

November 8, 2021

Re: Queen's Community Housing Office and Off-Campus Living Advisor

To Whom It May Concern,

It is increasingly difficult for graduate student workers at Queen's University to secure adequate housing in Kingston. Rent prices are skyrocketing, the number of community housing options available are insufficient, and the resources being provided to us through Queen's University's Community Housing Office and Off-Campus Living Advisor are not adequate. The Affordable Housing Working Group (AHWG) is writing to you in the hopes of improving the situation so that PSAC 901 members and all graduate students at Queen's have access to better resources and can more readily afford to live in this city.

In meeting with our membership, it is evident that there are a number of issues related to housing that Queen's should address immediately. Broadly speaking, problems fall into one of five issue areas: First, Queen's Community Housing application system is in need of more transparency and its communication needs to be improved; Second, postdocs at Queen's are unable to access Queen's Community Housing and have a hard time finding affordable housing in the community, and this is a problem that is in need of resolution; Third, Queen's community housing policies are harsh and the resources provided by its Off-Campus Housing Coordinator are insufficient and generally unhelpful; Fourth, Queen's communication as it relates to funding packages, especially for those from overseas, has caused undue stress amongst student workers trying to secure housing; Finally, there is a general lack of affordable housing in Kingston, and many graduate student workers live in core housing need. Queen's should be a part of the solution to the affordable housing crisis and use its resources to build affordable community housing for graduate student workers and postdocs that is suited to our needs.

In what follows, we provide a general overview of the situation, with our analysis guided by the lived experiences of our membership and in the hopes of inspiring a more just, equitable, and adequate system of housing at Queen's University. We conclude each section with bolded and italicized letters indicating what, concretely, we would like to see implemented. We encourage readers of this letter to examine the housing survey conducted in the Winter 2021 semester to learn more about PSAC 901 membership struggles with affordable housing, which is attached below.

QCH Applications

Student workers who have just moved to Kingston have expressed frustration when describing the inadequacy of the Queen's Community Housing (QCH) website, especially as it relates to securing a lease. For example, members wanting to apply for a lease are told to check the website regularly for updates for when lease applications would be accepted, but Queen's fails to communicate clearly about when the portal would be open. One member shared with us that they checked the website every three to five days, but because there was no prompt or information about when applications would be welcome, by the time they checked the Queen's Community Housing site, they were down the priority list and had been told to not expect a lease. An international student worker told the AHWG that they had applied for, but failed to receive, a lease from Queen's Community Housing: As a result, they have been living precariously and have been unable to find a stable lease contract due to high and inadequate housing on the private market. ***The process by which leases are awarded for QCH should be made more transparent and Queen's should communicate more clearly about when the QCH application portal is open.***

Another issue identified to us by graduate student workers on campus is the inability to simultaneously apply for An Clachan and John Orr Tower housing. That those hoping to rent from QCH are forced to go down either avenue without having an option to try and rent from another is nonsensical. ***There should be one list for community housing, and more community housing in general.***

Postdocs

Additionally, the policies QCH maintains relating to postdocs are discriminatory, in that QCH excludes them from QCH considerations entirely. For the data that we captured from postdocs on our 2020 AHWG housing survey, postdocs pay about \$300 more per month for housing than other 901 workers, around \$1194 per month. For those earning the minimum \$35 249 a year, paying the average postdoc rent price means spending an average of 40 percent of monthly income on rent, far above the definition of affordability provided by Canada Housing and Mortgage Corporation (CMHC). ***Especially when many postdocs have families to provide for, more equitable and just housing policies need to be introduced, and more housing needs to be built that is suited to our memberships basic needs.***

The needs of our postdocs need to be taken more seriously. In the housing survey conducted last year, one postdoc noted: "It is disappointing to have not received support from Queens with regard to housing. As Queens know better than anyone, house rent is too high for an international PDF scholar who lives with their family members. Having a new baby we have to move to a larger place, but it is not affordable! This is going to jeopardize our mental health."

Another postdoc made a similar comment: “Queen's postdocs are not eligible for Queen's Community Housing such as An Clachan or rental houses owned by Queen's, which is very frustrating for us. We are trainees but don't get the same benefits as graduate students. We have to search for more expensive and inconvenient places to live.”

Queen's University Housing Policies and Resources

Queen's Community Housing also uses excessively severe measures when it comes to their late payment rental policies. Despite the fact that graduate students and graduate student workers earn very little money, QCH has a punitive policy that, in effect, disproportionately targets people who are poor. Not only are renters who are evicted for a non-payment episode blacklisted from renting from QCH in the future, but the economic status of these underpaid student workers unduly impacts flatmates. As stated from the QCH Rent Information and Rates page, “Please remember, all tenants of a unit are **“jointly and severally”** responsible for any debts of that unit. Even if you have an agreement with your roommates to split the rent payments, if one does not pay everyone is held responsible for the debt.”

Experience has shown our members that Queen's University's housing resources are mostly resources for landlords, and not for tenants, workers, and students. Housing listed as part of this program does not appear to be more affordable or desirable than any other housing option. The Landlord Contract Program is a benefit to landlords, while the advantages it offers tenants are minimal. There are also apparently very few checks in place to ensure that landlords who are a part of this program are not exploiting tenants. The AHWG is aware of at least one situation where a landlord who is a part of this program got a tenant to sign a supplementary lease allowing them access to the property at any time without notice, telling the tenant that the supplement allows them to override the Residential Tenancy Act. ***At very minimum, Queen's University needs to institute a program of quality control. One way of very easily achieving quality control is to allow students who have leases with Queen's contracted landlords to post feedback that is made available to potential tenants.***

It is especially difficult for international students at Queen's to use the resources provided by our university. For example, over the summer, Queen's Off-Campus Housing Advisor held evening information sessions, making them inaccessible for those living abroad due to time differences. Especially in the midst of a pandemic, where people were living all over the world and some have not yet returned to campus, these sessions should have been held at different times that were available to students around the world. ***Moving forward, the Off-Campus Housing Advisor should hold event sessions that are sensitive to time in other parts of the world, where many of our members live when school is not in.***

Communication

Another issue we have identified is that there is a disconnect with University messaging. On the one hand, Queen's University has suggested that students and graduate student workers should not sign a rental lease prior to seeing the unit for themselves; On the other hand, it is somewhat of a common practice for our membership to not receive financial packages until just prior to the term beginning. Here is what we mean: Given the low vacancy rates and high demand for housing, it is customary in Kingston for landlords to demand people sign leases in the early stages of summer, even if the person will not occupy the unit until August or September. At the same time, the School of Graduate Studies held a seminar earlier in the year telling prospective and incoming students not to sign a lease prior to seeing the unit. We see this as a contradiction: One part of the University is saying not to sign anything without viewing it and knowing your budget (from the QCH website: It is the student's responsibility to ensure that the prospective accommodation is appropriate, suitable and safe), while another part of the University has shown that we do not receive our funding packages until we arrive in town. How are our members supposed to know if the housing is suitable and appropriate when we are not in town to inspect the unit and do not have our funding packages is a serious issue that needs resolution. ***At the very least, to make this a resource that is truly useful to student workers, Queen's should designate someone at the off-campus housing and community housing offices to visit units on behalf of members who are not present, and it should do what it can to try and relay funding packages to its student workers in a timely fashion to resolve these issues.***

This complaint builds off previous grievances that have been made apparent to our employer. In February 2019, PSAC 901's International Caucus penned an open letter to Queen's University detailing how unclear financial communication had impacted international student workers upon their arrival to Canada. As they stated at the time: "We firmly believe that when an international student is sent an offer to attend the university they should, at the same time, be given a standardised document that outlines the costs involved, the details of their funding package, as well as how this money will be distributed." ***The AHWG is now reiterating the need for Queen's to develop better communication strategies as it relates to funding.***

The General Lack of Affordable Housing

A larger issue facing Queen's University is that there simply isn't enough affordable, accessible, and adequate housing to meet demand. A PSAC 901 AHWG membership survey on housing shows that approximately 40 percent of people who have applied for a lease with QCH did not secure a tenancy. Moreover, more than 80 percent of Queen's graduate students and graduate workers live in core housing need, meaning they live in unaffordable housing or housing that is in need of repair. Our funding packages are not keeping up with the price of rent. We have attached the AHWG survey we conducted for you to review yourself (see end of letter).

PSAC 901 AFFORDABLE HOUSING WORKING GROUP

We want Queen's University to make sure that the units we live in are accessible and affordable. Our funding packages are low, but the current resources being provided to students and student workers are also insufficient. As it stands now, the off-campus living advisor, a former real estate agent and property manager, is not a suitable person to help our members. The off campus resources are resources for landlords, staffed by landlords, who have a seal of legitimacy from Queen's. The prices for the units being advertised there are not lower, and people are being taken advantage of and told to sign documents counter to their interest and against the Residential Tenancy Act. On the community housing front, there isn't enough of it, and for what does exist, penalties are excessively punitive and penalize people for being poor. There are more issues that deserve attention, and hopefully in time they get addressed. For now, we would like to have our voices heard and see our employer and our educational institution make necessary investments to remedy the identified issues. Having safe, adequate, affordable, and accessible housing is an integral part of life for students and workers alike. ***Queen's should build enough community housing for all of its graduate student workers and postdocs and rent these units at affordable, geared-to-income prices.***

Signed,

PSAC 901's Affordable Housing Working Group

“Our stipends are really not sufficient for the cost of living in this town”: The State of Graduate Student-Worker Housing in Kingston, Ontario

Report from the Affordable Housing Working Group (AHWG) presented to the PSAC Local 901 Annual General Meeting

Spring 2021



The Survey

By the Numbers

Who we heard from

We received 426 total responses to our housing survey which provided complete data for approximately 370 respondents. Of the total number of PSAC 901 members who completed it, 47.65% were Masters students while 46.48% were doctoral students. The remaining respondents were postdoctoral students (3.52%) and professional students (2.35%). A majority of respondents (70%) were first and second year graduate students. Although 73% of PSAC 901 members who answered the survey were domestic students, international students represented a significant share of respondents at 27%.

83% of respondents reported their current residence as Kingston, Ontario while 12.97% currently reside elsewhere. Approximately half of our survey respondents have lived in their current dwelling for less than one year. In total, 92.61% of respondents indicated that they are currently tenants, and only 27% of members report living alone. Of these PSAC 901 members, 45% report renting from an individual landlord while 35% currently hold a lease with a property management company.

Cost of Living

The majority of respondents (58.65%) reported an annual income of under \$25,000 per year, while 38.46% reported an annual income of less than \$20,000 per year (Figure 1). Students reporting less than \$15,000 dollars per year formed the largest group of respondents (n=89), followed by students making between \$20,000 - \$25,000 per year (n=84, figure 1).

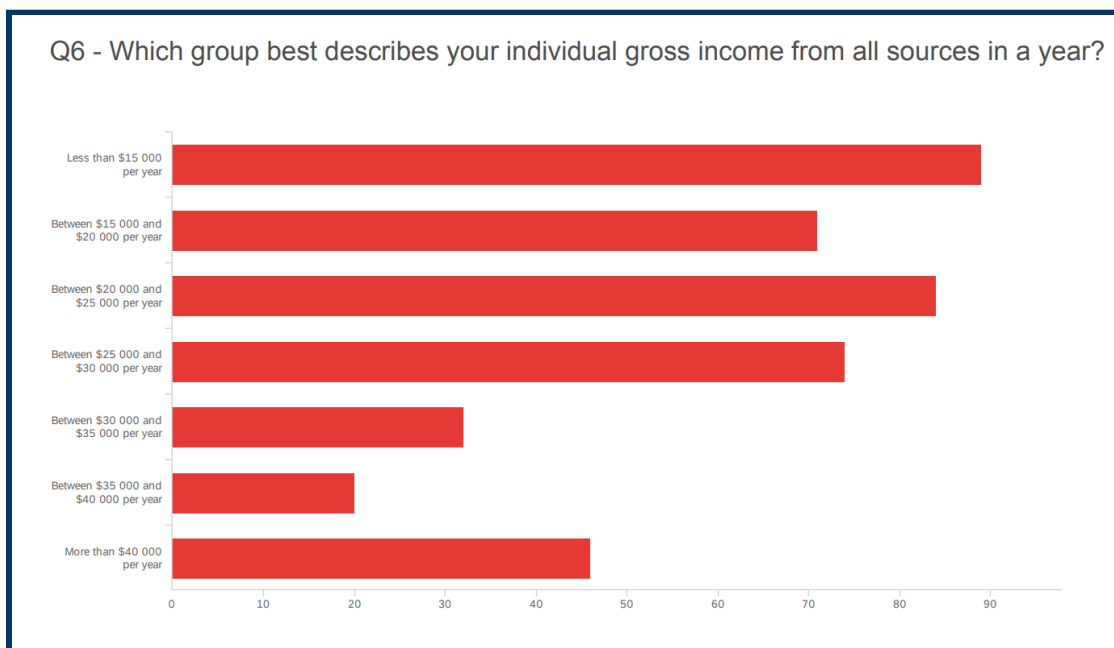


Figure 1: Individual gross income from all sources per year

Most respondents do not live by themselves because doing so is not affordable, and as such pay less than the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Kingston. A total of 72.75% of respondents reported living with at least one or more people, with the plurality (41%) reporting one roommate (Figure 2). The average monthly rent paid was reported as \$854.55, placing an estimated 88.94% of respondents in core housing need.¹

Despite the fact that average rent prices fall short of the average for the City of Kingston, it is worth noting that due to the inadequate amount of income and funding academic sector workers and graduate students receive, many have limited choices in their housing preferences. As the data explains, many live with other people against their wishes, live far from campus, can not leave their unit for more adequate housing options, find it easier to stay in an inadequate housing arrangement than move to something less affordable, go without certain amenities, etc. Members living in Queen's community housing pay less on average than those living in private market housing, and community housing serves to deflate the overall average of monthly rent in the data captured in this survey.

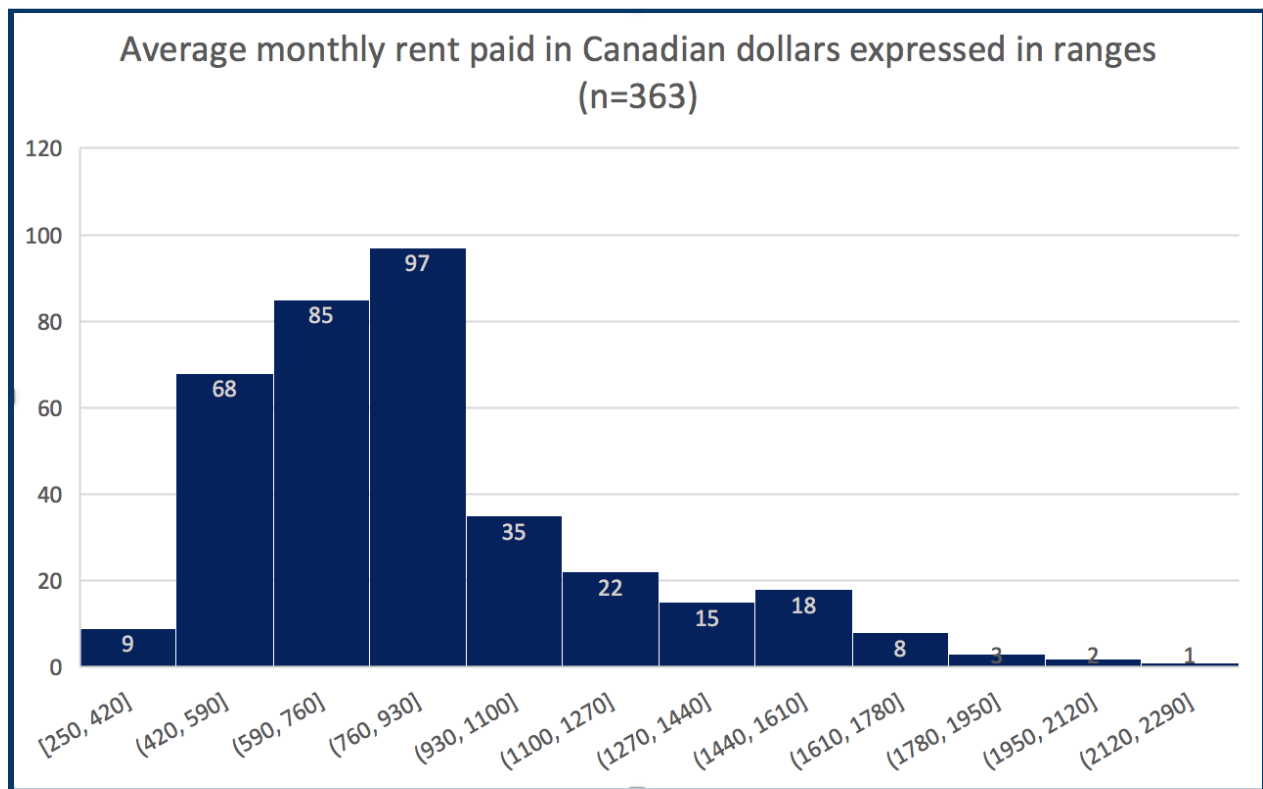


Figure 2: Average monthly rent paid in Canadian dollars expressed in ranges

The average cost of rent for graduate student-workers was noted as contributing to financial distress by a majority of respondents. 28.65% of our surveyed population indicated that they experience financial stress as a result of paying rent often or always (Figure 3). A further

¹ The Canada Mortgage Housing Corporation (CMHC) states that a "household is said to be in core housing need if its housing falls below at least one of the adequacy, affordability or suitability, standards and it would have to spend 30% or more of its total before-tax income to pay the median rent of alternative local housing that is acceptable (meets all three housing standards)" (2018).

28.11% of respondents occasionally experience financial distress, while 43.24% reported rarely or never experiencing such distress (Figure 3).

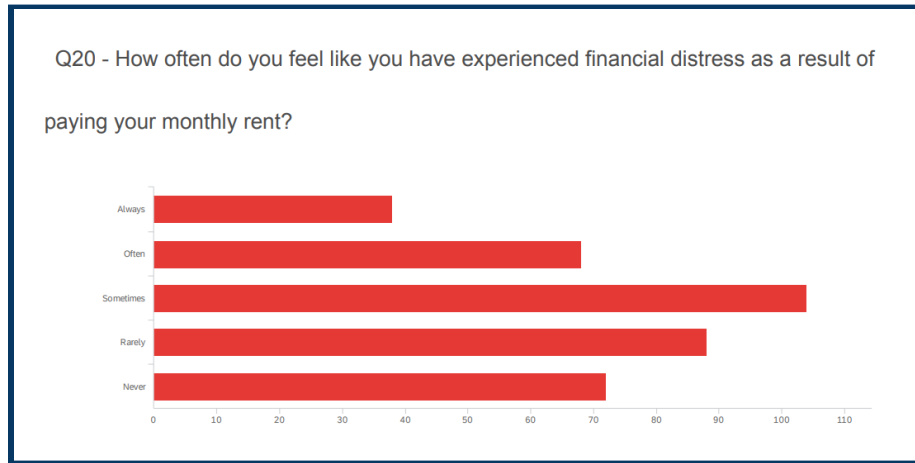


Figure 3: Financial distress related to housing affordability

Access to Student and Community Housing

71.22% of respondents did not apply for a tenancy at a rental property owned by Queen's University or indicated that they were not sure if they applied. A total of 28.79% of people (n=116) indicated that they applied for such a tenancy (Figure 4). Of this group, 61% successfully received a tenancy while the remaining 39% did not (Figure 4).

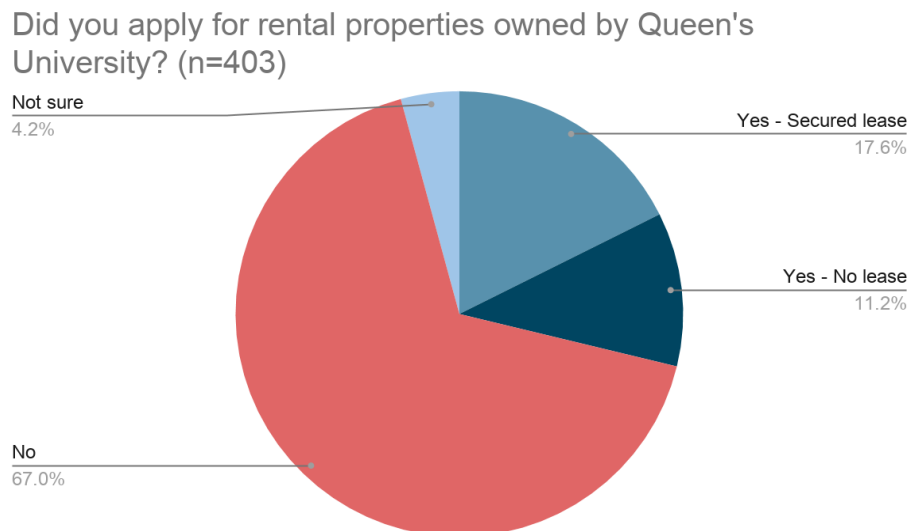
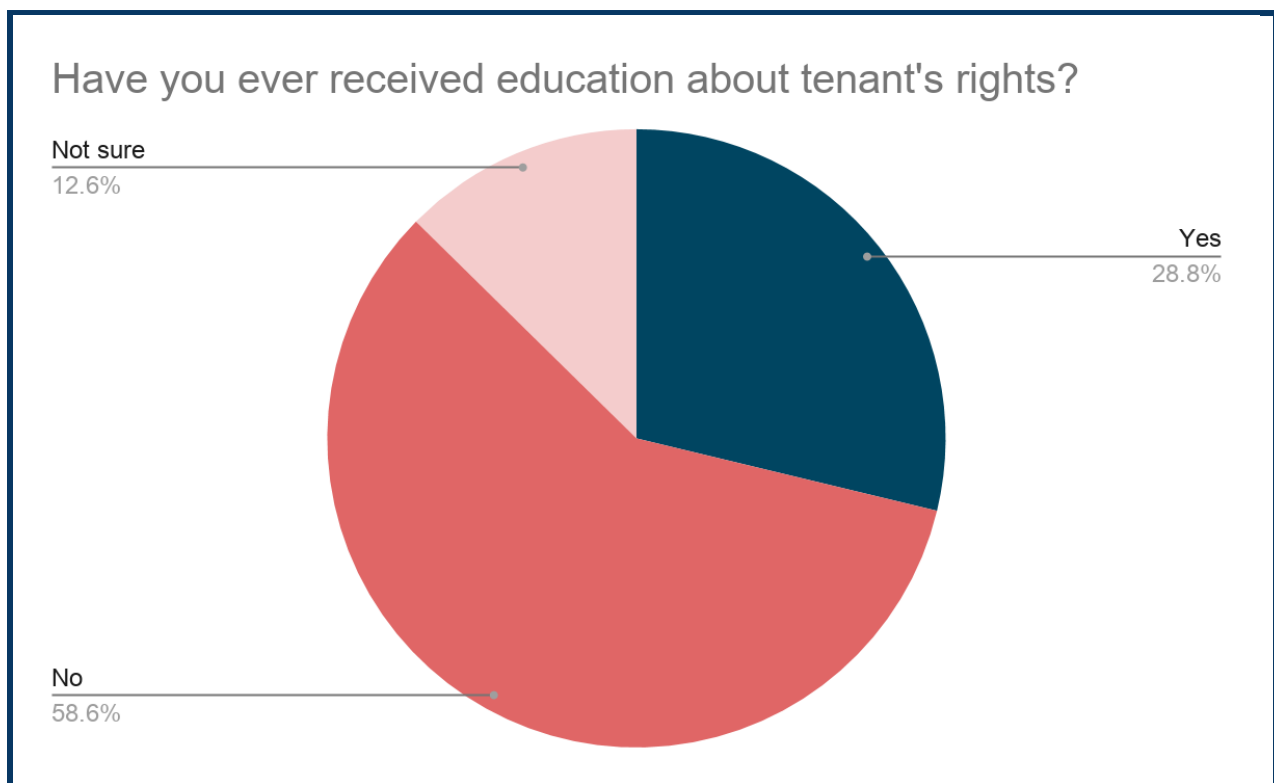


Figure 4: Access to rental properties owned by Queen's University

Among students who indicated that they had applied to Queen's Community Housing, such tenancies were highly sought after relative to the private student rental market, as will be discussed in the following section of this report

Navigating Tenancies in Kingston

Graduate student workers reported diverse experiences navigating Kingston's housing landscape, interacting with landlords and accessing adequate housing. 16.89% of respondents reported experiencing some kind of problem with their current landlord, while the remaining 83.11% indicated that they had not. Additionally, 71.23% of PSAC 901 members surveyed did not report receiving education about their rights and responsibilities as tenants. Prior to signing a lease, only 5% of respondents attempted to access legal advice related to their tenancy. Of those who sought legal advice, only 4 people indicated that they did not receive said advice..



Importantly, the majority (58%) of 901 members have never received education about their rights as a tenant. Around 12 percent of members indicated they were “not sure” if they have received information pertaining to their rights as a tenant (Figure 5).

Student Experiences of Inadequate Housing

Background and Methods

Survey respondents were invited to provide qualitative, open-ended written responses at two primary points throughout the survey. Immediately following question 16, “Have you experienced any problems with your landlord?”, respondents were given the option to explain the nature of

these problems. Similarly, question 21 invited participants to “tell us about this survey, about your housing experience, or any housing issue that will provide us with more information so that we can fight to address your needs?”. After reviewing the qualitative survey, a significant majority of the qualitative data from both questions reflected graduate student-worker’s negative experiences with housing quality and affordability in Kingston, including their interactions with landlords. In order to better understand the experiences of survey respondents, qualitative responses from both questions were grouped together and put through a preliminary thematic analysis using QSR’s NVivo qualitative data analysis software. The resulting thematic areas and the quotes that support them represent frequently raised issues and points of consensus among survey respondents that provide important context to the quantitative data in this report.

1) Housing is not affordable

“Rent is very expensive for a single-person household. After subtracting tuition fees paid every month in instalments, most of my monthly pay is used up to pay rent. With mobile and internet plans also being extremely expensive, the remaining amount is spent on groceries and nothing else. It feels like living alone is penalised.”

“I have lived in several student’s homes within the Kingston community. Several of which were in terrible condition and landlords refused to address the situations in a timely and efficient manner. It seems the only way to live in a reasonable and safe home in this community is to spend more than you can afford.”

“Kingston housing is not adequate for current students. You are paying so much and receiving so little and the properties are very old, dirty and run down.”

2) Insufficient Funding for Graduate Student-Workers

“Rent in Kingston, relative to the income provided to graduate students through TAs, RAs, grants, and bursaries, are exorbitant, especially in consideration of the excessive tuition fees charged to upper year graduate students, despite their receipt of only a fraction of University services.”



“Our stipends are really not sufficient for the cost of living in this town”

“Graduate student base stipend should be adjusted for inflation. My PhD base rate is the same as my father was paid in 1989.”

“Likewise, I think that the rate at which housing prices are rising needs to be matched in kind with the rate at which we, as grad students, are paid for our work as TAs, RAs, TFs, and in funding packages.”

“My rent, utilities, and internet costs eat up over 70% of my monthly income. Please help us get paid more.”

3) Housing affordability limits life choices

“While yes, I live alone, I am not an 18-22 year old undergrad. I'm a 30 year old adult trying to finish a PhD who likes to work at home and likes peace and quiet. I should not be expected to go get roommates to get by without devoting half my income to rent. Graduate student funding needs to take account of cost of living in this city or Queen's will become a university only for the upper class and moneyed families.”

"I live in residence, losing privacy and freedom because of how unsustainable rent prices are at queens. There was no option for me to continue school without gaining a job as a don. I don't have the same opportunities for funding as those in research masters."

"I moved into my current space because it was all I could afford within reasonable commute (walking/bus) to Queen's. It's too small to properly accommodate my research. I cannot afford a car, so renting/buying further away is not an option."

4) Unique barriers for international students

"It is very difficult for international students to find an affordable housing. The housing price in Kingston is expensive. Queen's housing is very limited and it is not helpful for international students. Looking for a house prior to my arrival in Kingston was a very stressful experience."

"It is disappointing to have not received support from Queens with regard to housing. As Queens know better than anyone, house rent is too high for an international PDF scholar who lives with their family members. Having a new baby we have to move to a larger place, BUT it is not affordable! This going to jeopardize our mental health."

"Some landlord companies are incredibly predatory (especially on International students)."

5) Illegal actions by private landlords

"During my undergrad at Queen's, I lived in an apartment owned by Foundry. They are the scum of the Earth. They tried illegal rent increases, changing my lease from all-inclusive to utilities not included without my consent, were negligent with completing repairs or emergency services in a timely order, and were incredibly rude to students in general."

"In my previous dwelling, concerns about landlord retaliation kept me from speaking up when our landlord was breaking the law. They were harassing me but I didn't have the time/money to move, and worried that a bad reference from them could prevent me from getting a future place. A resource on dealing with these scenarios would have been useful for me. (Examples: entering our unit outside of allowed hours/without the required notice, removing and donating our personal possessions from the house without asking, removing furnishings they'd provided without notice or replacement, harassing us about 'clutter' in common spaces (ie, any personal belongings that were outside our room)."

"My previous landlord would show up 3 times a week without any announcement and also entered the house that I rented from them."

"While I no longer rent, when I was a renter there were many unethical rental companies I encountered that put illegal clauses in their contracts, or told me that I had to "re-sign" a lease each year."

6) Unsafe housing conditions

"In previous years, during undergrad when money was tighter, I lived in some shitholes. Plumbing would clog weekly, heat to parts of the house would break and never be restored leading to appliances such as fridges freezing/bottles bursting/frozen pipes. I also lived in one place that had knob and tube wiring, no boxes for electrical connections, and no functional smoke detectors. I have had a fire in a house (confined to the oven) which filled the entire house with smoke to the point where we could not stay, but did not ever trigger a smoke alarm. The housing in Kingston is terrible, but I have been able to get away from it by living further away (30 mins) from campus."

"I have a bug infestation in my apartment and when I talked to them about it they brought in some incompetent person and he didn't do anything and didn't listen to what I was saying."

“The unit was full of pests - mice, spiders, house centipedes, silverfish, ants - and was constantly damp and humid due to an exposed-ground basement.”

“There was a leak in the apartment upstairs and part of our ceiling and wall broke, having a direct hole with all the wires in the wall and our upstairs neighbour. It took more than 3 weeks for the landlord to fix the issue”

“We had to wait six month to get a window replaced in our apartment last February. We requested the maintenance in September as the window wouldn't close, but it wasn't replaced until February, after which time we had accrued significant heating costs.”

7) Unpleasant experiences with private landlords

“Shortly after I moved in there were a lot of renovations that were being done and there was a lack of communication for when they would be entering my unit, how long they would be here, and what was being done (e.g., if the water would be turned off). It was very frustrating for me and caused a lot of stress.”

“[The landlord] just stares into the apartment all the time.”

“Generally reticent to spend money on upkeep unless pressured repeatedly to do so.”

8) Development policy and Kingston's housing market



“Rented a unit in a building under construction. Building wasn't ready for September as planned. Was homeless for a month until it was ready. Tough start to a masters.”

“I think heritage restrictions on Kingston properties sometimes deter landlords from repairing or upgrading the houses, and as a result, students are living in dilapidated homes.”

“The properties owned by landlords but on a contract with the university allow landlords to break the ontario Tenant act with clauses in the leases. Especially when it comes to notorious landlords like Daphne Dean. The university doesn't actually care, they just let landlords take advantage of students who are too young and poor to do anything about it.”

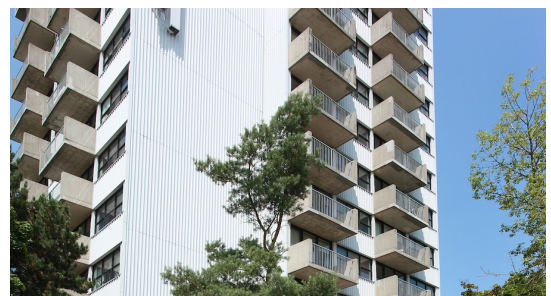
“We need more housing to bring prices down.”

“...These are both companies who pressure students to sign new leases so they could bump up the rent more than the Ontario allowable amount, and have both "explained" this under the guise of some Queen's related property thing where they force us to sign these leases in October, months before the May to May lease is up. I don't know why Queen's is affiliated with these companies because a lot of International or even domestic but out of city students look for these affiliations as a guarantee but are misled by this into exploitative contracts.”

9) Queen's community housing

“If I may suggest any plans, we desperately need more buildings like John Orr tower and An Clachan to accommodate the students in comfortable housing at a reasonable price. For me, I am already settled in a decent place that I like but my suggestion is for future students and students still looking for a good place to live. I don't want anyone to go through what I went through. Thank you for listening.”

“I was really lucky to have gotten a spot in John Orr - I was on the waiting list, and signed a lease with a pretty predatory housing company at first. With that company, I was able to get back half of my



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first month's rent because they were able to find someone else. I feel very fortunate to be in John Orr, and feel strongly that we should have more community housing available for graduate students."

"Outside of university housing, I haven't found any affordable housing in town."

"One of the more affordable options is the queens housing, but you're not guaranteed a spot as a grad student and they're far away so...not necessarily great options all around."

"I lived in a different apartment before this September, which had rent that was ~1300 because previously I had been unable to get a spot with Queen's housing."

"John Orr tower Parking should be free and not over \$100 a month. This added cost is unfair when the parking lot is always empty and the other community housing building does not have to pay for parking."

"It is appalling that at John Orr Tower I have to pay an additional \$110 a month approximately for parking when An Clachan gets free parking. I didn't have a choice what housing complex I went into, I was assigned John Orr Tower."

10) Accessible supports and actionable rights for renters

"It is important that we know what are our rights and duties as tenants. Sometimes we don't know what we can or can't do in the apartment or who is responsible if something needs repair, etc. The system in our home country is probably different than the system here in Canada."

"I don't think much change is going to happen if tenant rights are nor (or can not) be enforced. And it's hard to punish landlords that abuse their tenants when most of the demand in Kingston comes from students that don't know better."

"I think education on tenant rights and how to advocate for those rights would be very beneficial."

"I found myself needing to seek legal advice from the university along with the Landlord Tenant Board on how to get appropriate repairs, temporary relocation, and reimbursement of electricity costs (that were a direct result of the repair). The rental company was thankfully quick due to my persistence."