

Can You Afford Opportunity? Documenting the cost of subsidized housing

By: Leneque G. Wilson, York University, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies (LA&PS), School of Social Work, SOWK 3060 – Integrated Social Work Practice

Research Question:

In what ways does the stigma around poverty act in subsidized housing systems to influence choice and opportunity?

Thesis:

Social housing systems act in a part of a complex and expansive structure, which aims to restrict the freedom of choice of people in poverty, thus denying them of equitable opportunity.

Key Concepts:

Subsidized Housing, New Home Project, The Social Determinants of Health, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, The Cycle of Poverty, Capitalism

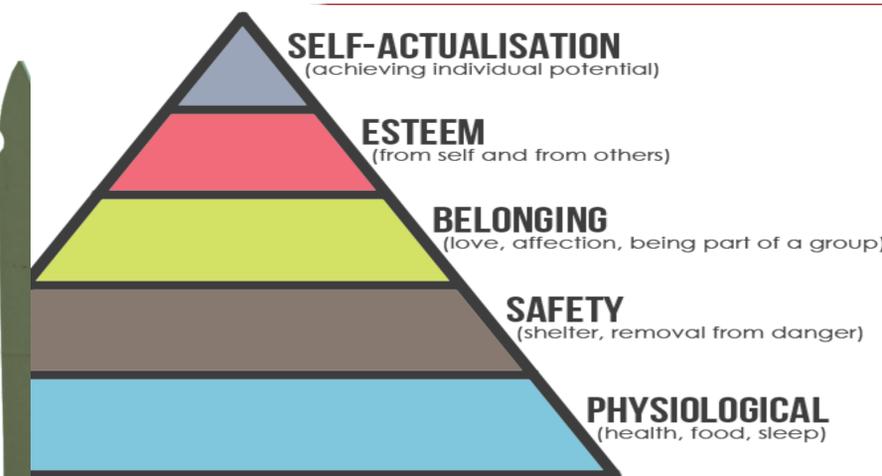
Abstract:

According to social researchers (Braveman, 2011; Krieger, 2002; Hatzenbuehler, 2013; Marmot, 2008), the lack of access to affordable housing is a major social determinant of health. In Toronto specifically, the cost of living continues to rise, while work is becoming more precarious. There are 4.8 million people documented as “poor” in Canada. Of these, more than 5,000 are homeless in Toronto alone, while nearly 60,000 are residents of Toronto Community Housing (TCH). This demonstrates a chronic problem in the system. For these people, obtaining and maintaining adequate, subsidized housing is often shrouded with the denial (and illusion) of choice and the suppression of opportunity.

This paper takes a psychosocial approach to the study of Toronto’s housing systems and the broader structures that influence them, by utilizing secondary research. Issues regarding choice and opportunity are reinforced by means of psychological barriers contained within regular TCH affairs. Additionally, people in poverty are further impeded with other systemic and social barriers (i.e. capitalism, criminalization, racialization, medicalization and feminization). These issues are not the responsibility of TCH alone; rather, they saturate the realm of national culture and should be addressed in different sectors accordingly. This paper also examines the involvement of political entities and their use of rhetoric in the replication of these problems. Moreover, it further offers suggestions for change, particularly in rhetoric, which suggests that poverty is not simply economic, but also social, political and psychological.

Methodology:

Secondary research methods, which include news sources (online and print), peer-reviewed journal articles, government think tank research reports, to name a few.



Statistics for consideration:

- There is a 2.6 billion dollar repair backlog on subsidized housing units in Toronto. Reports suggest that if the repair backlog is not prioritized, by 2023, 91% of units will be in critical and poor condition and fail to meet basic living needs.
- In 2014, on average a household was on the wait-list to receive a TCH unit for four years.
- Residents of Toronto Subsidized housing are four (4) times more likely to be murdered.

Key Findings:

- Housing tenants need to navigate 'the system' considering what decisions may considerably increase their rent.
- Current issues within the system fail to meet “safety” and “belonging” needs as defined in *Maslow's Hierarchy* and “Housing” in the *Social Determinants of Health*.
- The language used by politicians in the past can be seen as damaging to subsidized housing users. For instance, when referring to Canadians as “voters and taxpayers”. Which subliminal messages might that send?
- Our society highly values active participants in capitalism (prevailing consumers) and undermines those who are not. In other words, the rich are valued because of their contribution to the economy, while the poor are punished for not being able to do so.

Subjects for future study:

- How will the change in government, from Conservative to Liberal, affect the dynamics in subsidized housing?
- What changes will the “New Home” project bring, and what are the limitations to this plan?
- Will the Liberal government truly invest the promised \$125 million per year in tax incentives for developers and landlords to build and renovate affordable rental units on what they call “social infrastructure? How will this change the subsidized housing scene in Toronto?

Where do we go from here?

Poverty affects everyone. We need to engage in dialogue about the importance of voting and about the stigma of poverty. We need to consider how predominant ideologies make it difficult for the poor to overcome their situation.

