

Highrise hell for low-income families in Toronto

New report details deplorable living conditions for low-income families in Toronto's aging highrises.



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U of T researcher Emily Paradis and tenant Rubena Naeem walk along Thorncliffe Park Dr., in a highrise community that was part of a recent groundbreaking survey. Nine of 10 low-income families living in the city's aging apartment towers are on the verge of homelessness, the study found.

By: Laurie Monsebraaten Social justice reporter, Published on Wed Mar 12 2014

Overcrowding, elevator breakdowns, broken door locks, persistent pests, peeling paint and the ever-present worry about paying the rent.

That is the growing reality for families with children living in Toronto's aging highrise apartment towers that dominate the city's low-income neighbourhoods, according to a University of Toronto study being released Wednesday.

It is the first attempt to define and measure inadequate housing, hidden homelessness and the risk of homelessness among families in these communities, where about half of the city's tenants live.

Preliminary findings from the research, [released last fall](#), showed that as many as nine in 10 of these families are at risk of homelessness.

The full study paints a broader picture of the housing crisis facing these low-income families by delving into their immigration status, income, education, health and social networks.

"Previous studies have looked at housing problems in certain neighbourhoods, among specific groups, or within particular sectors such as Toronto Community Housing," said Emily Paradis, the study's lead investigator.

"This research shows that the housing crisis for low-income families is unfolding across Toronto, in private rental as well as social housing," she said.

It reveals that racial minority or immigrant families make up more than 80 per cent of these highrise communities and that 37 per cent are headed by lone parents, mostly women. By contrast, half of all Toronto residents are immigrants, while only about 30 per cent of families are led by single parents.

Employment and education don't protect highrise families from poverty or inadequate housing, the study found. Most adults have completed post-secondary education and two-thirds report employment as their main source of income. But about 71 per cent of these families live in poverty, compared with just 21 per cent of families city-wide.

The physical and social conditions in these buildings, built between 1950 and 1979, affect health, well-being and children's development, the report says. But most families can't afford to move anywhere else. When they lose their housing due to eviction, family violence or other factors, they tend not to go to homeless shelters. Instead, they become part of the "hidden homeless" by doubling-up with other families, the report says.

"While sharing a home can enhance social support and extend resources, living in overcrowded conditions also increases stress and conflict, limits privacy and makes it difficult for adults and children to find a quiet place for work or study," it says.

The vast majority of these families came to Canada to give their children a better life, Paradis said.

"But children's lack of space to study and the stress of parents who are unable to find jobs, let alone use the credentials they came with, is throwing those dreams into question," she said in an interview.

Gopi Krishna, who runs the Scarborough Housing Help Centre at Lawrence Ave. E. and Kennedy Rd., sees the toll it takes on families in his community.

"Parents have made so many sacrifices so their children will do better," he said. "Is it possible we are setting up the second generation for failure? There is a real danger the second generation will be lost, too."

Krishna estimates that between 30 per cent and 40 per cent of the apartments in Scarborough are overcrowded, with families of four sharing a one-bedroom apartment and two families sharing larger units.

Rubena Naeem, a 40-year-old single mother of two teenagers, has been living in Thorncliffe Park since 2003. The highrise community, built in the 1950s and '60s to house 13,000 residents, is now home to about 30,000.

Although Naeem holds a master's degree in political science from a university in Pakistan, she has only been able to find part-time work that pays \$11.38 an hour.

"Employment is a big problem in this community," she says. "People who can't afford a two- or three-bedroom apartment are living in a one- or two-bedroom apartment."

Families rent out rooms to foreign students from their communities back home to help make ends meet, she added.

Despite the poor condition of the housing and the economic struggles families face, Thorncliffe Park is

safe, Naeem said. “The community supports each other and everybody knows each other,” she said.

The study is based on a survey of 1,566 families with children in highrise communities in the old cities of Etobicoke, York, East York, North York and Scarborough, and the Parkdale neighbourhood. The survey was conducted in 2009 and 2010 as part of the United Way Toronto’s larger [Vertical Poverty report](#).

Paradis and her team also conducted focus groups with more than 130 service providers and parents from these buildings to flesh out the statistical findings. It was funded by the federal government’s Homelessness Partnering Strategy.

The report recommends a national housing strategy with federal dollars to fund new affordable housing, a provincial housing benefit to help low-income residents offset high rents, and inclusionary zoning to ensure every residential development includes a certain percentage of affordable housing. It also calls for strengthened enforcement of landlord obligations and tenant rights.

“Ensuring safe, affordable housing is one of the most basic building blocks for making this a great city for every resident in every neighbourhood,” said Pedro Barata, of United Way Toronto.

“The solution requires all sectors to play a role — many landlords, tenants and the community sector are already working together to do their part,” he said.

“It is critical that all levels of government step up their efforts so that we can achieve tangible, long-term solutions to this tough challenge.”