

Addressing Core Housing Need in the City of Saint John, New Brunswick

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Executive Summary

Introduction & Rationale

Housing fulfills one of the most basic human needs, and therefore significantly impacts a household's quality of life. Factors such as housing conditions and market trends, social trends and economic growth affect a household's ability to obtain *affordable, adequate* and *suitable* housing. When a household must spend more than 30% of their total before-tax income on shelter costs, reside in substandard conditions, or do not have sufficient bedrooms for their housing needs, this is categorized as being in *core housing need*.

In 2011, over 1.5 million households across Canada were assessed to be in core housing need, totaling 12.5% of all households. In the City of Saint John, New Brunswick, the incidence of core housing need was 14.7% that year, surpassing the national rate (CMHC, 2014d) (CMHC, 2015j). With one of the most affordable housing markets in the country, the City of Saint John is an interesting locale to examine core housing need.

Research Questions

The concept of core housing need, defined by Canada's Housing and Mortgage Corporation (CMHC), was used in this report to discuss housing need across Canada, New Brunswick, and more specifically the City of Saint John. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. How does core housing need in New Brunswick compare to the rest of Canada?
2. What provincial strategies have been developed to tackle core housing need? Do these plans address the issues occurring in New Brunswick?

3. How does the City of Saint John differ from the rest of New Brunswick concerning core housing need?
4. How are the specific housing needs of Saint John addressed through provincial and local strategies?

Methods

This research relied on three methods to allow for a triangulation of data from both qualitative and quantitative sources. A document review, statistical review, and three semi-structured key informant interviews were completed as methods for this study. The City of Saint John was selected as a case study to analyze core housing need in New Brunswick.

A document review was completed to identify information concerning core housing need at the national, provincial and local level. Further, the document review was used to review provincial plans and programs that exist to address core housing need in New Brunswick. Sources such as CMHC, New Brunswick Housing Corporation (NBHC), and Saint John Human Development Council (HDC) were reviewed during this process.

Using a variety of data from Statistics Canada and CMHC, the second method used for this report was statistical review. These data were used to measure core housing need, housing market trends, income levels and poverty rates among other key variables used for this study.

Finally, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants to complement the other research methods and gain further insight concerning core housing need in New Brunswick and Saint John. These interviews discussed the status of core housing need, existing programs addressing the problem, the effectiveness of these strategies, and recommendations for eliminating core housing need in Saint John.

Findings

The general findings exposed similar trends among core need households across Canada, New Brunswick and the City of Saint John. All three levels of analysis revealed that due to typically lower income levels, renter households are more likely to be in core need, at a rate of 1 in 4 households. Further, regardless of the housing tenure, the housing standard that households most commonly fall below is affordability (CMHC, 2014d).

However, there are two key differences between core need households in Canada, New Brunswick and the City of Saint John. First, the incidence of core housing need in the City of Saint John increased from 2006 to 2011, whereas there was a decline in Canada and New Brunswick during this period. Secondly, New Brunswick and the City of Saint John have a higher incidence of inadequate housing and a higher percentage of core need households falling below this standard due to its aging housing stock (CMHC, 2015j) (Statistics Canada, 2011).

Within the City of Saint John, core housing need is largely confined to two Wards. These areas of the City experience the highest poverty rates, the highest percentage of renter households and the oldest housing stock. Representatives from the Saint John Non-Profit Housing Inc. and Housing Alternatives Inc. noted concerns about the segregation of poverty and housing need in these areas of the City.

This is due in part to high poverty and unemployment rates, household reliance on social assistance, and an insufficient number of affordable housing units available in the City of Saint John (CMHC, 2015a) (CMHC, 2014d). Furthermore, insufficient enforcement of the Minimum Building Standard in a City where 42.7% of households rent can result in many housing units remaining in substandard conditions (CMHC, 2015e). Landlords must be held accountable for repairing or upgrading inadequate housing, especially in

the City with the province's oldest housing stock (Statistics Canada, 2011). These are key factors concerning the growth of core housing need in the City of Saint John.

There are numerous provincial programs that address core housing need by investing in affordable and adequate housing. However, federal investment in affordable housing has been declining and is precarious. With federal/provincial funding agreements lasting four years at a time (under the CMHC – New Brunswick Agreement for Investment in Affordable Housing), local housing providers expressed concerns about the uncertainties of on-going funding to supply affordable units.

Recommendations

The final chapter of the report outlines various recommendations to consider at the federal, provincial and municipal level. To more effectively address core housing need in Saint John, here is a sample of the final recommendations:

- Increase investment in housing programs funding new and existing affordable units, as well as the repair and renovation of inadequate housing. Further, it is imperative that a long-term, national housing strategy be implemented with a sustainable funding model able to protect social housing, reduce homelessness and close the gaps in the housing system.
- It is recommended that the distribution of funding is proportionate to provincial needs. The City of Saint John is not receiving adequate funding for its housing needs. This results in higher incidence of core housing need and reliance on social assistance and emergency shelters in the community.
- Ensure stronger enforcement of the Minimum Building Standard By-law in the City of Saint John. This would help improve living conditions and increase landlord accountability. The City should consider developing financial incentive programs for landlords to invest in buildings and units, as well as convert units to better reflect the community's housing needs.

- Implement a municipal plan for affordable housing and ensure the City's zoning by-law offers incentives and allows for the construction of affordable housing units.

In conclusion, addressing core housing need is complex and goes beyond simply providing acceptable housing. Core housing need has been declining across the country and province of New Brunswick since 2001. It is possible that Saint John can reduce its incidence of core housing need as well. However, as highlighted by the recommendations, it will require considerable long-term effort and cooperation from the federal, provincial and municipal levels.