finding mission to Canada. Mr. Kothari's *final report on his mission* was presented to the United Nations Human Rights Council in February of 2009. A copy of his final report is appended to this submission.

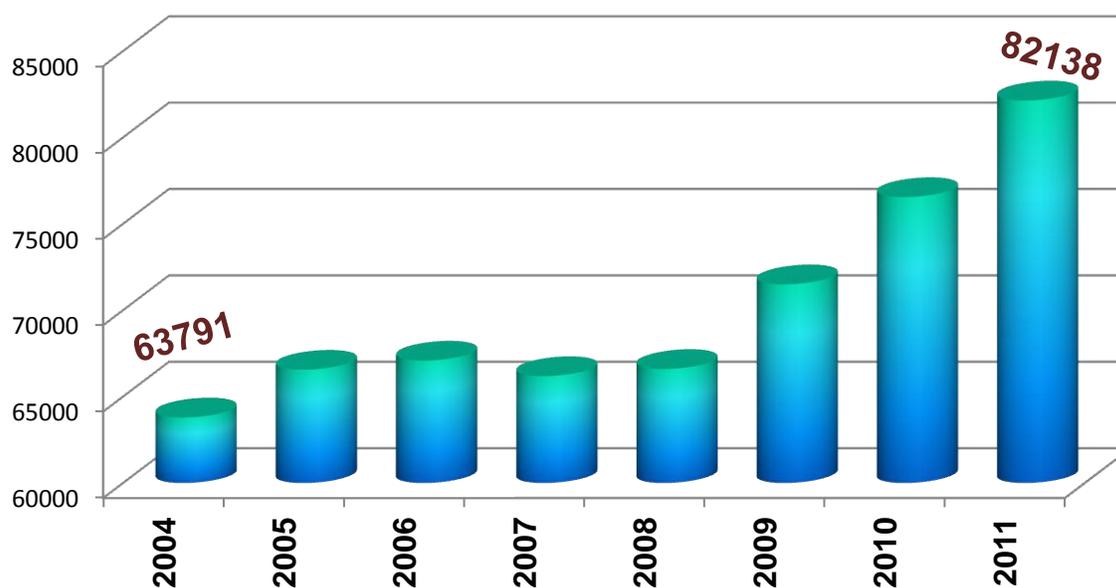
6. In 2009, the Government of Canada was the subject of a *Universal Periodic Review* by the United Nations Human Rights Council. A total of 68 recommendations were made (a copy of the working group report is attached as an appendix), a number of which address housing, homelessness, poverty and socio-economic disparities. The *Government of Canada, in its formal response to the Universal Periodic Review*, accepted recommendations 47, 48 and 49 on housing, the Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing’s fact-finding mission recommendations and poverty issues. The formal response is attached as an appendix. The Government of Canada promised in June of 2009 “to enhance efforts to address poverty and housing issues, in collaboration with provinces and territories.” While the Government of Canada did sign a short-term housing agreement with the provinces and territories in 2011 (based on arrangements that were announced in 2008), there has been no enhanced intergovernmental effort on this issue.

7. More than 3.2 million women, men and children – about 11% of Canada’s population – live in ‘core housing need’, the federal government’s definition of the most precariously-housed. A significant portion of these experience homelessness. However, as the Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing has noted in his fact-finding mission report, Canada does not have a national definition of homelessness, and the country does not collect national statistics on a number of dimensions of housing insecurity, unlike most other developed countries. The Wellesley Institute’s Precarious Housing report drew together the best available information to create a housing and homelessness ‘iceberg’ to illustrate the range of housing needs in Canada.



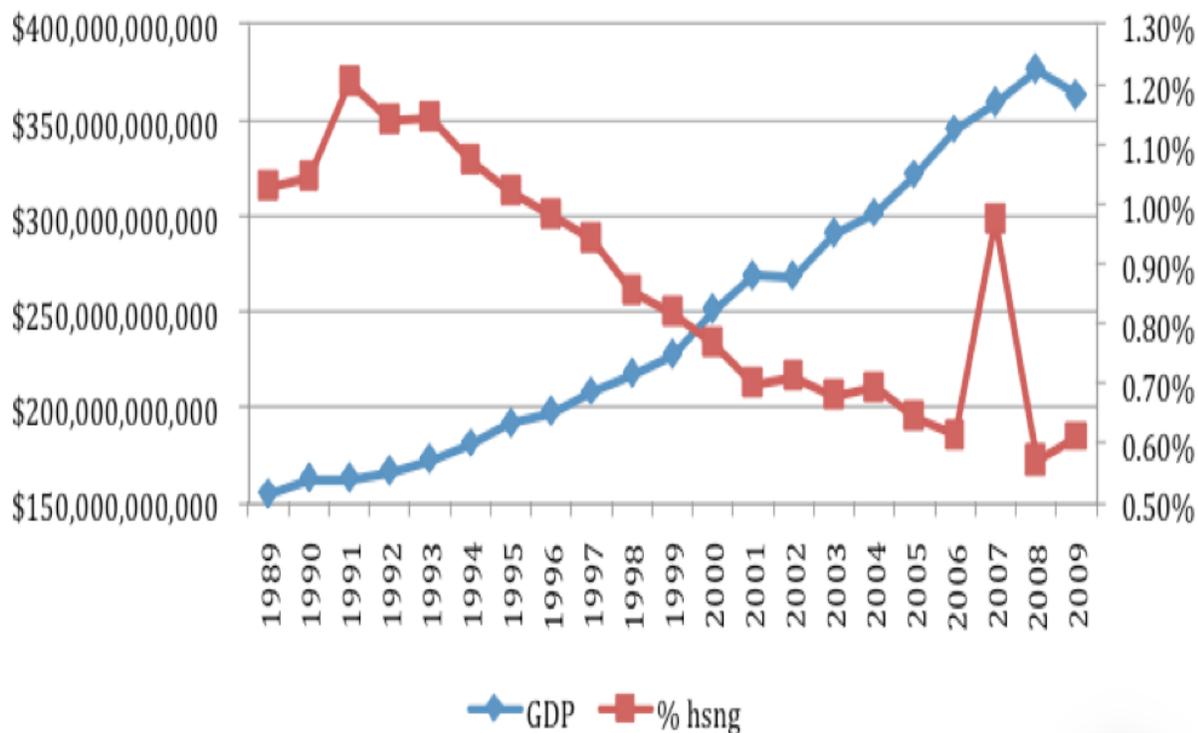
8. One local indicator of growing housing insecurity is Toronto’s affordable housing waiting list. The list, maintained by the City of Toronto’s affordable housing

landlord, has set a new record every month since before the recession of 2008. The number of households on the list has grown by 29% from 2004 to 2011 – up from 63,791 households to 82,138 households. The wait list continued to set new records in each of the first three months of 2012 – reaching 83,681 households by the end of March. With only 348 households housed from the list that month, the average wait time for an affordable home in Toronto is now more than 20 years. Some households on the wait list are currently housed, but living in substandard, overcrowded or unaffordable accommodation. Others are homeless. All of them are struggling with food security and hunger. Affordable housing wait lists in other Canadian communities follow a similar trend.



9. Housing insecurity and mass homelessness sharply increased in Canada starting in the 1990s with cuts to national investments in housing and homelessness programs, and additional cuts to housing and homelessness investments by many provincial, territorial and municipal governments also starting in the 1990s. In Canada, many housing programs are cost-shared among federal, provincial / territorial and municipal governments, so when the national government cuts \$1 in funding, local communities experience a loss of \$2, \$3 or more. During the two decades from 1989 to 2009, Canada's Gross Domestic Product – a leading measure of economic activity – more than doubled. However, federal housing investment, as a share of GDP – a conventional indicator used by economists to measure government investments over time – fell by half from 1.2% of GDP to 0.6%. In dollars, federal housing investments were \$1.6 billion in 1989 and were \$2.2 billion in 2009 – a 39% increase. Over that same period of time, the Bank of Canada reports that inflation rose by 54%. Adjusting for inflation, federal housing investments in 2009 were \$250 million less than the amount required to match federal investments in 1989. A population increase and a growth in the number of precariously-housed households further erodes the limited governmental housing dollars on offer. The Wellesley Institute's *Precariously Housed in Canada*, along with *a legal affidavit prepared by Michael Shapcott, the Wellesley Institute's Director of Housing and Innovation, for a Canadian Charter Challenge* (a copy of which is appended to this

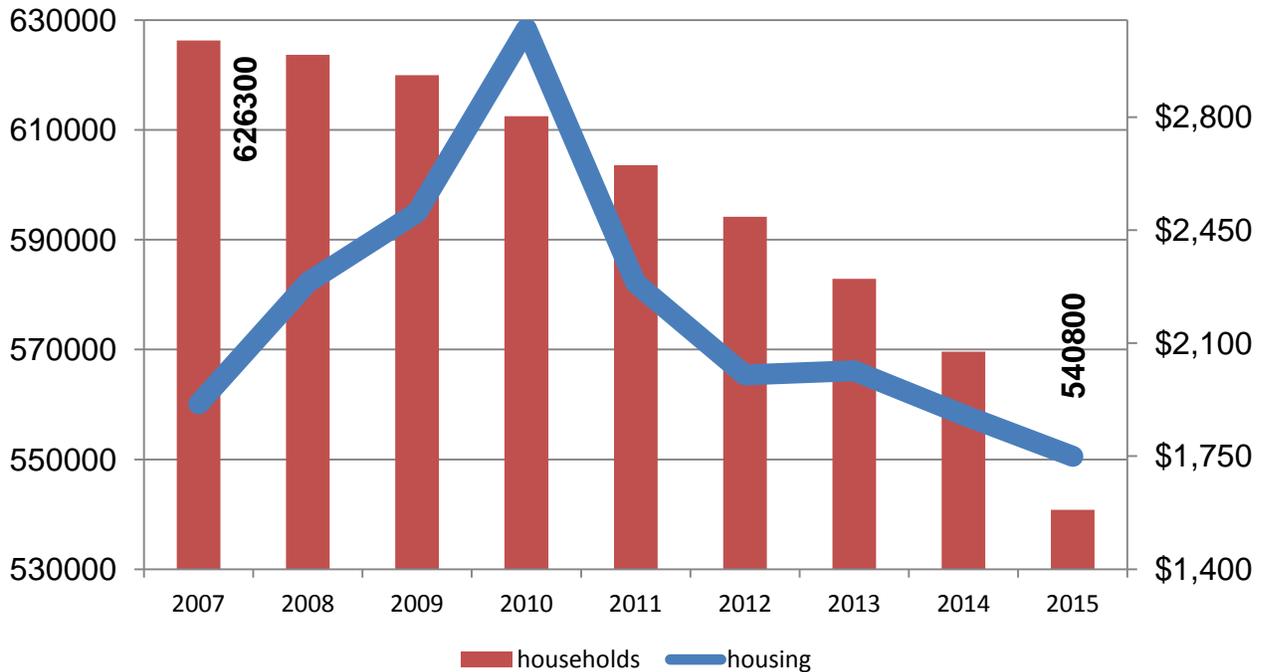
submission), set out the specifics of erosion in housing investments at the national, provincial, territorial and in selected municipalities across Canada.



10. In 2008, the federal government announced a five-year extension to three national housing and homelessness programs. All three are scheduled to terminate in 2014. The federal government’s national homelessness initiative programs funding to 61 communities to provide transitional housing, services and supports to people who are homeless, including food programs. Federal homelessness investments have not been increased since the program was launched in 1999, even though inflation and the growth in homelessness have eroded the spending. About 80% of the funding is allocated to ten large communities, and the remaining 20% goes to 51 smaller communities. As there has been no increase in funding in the 13 years since the program was first announced, those 61 communities are forced each year to ‘do more with less’ or, as happens in most communities, ‘do less with less’. All the rest of Canada does not receive homelessness funding, including food programs.

11. In its 2009 budget, as part of its response to the global recession, the federal government temporarily increased housing and homelessness investments. Two years later, all those investments were terminated. The federal government’s 2011 spending estimates included a 39% cut in national housing investments (down from \$3.1 billion to \$1.9 billion). Three of the programs that experienced the biggest cuts were: affordable housing initiative (which funds new affordable homes) cut 97% from \$452 million to \$16 million; national low-income housing repair program cut 94% from \$674 million to \$37 million; and the national on-reserve Aboriginal housing program cut 27% from \$215 million to \$156 million. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the federal government’s national housing agency, projects additional funding cuts in the coming years. The blue line in the chart below shows

CMHC’s actual housing investments to 2011, and includes its official estimates to the year 2015 – showing the temporary increase following the 2009 budget and the subsequent sharp drop in housing investments. The red bars show the number of low-income households assisted under federal housing programs – which will fall from 626,300 in 2007 to an estimated 540,800 in 2015. As already noted, since certain federal programs are cost-shared at the provincial, territorial and municipal levels, the impact of the federal cuts is magnified in the local community.



12. The lack of affordable housing is consistently identified in local and national reports as a key factor in generating hunger in Canada and driving people to rely on food banks and other charities. The high cost of housing means that 3.2 million Canadians who experience ‘core housing need’ have difficulty ensuring a healthy diet. For many of them, the lack of adequate housing means that they cannot properly store good food or prepare nutritious meals.

13. For people who are forced to live without shelter, food is an especially serious issue. In 2007, the Wellesley Institute funded Street Health to provide a comprehensive overview of the health status of people who are homeless (a copy of *Street Health 2007* is appended to this submission). Fully 96% reported that they rely on food charity for basic nutrition, while 69% said that they experienced hunger at least one day per week in the previous three months. Part of the reason for the high level of hunger among the homeless is the patchwork of meal programs. The Street Health report cites a review of the 84 meal programs for the homeless in Toronto and notes that 66% offer only a single meal daily, 79% offer no food on Saturday and 82% offer no food on Sunday. This patchwork will fray even more as federal homelessness funding is terminated in 2014 (as noted in paragraph 8). Fully one-third of the respondents said that a health condition, such as diabetes, required them to follow a special

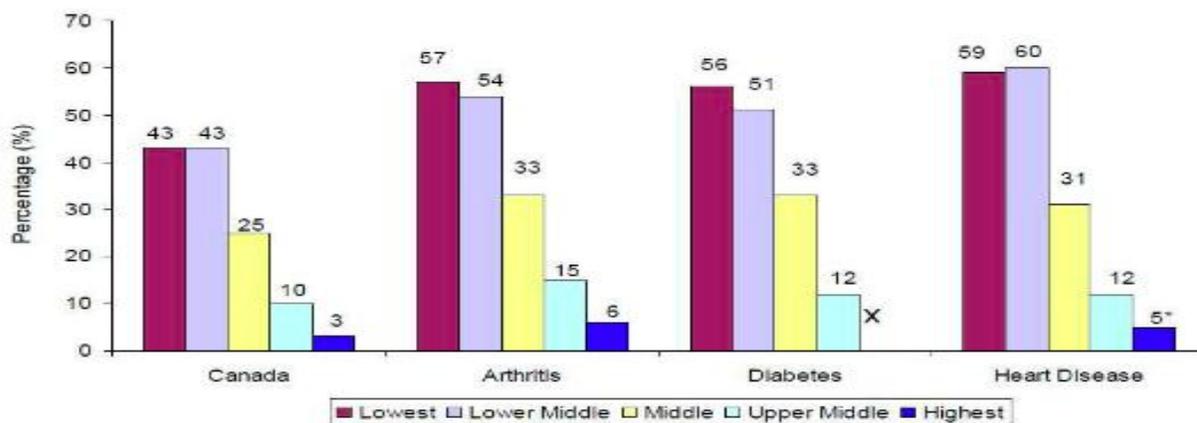
diet, but more than half said that they were not able to follow their special diet because of lack of access to appropriate food.

14. The Salvation Army provides the largest number of shelter beds for the homeless in Canada. Starting in 2007, The Salvation Army began a survey of its clients across the country. Housing and homeless advocates applauded the decision by The Salvation Army to take seriously the interests and views of its clients, and welcomed the important changes that the survey brought to the operations of The Salvation Army. A copy of *The Salvation Army report* is attached. Food issues featured as both positives and negatives among shelter users, with The Salvation Army summarizing the issues: “The low income of individuals experiencing homelessness prevents them from eating healthily and regularly. Often these individuals depend on meal services because they do not have a place of their own in which to cook or store food. Practices and provision around procedures to control dining experiences is very important. Service providers and shelter users rated food as one of the best aspects of staying at a Salvation Army shelter. At the same time, shelter users expressed concern with the quality and quantity of the food being provided. Food is fundamental to the provision of services to individuals experiencing homelessness; therefore, it is critical that The Salvation Army supply its clients with healthy and nutritious meals. The Salvation Army recommends that healthy and nutritious meals be provided where food is offered to the homeless in its shelters and food programs.”
15. An adequate income is a fundamental requisite for access to healthy, nutritious food in Canada. Most of the 1.5 million Canadian households in core housing need are paying 30% or more of their household income on shelter, which leaves them with an inadequate amount of money for other necessities such as food, medicine, clothing, transportation, and childcare. Statistics Canada, the federal government’s statistical agency, estimates that among all Canadian households, fully 3 million are paying 30% or more of their household income on housing. That represents 25% of all Canadians.
16. Many Canadians derive their income from labour markets. Sheila Block, the Wellesley Institute’s Director of Economic Analysis, has produced a short paper that draws the links between *employment and health*, and has also analyzed inequality in her report on Canada’s *colour-coded labour market* (copy of both are attached). While lower-income Canadians generally will have difficulty in purchasing housing as well as food, medicine, transportation, clothing, childcare and other necessities, the unequal burden falls more heavily on racialized Canadians.
17. Low and moderate-income Canadians who do not receive sufficient, or any, labour market income, rely on welfare income to be able to purchase housing, food, medicine, clothing, transportation, children and other necessities. The federal government’s National Council on Welfare, which is being abolished in the current federal budget, reports that welfare incomes throughout Canada consistently fall well below the poverty line – the minimum amount determined for a healthy life.
18. Canada has been experiencing growing poverty and income inequality, according to recent international surveys by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. In

both its *Growing Unequal* report of 2008 and *Divided We Stand* report of 2011, the OECD reports that while Canada was ahead of the OECD in poverty and inequality indicators in the mid-1990s, a combination of sharp cuts to social investments and income transfers, along with cuts to taxes for wealthy Canadians, has pushed Canada below the OECD average in recent years. The combination of the two factors of poverty and income inequality leave lower-income Canadians less able to afford growing food costs, and less able to afford growing housing costs – both of which have been increasing faster than the rate of inflation, and faster than the stagnant level of increases in household incomes. The OECD country reports on Canada are attached as appendices.

- The strong links between income, food, health and housing are illustrated in a number of research reports. Recently, the POWER study in Ontario noted the strong links between food insecurity, income and people living with chronic health conditions. In every case, the poorest Canadians not only reported the biggest concerns with chronic health conditions such as arthritis, diabetes and heart disease, but they also reported the most significant burden of food insecurity.

Canadians With Chronic Conditions Who Also Report Food Insecurity



Data source: Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) Cycle 3.1
 *Interpret with caution due to high sampling variability (CV 16.8-33.3)
 X Data suppressed due to small sample size.



Observations and recommendations:

- Canada has a long and proud tradition of respect for international human rights. John Peters Humphrey, a former law professor at Montreal’s McGill University, is often called the ‘father of the international human rights system’ because of his work in helping to draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and establish the system of human rights at the United Nations. Canada has ratified or acceded to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and numerous other international legal instruments that recognize the right to food, the right to housing and other fundamental human rights.

21. Canada has rich and abundant resources in civil society and academia to design, develop and manage effective community-based responses to hunger, precarious housing and to meet other human needs. We have plenty of successful initiatives, including The Stop Community Food Centre; along with many others like FoodShare. We don't lack the ideas, the energy and the people to end hunger and ensure that everyone has a good place to call home.
22. Canada's nation-wide affordable housing crisis and deep and persistent homelessness are key factors in driving hunger and food insecurity across the country. After the funding and program cuts of the 1990s, Canada became the only major country in the world without a national housing plan. ***Bill C-400 – An Act to ensure secure, adequate, accessible and affordable housing for Canadians*** – is a private member's bill that is currently before Canada's national Parliament, would incorporate Canada's international housing rights obligations into domestic law, and would require the national government to collaborate with other orders of government, civil society, Aboriginal organizations and the private sector to design and implement a robust national housing plan. In the last session of Parliament, a similar bill passed first and second reading, and was amended at committee and awaiting third and final reading before Parliament was dissolved for an election. ***We respectfully request that the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food add his support to this vital piece of national legislation. Resolving housing issues is an important and effective intervention in ending hunger and food insecurity.***
23. In our Precarious Housing report, we note that the biggest housing challenge in Canada is the ongoing erosion and termination of funding and programs. While there have been times when new, short-term initiatives were launched – such as 1999, 2001, 2005 and 2009 – the overall trend over the past two decades has been a steady erosion of investments that has, in turn, led to increased housing insecurity and growing homelessness. As noted in paragraphs 8 and 9 above, the downward trend is accelerating in 2014. This ongoing erosion is directly contrary to the principles of “continuous improvement” and “progressive realization” of human rights embedded in various international legal instruments to which Canada adheres. ***We respectfully request that the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food bring to the attention of the Government of Canada that this ongoing erosion of funding and programs is a serious threat to the realization of fundamental human rights in Canada.***
24. The Senate of Canada subcommittee on cities consulted widely and produced a detailed report in 2009 titled ***In From the Margins: A Call to Action on Poverty, Housing and Homelessness***, that contains a great many useful recommendations on the links between housing, hunger, income, education and homelessness. A copy of the report is in the appendix. In addition to addressing the high cost of housing – which is the single biggest expense for most Canadians – ***we respectfully request that the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food identify inadequate and unfair labour market incomes, and inadequate welfare incomes, as fundamental causes of hunger and food insecurity in Canada.***

Thank you for the opportunity to make these submissions. All of which are respectfully made by Michael Shapcott, Director, Housing and Innovation, the Wellesley Institute, 10 Alcorn Avenue #300, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M4V 3B2; michael@wellesleyinstitute.com ; www.wellesleyinstitute.com