



# **How are Living Conditions Impacting Working Conditions? A Qualitative Analysis of Graduate and Post-Doctoral Experiences at Queen's University**



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# INTRODUCTION

Finding appropriate housing to complete a graduate degree or a post-doctoral position at Queen's University is challenging. With the rental vacancy rate in Kingston hovering around 1%, there are limited options. The extent of this problem became apparent last spring. As reported in the *Kingstonist*, when Queen's Community Housing opened its portal for new applicants, there were "over 300 applications submitted for just 60 available units in under 30 minutes."

Not only are there limited rental units in Kingston, but there are very few units that fit into the monthly budgets of graduate and post-doctoral workers. PSAC 901's Affordable Housing Working Group's previous research from 2021 found that the income of graduate student workers at Queen's University did match up with their housing costs. The study found that approximately 88% of survey respondents lived in core housing need, given that they spent over 30% of their income on rent alone.

When individuals spend more than 30% of their income on housing costs, their choices in life are restricted. For instance, respondents in 2021 noted the need to live with roommates and the need to take on additional work to be able to afford basic necessities. Notably, these qualitative findings were in response to a general question: "Tell us about your housing experience, or any housing issue that will provide us with more information so that we can fight to address your needs." Given this, the Working Group felt that it would be worthwhile to design a follow-up study to ask directly about these issues.

# CURRENT RESEARCH



Building on the previous research, the Affordable Housing Working Group sought to understand better the lived-experience of housing insecurity from graduate student and post-doctoral perspectives. In particular, the study wanted to find out how housing options, costs, and arrangements are impacting the academic experience of graduate and post-doctoral workers.

The survey began with closed-ended questions. The closed-ended questions were used to understand who was responding, where graduate students and post-docs lived, how much they were paying, and how many roommates they lived with. For this, there were 149 complete responses. Of the respondents, 47.7% were PhD students/candidates, 44.4% were Master's students, and 7.9% were post-doctoral scholars; 97.3% lived in Kingston; the average monthly rent per person was \$1063; the average monthly utilities per person was \$139; and the majority (57.7%) lived with at least one roommate.

Next, the survey moved on to open-ended, narrative-based questions that prompted respondents to detail their experiences of finding housing, living in their current housing, and how their living conditions were impacting their working conditions. Respondents were also asked to reflect on whether (or how) their housing was meeting their needs. Respondents were invited to either respond to all the narrative-based questions or a selection of their choosing. This was to allow for flexibility in the sharing of lived-experience. Some respondents found it easier to detail, cohesively, how they were impacted by their current housing conditions rather than spreading responses over each question while other respondents preferred to break the parts of their overall experience down by question. The number of responses to the open-ended questions ranged from 103 to 149. All responses were carefully read several times. Responses were coded and codes were then assigned to broader themes.

Four themes emerged across the open-ended questions. First, many (directly and indirectly) illustrated how finding good quality, below-market-rate housing in Kingston is a matter of luck. Second, almost all respondents raised concerns about how financial insecurity is impacting their ability to focus on their work. Third, many articulated the importance of having a private space at home to support their productivity and mental health. Fourth, many expressed concern that there was not enough support for families, or age considerations when it came to housing. Woven throughout these overarching themes are feelings of stress and anxiety. Overall, findings indicate that graduate and post-doctoral workers are struggling with the current housing situation in Kingston and that these struggles are having spill-over effects significantly impacting their ability to focus on their academic goals.

This situation raises serious concerns about the relationship between the university and PSAC 901 members. Graduate and post-doctoral workers do not come to Queen's University arbitrarily; rather, they come here with hopes of producing the highest quality scholarship possible. Likewise, the university selects graduate students and

post-doctoral scholars with the belief that they have the potential to make meaningful academic contributions. In theory, funding packages—including contracted jobs with limited hours—are to ensure those coming to the university can fully commit themselves to their research without distraction. This is reinforced by the fact that many departments, and individual supervisors, restrict the number of hours graduate students can work. Currently, however, the high cost of housing is placing limits on the amount of time and the degree of dedicated attention graduate and post-doctoral workers are able to commit to their academic goals.

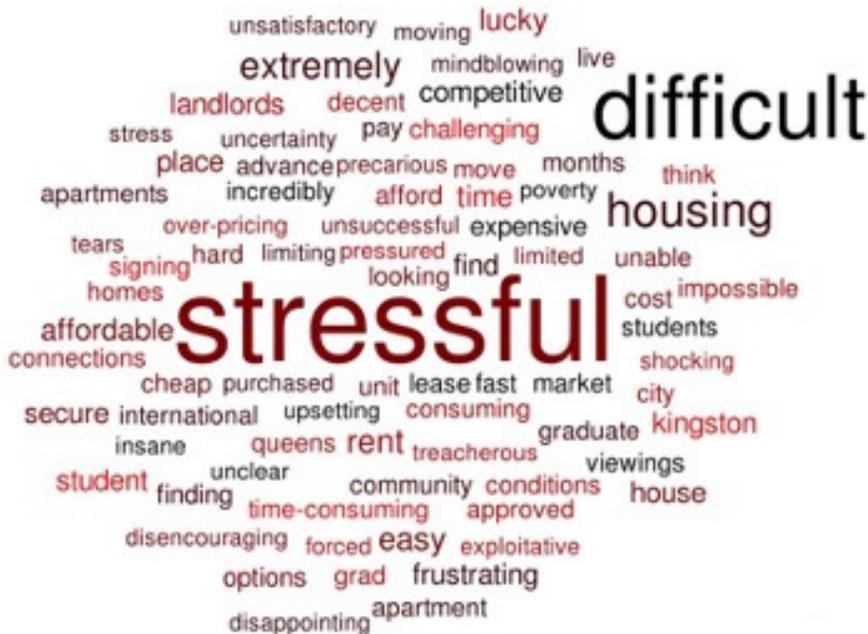
Each of the following thematic discussions demonstrate how the housing conditions of graduate student and post-doctoral workers are negatively impacting research and professional development. The report concludes with recommendations that, altogether, call for serious changes to the relationship between the university and PSAC 901 members.

# GETTING LUCKY

**“Securing good, relatively affordable housing in a decent area should not come down to luck.”**

The first open-ended question asked: "How would you describe your experience trying to find housing?" The majority of respondents listed words with negative connotations. Figure 1 shows the most commonly used words, with font size correlating to frequency. The two most commonly used words were “stressful” and “difficult.” These descriptors were expressed through several narratives highlighting the competitive nature of the rental market in Kingston and the relative scarcity of appropriate rental units. Respondents reported checking available listings every day and responding to ads as soon as they were posted only to find out the unit had already been rented. This process induced fear in many cases. As explained by one individual: “Before finding my current apartment, I was worried that I wouldn't be able to find a place to live in Kingston.”

Figure 1: How Would You Describe Your Experience of Securing Housing in Kingston?



To address this sense of housing insecurity, and to limit the fear of not being able to find a place to live, respondents reported deploying a number of tactics. For instance, at least one respondent reported paying rent for additional months before moving to Kingston to ensure that they would have a place to live in September. Others reported signing leases without having seen the unit in person or without having had a proper tour of the unit.

In some cases, though, it was not feasible to deploy such tactics to secure housing. Some respondents—especially those self-identifying as racialized and/or international students—identified discriminatory tendencies of private landlords in Kingston. One respondent noted apprehension from landlords when they reached out about available units because of their race. While extremely difficult to prove in such a tight rental market, this apprehension could indicate that landlords simply select the tenants they want to rent to. Other discriminatory elements of Kingston’s private landlords, felt by a wide range of respondents, included: illegally disallowing pets, evicting individuals if one roommate moves out, and restricting guests.

As **Figure 1** also indicates, there were a few who noted that finding housing was easy. These individuals explained that they had deep connections to the city, having either completed their undergraduate degree at Queen’s or having previously bought a home within driving distance of the university. These individuals in the narrative-based questions tended to express feelings of “luck.” Many recognized that if they did not have connections or their current housing was not secured in advance, they would have faced extreme difficulty.

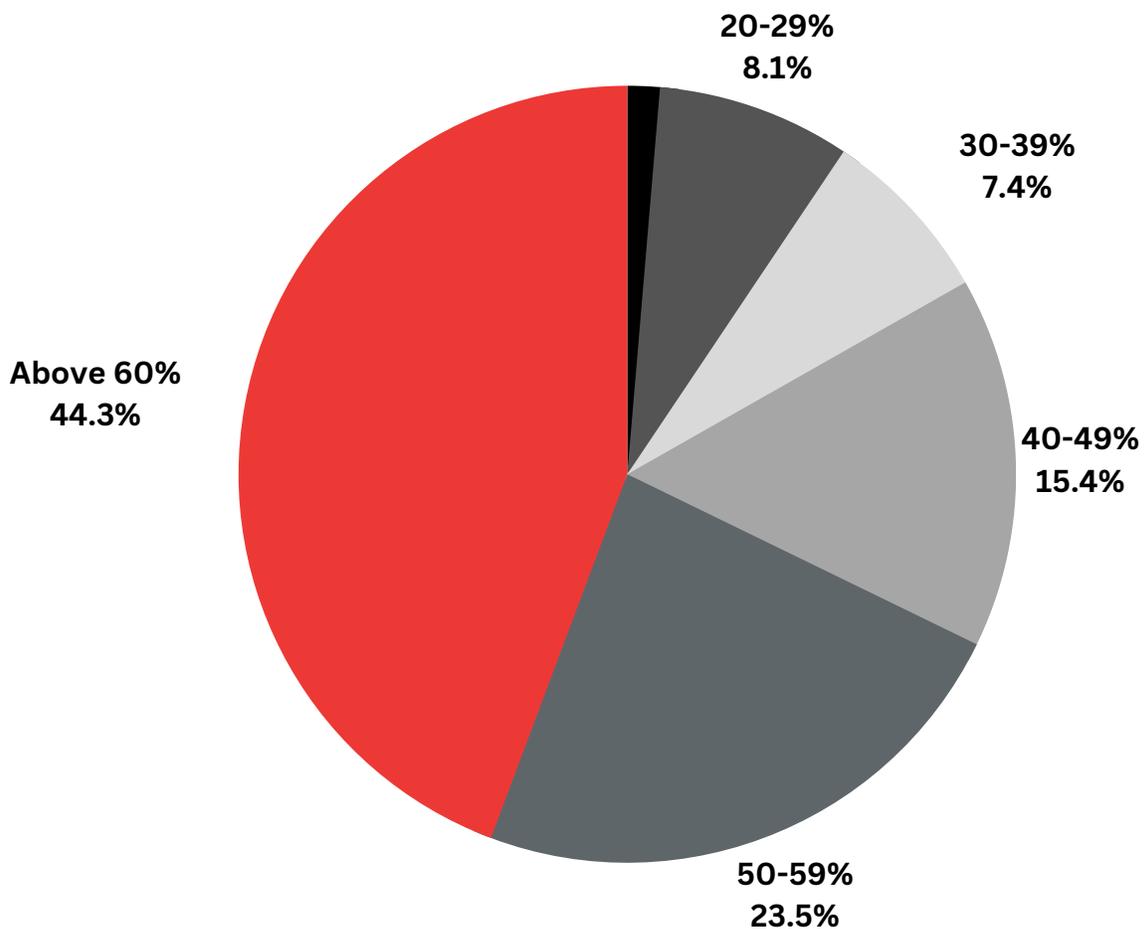
Similarly, respondents who lived in Queen’s Community Housing expressed how lucky they felt to have secured their units. Respondents noted that living in Queen’s Community Housing felt like a “privilege” and that they were “thankful” for their good fortune. This is despite the fact that many also reported maintenance issues with their Queen’s Community Housing units, including leaky ceilings, aging units, and heating/cooling problems.

Others who had applied to Queen’s Community Housing but were unable to secure a unit followed a similar narrative about ‘luck.’ One respondent noted that they wanted to apply for Queen’s Community Housing but (unluckily) had an appointment at the same time the application portal opened, while another highlighted how they submitted an application as soon as the portal opened but were not lucky enough to secure a unit. One respondent powerfully argued that there was a need to create more units to ensure “everyone applying [stands] a chance.”

In the private rental market, some respondents also noted that they felt lucky that their unit was below the going market rate in Kingston. In most of these cases this feeling of luck, though, was overshadowed by how even with comparably 'affordable' rental costs, they still felt financial stress. This contradiction was expressed clearly by one respondent who stated: "I am lucky to pay below average rent for a 1 bedroom, but it is almost my entire monthly earnings with about 300 left over for everything else!" This indicates that even when individuals luck into below-market-rate units, they still experience high levels of financial insecurity.

For most, the cost of housing consumes almost all of their monthly income. Figure 2 shows the self-reported percentage of monthly income being spent on housing. Fewer than 10 percent of respondents are spending less than 30% of their monthly income on housing. This means that over 90% of respondents would be considered as living in core housing need—slightly higher than the previous Affordable Housing Working Group's 2021 finding of 88% of respondents living in core housing need.

Figure 2: Approximately what percentage of your income is spent on housing?



It is not only the graduate and post-doctoral workers who should feel stressed about this situation but also the university. “Luck” in this context can be a two-way street. One respondent noted that housing costs were a major concern for them and had they not been able to access a unit in Queen’s Community Housing, they would have considered pursuing their graduate studies at a different institution. A post-doctoral worker similarly noted that if they were aware of the cost of housing in Kingston, they “may have not considered to move to Kingston and looked for jobs elsewhere.” Another respondent articulated this sentiment in an even clearer way by stating: “If Queen's doesn't help advocate for a better housing situation, I imagine it will severely compromise their ability to attract graduate students.” If housing costs continue to move in an unattainable direction, then, Queen’s will have to rely on luck to attract top-tier graduate and post-doctoral workers.

## A BALANCING ACT

**“In order to actually feed myself past paying rent, I am working 2 part-time jobs on top of my TA work. This drains a lot of my time that I need to use to focus on research, as most evenings, and many days, I am at work trying to simply fund my grocery bills.”**

Not only do graduate and post-doctoral workers report paying high percentages of their income on housing costs, but they also report needing additional streams of funding to cover the costs of housing and other basic necessities. Figure 3 indicates the various ways respondents cover their cost of housing. The financial insecurity caused by high housing costs also spills over into the daily lives of graduate and post-doctoral workers. With this, the need to take on additional jobs and an inability to afford food were two major concerns respondents highlighted. These issues had serious impacts on the ability of graduate students to focus on their courses, research, dissertation writing, and professional development.

Figure 3



Many reported that they took on additional jobs not only to pay for housing but also for other basic necessities. One respondent stated straightforwardly: “I have three jobs to pay for housing, utilities, and food.” Another respondent elaborated a bit further: “low graduate funding makes it so that I need to take on a good amount of RA/additional TA/teaching work in order to afford rent, tuition, and other living expenses.” For others, it is necessary to take work outside their field of expertise to cover these living costs, which further detracts from professional development in their field of expertise.

Living this type of paycheck-to-paycheck lifestyle creates a great deal of stress. Some respondents expressed fear that if they were to lose even one of their jobs, they would not be able to afford rent. Others worried about whether they would be able to complete their graduate degree with the mounting costs of living and the limited time they were able to commit to their research.

Throughout the responses, it became clear that for many it was impossible to detach concerns of financial insecurity from concerns about their decreased productivity that was resulting from a lack of adequate nutrition and a need to work additional jobs to afford housing and other basic necessities. Respondents variously explained that: “[i]t’s hard to engage with school work when you can’t afford to pay rent and get groceries,” taking on extra work “drains a lot of my time that I need to focus on research, as most evenings, and many days, I am at work trying to simply fund my grocery bills,” “the anxiety of housing insecurity makes it very difficult to function,” and with little money and time “my ability to attend conferences—a crucial part of scientific progress and professional development—has been negatively

affected.” In sum, the current situation of high living costs and low funding rates is having severe negative impacts on the ability of graduate and post-doctoral workers to put their best selves forward.

This situation is more challenging for some than it is for others. As **Figure 3** indicates, some are able to access savings and family support. As explained by one respondent: “Students who are left to work extra tend to be those who do not have easily-accessible family support or are from far away and cannot move back in with family. This shows that students who are struggling to complete their degrees tend to be from less-advantageous backgrounds.” Echoing the previous section, without substantial change in graduate student housing supports, and graduate student funding packages more generally, Queen’s will have to hope that those with more financial means will be able to maintain the university’s reputation as an institution of research excellence.

For now, many will continue to struggle with a serious trade-off between working extra jobs to afford basic necessities or dedicating more time to research and dissertation writing (despite being hungry).

## **LIVING CONDITIONS IMPACT WORKING CONDITIONS**

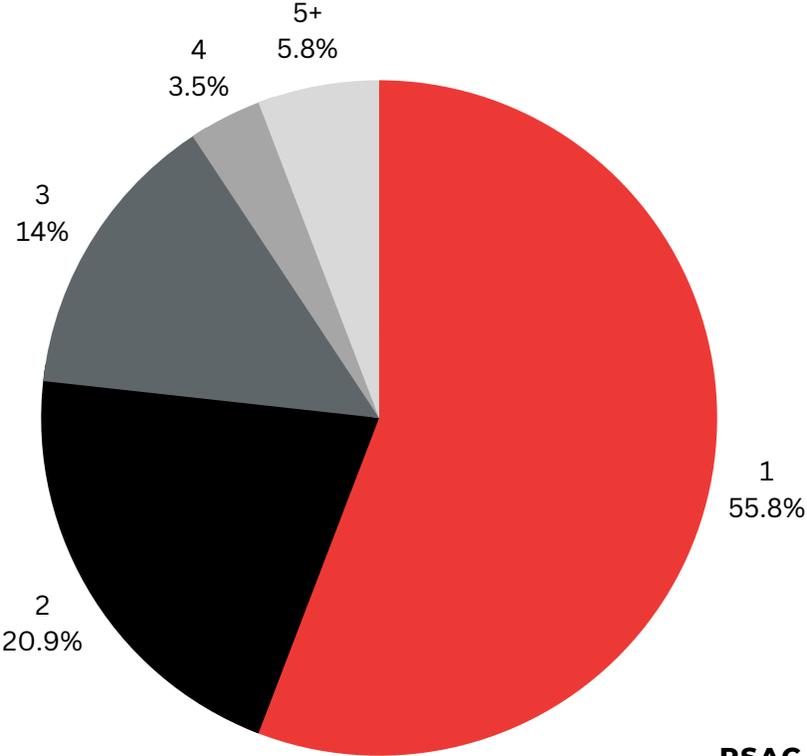
**“Secure housing is very important for us graduate student workers to be able to give our 100% to our teaching and research.”**

Having appropriate housing tends to improve the working conditions of graduate and post-doctoral workers. One respondent explained that “having good housing makes it much easier to do my work. In past years, I lived farther away from campus and had a very limited amount of space for work, which made things much more difficult.” Another respondent echoed this sentiment, stating that their housing conditions “help [their] working conditions.” One student went as far as to describe having a private working space as being “necessary for academic success.” Having appropriate housing can reduce stress and allow for greater energy to be put toward course work, research, and writing.

However, for many, appropriate housing that supports their academic work is out of reach. As reflected in the previous sections, the university offers very limited units with below-market rents. This means that most graduate and post-doctoral workers have to rely on the private market. This can pose a serious problem. One respondent noted that “landlords do not consider the financial boundaries of students.” This is evidenced by how the average market rent in Kingston is now \$1,388 but the average Teaching Assistant makes around \$1,200 a month. Landlords are profit-seeking by nature. The university cannot rely on the private market to ensure students can afford appropriate housing that will support their academic success.

With the current mismatch between rental costs and income, graduate student workers typically deploy the tactic of moving in with roommates to decrease rental costs. As shown in Figure 4, the majority of respondents reported living with at least 1 roommate (86/149 respondents). Graduate students without an apartment of their own, however, reported that their living conditions tended to negatively impact their working conditions. With roommates, respondents found it difficult to focus on their work at home as a result of conflict, noise, and cleanliness issues. Additionally, living with roommates often meant that graduate students did not have a dedicated workspace. One respondent simply stated: “I wish had a room of my own to work at home.” Another respondent explained that they neither had a private working space at home nor on campus. Others in this scenario explained that they did much of their work from their bedroom, which distorted their sense of a work-life balance.

Figure 4: If you live with roommates, how many?



For many, then, there is a trade-off between struggling to pay for an apartment individually (alongside other basic necessities) or struggling to find appropriate working spaces while living with roommates. Both options have negative consequences for academic work.

# TOO OLD FOR THIS

**“There is just not enough housing for folks like us: grads and postdocs, who have families/dependents living with them. We can't rent single-room units, we are too crowded for "student housing", but we don't make enough money to afford ‘family housing.’”**

A final common element in the narrative-based responses is that many felt too old for their current lifestyle. Graduate and post-doctoral workers tend to be at an age where they value personal space and independence for a variety of reasons. For some, having a family necessitates a great deal of private space. For others, private space is needed to achieve a sense of self-worth or to feel confident that they are on a good life path. Altogether, many felt that their incomes were not allowing them to access the types of housing that they needed at the current point in their lives. Not being able to attain adequate housing can lead to chaotic working arrangements for families and feelings of inadequacy for all.

For families, having to find appropriate housing on a limited budget is extremely difficult given the need to secure extra room. Not only do families need an additional room for their child, but also often require an additional room for family members who help lessen the parent's care burden. One respondent reported that her mother was staying to help with childcare so they could focus on completing their graduate degree. However, this meant that their home office had to be transformed into a room for their mother to stay in. Noting the lack of work-life balance this situation created, the respondent stated: “We live in cramped house, where care work and office work are enmeshed.” Others similarly reported cramped conditions when family members travelled to Kingston to help support caregiving activities. Another respondent expressed their frustration by stating: “As grown adults in our 30s, we need more space for our family, but we cannot afford anything bigger.”

Overall, families reported that there are simply not enough family-housing options in Kingston that are affordable on graduate and post-doctoral budgets. One respondent highlighted that “[t]his doesn’t make sense. A graduate student doesn’t mean he cannot have a family.” In an extreme case, one respondent reported that after the house they were renting was sold by the owner, they had to move out of Kingston to find appropriate housing.

The difficulty of finding appropriate family housing often had negative implications in terms of mental health. One respondent explained: “I came here with my wife and an infant. The cost for 'survival' is too much. And it is hampering my mental state and my study. The fund and TA wages covers the rent, but not our food.” Skipping meals to save money, while problematic for graduate students without families, is even more problematic for families who are responsible for the well-being of their children.

Families, though, are not the only ones who expressed feelings of frustration when it came to their current housing options not being able to meet their needs. Many graduate student workers are at an age where independence is expected. Yet with housing costs taking up almost all, if not more, of the current wages of graduate students, this sense of independence cannot be realized for some. One respondent explained:

“As a graduate student, it is stressful and disappointing to me that I am unable to independently financially support myself. It makes me feel embarrassed that I have to ask for assistance from family members as it is not feasible for me to afford housing and other amenities with my stipend and TAsip. I, unfortunately, don't have the capacity to take on another part-time job as I am constantly busy with grad schoolwork and no part-time job would be able to accommodate my schedule.”

Graduate workers should not feel embarrassed. Nor should they feel responsible for not being able to take on additional jobs to cover their costs of living. The current set-up, where the institution is able to claim emerging scholars as their own without ensuring these same scholars have the basic necessities required to survive, is the problem. One respondent clearly articulated this problem:

“Graduate students that are working on research-based degrees are expected to work at least full-time hours on research that is done in their university's name. We do specialized work that requires an education and training. We design, lead, and execute projects that often get published to the benefit of the university. However, instead of being paid like the full-time employees that we are expected to be, we somehow pay the university tuition and receive a stipend that doesn't even meet the cost of living for our area. A full-grown adult with a bachelor's degree who works full time should not need to live with strangers or work extra jobs in order to afford housing.”

Overall, it should be clear from this report that the relationship between the university and PSAC 901 members needs a new direction. The following recommendations can help establish a new relationship built on mutual respect.

# NEXT STEPS

If Queen's University wants to continue to attract graduate and post-doctoral workers there are major changes that need to occur. The university must take responsibility for ensuring that graduate and post-doctoral workers have the ability to live without the weight of financial insecurity detracting from their academic goals. We urge Queen's University to:



- 01.** Pursue all possible avenues to increase the number of Queen's Community Housing units available below current market rates.
- 02.** Provide housing subsidization packages for graduate and post-doctoral workers who are unable to secure a monthly lease that is under 30% of their income.
- 03.** Establish a rent bank that provides non-repayable loans to graduate and post-doctoral workers who have fallen behind on rent or who are at risk of falling behind on rent.



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**04.** Improve support for international students and those who are unable to visit Kingston before signing a lease.

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**05.** Increase PSAC 901 wages.

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**06.** Abolish graduate tuition.

# CONCLUSION

01

## **It is too difficult to secure adequate housing**

- Our incomes are too low for private market housing.
- There are not enough below market-rate, Queen's Community Housing units.

02

## **Working several jobs doesn't work**

- We need adequate funding to cover the high costs of housing and food.
- Working several jobs to cover basic necessities detracts from our academic goals.

03

## **Private working spaces are a necessity**

- Without a private working space, it is difficult to fully concentrate on coursework, research, writing, and academic development.

04

## **We lead lives of value**

- We came to Queen's University to do meaningful work. We should not have to struggle to house and feed ourselves and our families.

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**Thank you for taking the time to read this report. Please reach out if you want to get involved!**

**Contact:**

PSAC 901 Affordable Housing Working Group

Email: [ahwg.psac901@gmail.com](mailto:ahwg.psac901@gmail.com)