



The housing dimensions of mental and social well-being: Learning from COVID-19

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Highlights

- Housing need and vulnerability cannot be fully captured by core housing need alone.
- Housing stability, housing affordances, and access to neighbourhood services and amenities are central to households' everyday well-being and responses to external shocks.
- Building long-term resilience requires holistic housing policies that go beyond cost to address how people live in and experience housing.
- Inaction means that preventable burdens will continue to shift onto already strained health and social systems.

Mental and social well-being are closely related to, but distinct from, health. While health refers to physical and psychological conditions, well-being captures how people experience their lives and what their health enables them to do.

Mental well-being: Emotional and psychological experience, including the ability to manage stress, function in daily life, experience a sense of purpose or satisfaction.

Social well-being: Ability to build and maintain relationships, access support, participate in community life, and feel a sense of belonging.

Introduction to housing and well-being

The COVID-19 pandemic created a unique window for housing researchers to better understand how housing shapes mental and social well-being, and resilience in times of crisis. During this period, homes and neighbourhoods became the primary—if not only—sites of daily life. This context highlighted existing housing vulnerabilities and revealed new ones.

Housing and neighbourhood conditions are key social determinants of health and well-being. In Canada, housing vulnerability is often measured using “core housing need,” which focuses on affordability, overcrowding, and the need for major repairs. However, this approach does not fully capture how people experience and use their housing.

To create resilient communities, housing policy must address the full range of conditions that shape how people live in and through their housing, particularly as these conditions shift during periods of disruption. **These shifts can have significant effects on well-being that are not explained by housing cost or physical condition alone.**

Housing dimensions and well-being

Five key dimensions capture how housing influences mental and social well-being:

- **Housing cost:** the share of income spent on housing and its impact on meeting other basic needs.
- **Housing quality:** the physical condition and livability of a home, including safety, maintenance, and need for repairs.
- **Housing stability:** the ability of a household to remain in their home for as long as desired, without involuntary disruption, displacement, or uncertainty.
- **Housing context:** the neighbourhood environment surrounding the home, including access to key resources like public transit, healthcare, grocery stores, and public or semi-public open spaces.
- **Housing affordances:** the features and functions of housing that shape everyday experience, including privacy, safety, comfort, and opportunities for social connection.



Affordances are the perceived and actual ways that objects or environments enable or limit what people can do and experience, shaping everyday activities and interactions.

When these possibilities change, there can be significant effects on mental and social well-being. These effects are not fully explained by housing cost, tenure (ownership or renting), or housing type (e.g., single-detached home vs. apartment), but by how housing supports or constrains daily life.

For example, during COVID-19 restrictions, some people living in community housing experienced more social interactions than those living in single-detached homes.

Housing influences well-being through multiple pathways

These five dimensions shape mental and social well-being and interact to influence everyday life. However, their relative importance can shift depending on context. During periods of disruption—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—housing stability, affordances, and context/neighbourhood access became especially significant, as they shape people’s ability to maintain routines, relationships, and access to support when external conditions change.

Policy recommendations

Federal government:

- **Expand the community housing sector** through increased funding and stronger collaboration between governments and stakeholders. Evidence from the pandemic shows that tenants in this sector experienced greater well-being and resilience than those in the private rental market.
- **Adopt multi-dimensional housing need measures** that better capture housing conditions, including housing affordances and lived experience.

Provincial governments:

- **Support housing models and programs that strengthen social resilience**, including sustained funding for community-based organizations that support tenants, stability, and social connection (e.g., [Hey Neighbour Collective](#), [Whole Way House](#), etc.)
- **Strengthen renter protections and tenure security** by enhancing Residential Tenancy Acts and preserving existing affordable housing, including measures to prevent renovations and other forms of involuntary displacement.

Local governments and housing developers:

- **Prioritize accessibility** in housing (e.g., accessible and adaptable dwelling design) and neighbourhood planning (e.g., transit, services, and public space).
- **Engage end-users** in housing design and evaluation to reflect lived experience and everyday needs.

What's at stake?

Housing crises are often understood through narrow financial and material indicators, such as affordability and supply. This limits housing need to visible forms of deprivation, while obscuring less visible forms of housing vulnerability that may only emerge during disruption.

Without a more holistic understanding of what it means to be safe, stable, and supported at home, housing policy risks overlooking how housing shapes mental and social well-being through everyday conditions and experiences. **This narrow focus shifts preventable burdens onto already strained health and social systems, rather than addressing upstream determinants of health and well-being through housing policy.**

Suggested readings

Zhu, Y. & Holden, M. (2023). Housing and psychological well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Habitat International*, 135, 102812. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2023.102812>

Mahdavi, D. V., Holden, M., & Zhu, Y. (2022, August 30). *More housing supply isn't a cure-all for the housing crisis*. The Conversation. <http://doi.org/10.64628/AAM.7csqpg9na>

Below is an example of the survey questions used to analyze well-being in relation to COVID-19 and housing. The survey was conducted with over 2,000 residents of British Columbia and Alberta.

**Rate your experiences of the following on a scale of 1 to 5
(1 = None of the time, 5 = All of the time)**

Over the past month, how often did you experience the following feelings about your well-being?

- Being in good spirits in general
- Feeling energetic
- Feeling fresh and rested
- Feeling satisfied with my life
- Feeling I have gotten the important things I want in life
- Feeling in most ways my life is close to my ideal
- Being bothered by nervousness or my “nerves”
- Feeling depressed to the point that nothing interests me
- Feeling sad, discouraged, or hopeless
- Feeling concerned, worried, or had fears about my health
- Feeling anxious, worried, or upset

**Rate your experiences of the following on a scale of 1 to 5
(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)**

Thinking about your experience over the past month, do you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding your feelings about society?

- I feel a sense of loneliness
- I feel like I am an important part of my community
- I feel close to other people in my community
- I believe other people in society value me as a person
- I feel that I have nothing to contribute to society
- I feel that my daily activities do not produce anything worthwhile for my community
- I feel that other people are not trustworthy
- I feel distrust in social institutions like law and government