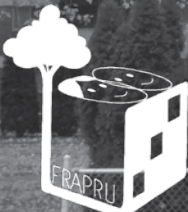


Myths and realities Immigration and housing in Quebec



Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain
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Housing: a fundamental right for all!

Access to quality affordable housing is not only an essential need, but also a fundamental right. Having signed several international pacts that guarantee it, Canada and Quebec are obligated to respect this right. Yet, the vast majority of housing in Quebec is a private business and is increasingly subject to speculation: it is considered to be merchandise, which is very different from the notion of housing as a fundamental right. Despite this, there are almost no new rental housing units being constructed. The supply in the housing market is concentrated upon access to property; access to increasingly expensive property. For many people, there is no choice: they pay too much for small, bad quality housing.



Photo: Flavie Choquette-Giguère

In this difficult context, people of immigrant origins, in particular those that have arrived recently, have great difficulties in getting their right to housing respected. As tenants, they face a double discrimination. As individuals living with poverty, they suffer the same prejudices and the same abuses from the landlords as welfare recipients, low-

wage workers, the elderly, the large families, single-mothers, and people with disabilities the society. In addition, as people of diverse origins, whether racialized or not, they have to endure generalisations, ignorance and racism; which results regularly in refusal, harassment or stigmatisation.

I left Cameroon for France in 1967. Upon my arrival in Canada in autumn 2002, when I was looking for my first apartment, a landlord in the Petite-Patrie neighbourhood asked me for 2 months of rent in advance (\$450 per month, nothing included, for a small 1½), because she felt that I didn't have enough money. She wanted my son, who lives in France, to provide a proof of his employment and his revenue, signed by his head of service. I accepted because I was having difficulty finding housing. At that moment, I had been living in a shelter for women in difficulty. In February 2004, when I found more suitable housing, I was able to be free of that lease by threatening to complain to the Rental Board about the illegal deposit of rent.

Cécile, resident of L'Acadie Boulevard in Park Extension, Montreal



Photo: Étienne Grandmont

Many faces, many difficulties

The Quebec population has evolved a lot in the last few years. The presence of people of immigrant origins has increased over time in the Quebec landscape, in particular in large urban centres like Montreal, Quebec, Sherbrooke, and Gatineau. The socio-demographic portrait of tenant households has been greatly affected by the arrival of people from all over the world.

Whether they immigrate by choice or by necessity, immigrants and their families come here to begin a new life and so they are often in a situation of poverty. Not only do they have to fulfill basic necessities such as food, clothing, and transportation, but we also ask them to integrate into a new society while learning French, looking for a job, and sending their kids to school. In addition to all that, when they try to find suitable housing, they face a lack of housing (particularly of large dwellings), prohibitively high rents, unhealthy housing conditions, racial discrimination, and long unending waiting lists for low-rent housing. Finally, because of a lack of knowledge on Quebec law and their rights, immigrants and their families are more vulnerable to all kinds of abuse.

Half of all immigrant households in Quebec are tenants. Yet the more recent their arrival, the higher this percentage is. Those who arrived here in the last 20 years are those who suffer the most hardships: paying a very high portion of the household income on rent, overcrowding, frequent moves, etc.

The FRAPRU, whose main concern is defending the right to housing, has decided to produce this docu-

Tenant households with core housing needs according to their origin and the period of immigration, Quebec 2006

All households together	261,000	22%
Immigrant households	57,000	31%
Before 1981	13,000	25%
1981-1990	10,000	29%
1991-1995	8,000	31%
1996-2000	7,000	29%
2001-2006	19,000	39%

Source : CMHC, Census 2006, updated October 2009.



Photo: Simon Dumais

ment to bear witness to this evolution, and to circulate a more current portrait of an important group of tenants. It is also to be noted that an increasing number of FRAPRU members and activists are from immigrant communities, particularly in certain areas of Montreal.

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I am in Montreal since 2005. I live with my five-year-old son in the Ahuntsic neighborhood in a small 3½ infested with cockroaches. I would like to have a larger apartment but I don't have the means, the rents are excessive. While I was living without a status, I had great difficulty signing a lease because I would be asked to produce official papers and the coordinates of my employer. On top of that, when I met the landlords in person, I was regularly told that the housing units were already rented. Now that I am officially waiting for an answer regarding my permanent residence, I would like to apply for social housing but I do not have the right.

Saul, Verdun

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Myths vs. reality

Q I've heard that foreigners have the right to apply for low-rent housing the day they land in Canada.

A No, they need to obtain their permanent residence before they can apply; and then they find themselves on the unending waiting list.

Q Is it true that they obtain low-rent housing quicker than the others?

A No, they are subjected to the same municipal rules of attribution and they have to wait their turn; if, sometimes their waiting time seems shorter, it is because they have more points because of the extent of their hardship.

Q It seems that we only accept the poorest immigrants.

A No, for many years now, the number of refugees has greatly decreased relative to the number of immigrants that come under entrepreneur and investor categories.

Q It seems that immigrants who are already here get their whole tribe to join them?

A No, permanent residents and those who have become citizens can sponsor close relatives but under strict conditions. Furthermore, it is expensive to apply and

one of the conditions to apply is accepting financial responsibility for the person being sponsored for several years. It is also a complicated and difficult procedure: for example, the average waiting time for an application for sponsoring a parent or grandparent, according to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, is over 7 years and since November 2011, a temporary moratorium has been installed and no new applications in this category will be accepted for at least 2 years.

Q They all put themselves on welfare...

A It's much more complicated than that. Often, their work skills and diplomas don't get recognized, and on top of that, people are subject to discrimination from many employers. Furthermore, as many of us know, it is very difficult to get a job without references, with few contacts, and (as is the case for most new immigrants) without local work experience.

Q Anyway, Canada only sends us those who speak English...

A Quebec has a right to scrutiny on a part of the immigrants that arrive here and speaking the French language is one of the criteria for being accepted.

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I was living in a 7½ with my wife and my five children. My landlord would regularly make visits to the apartment within a few hours notice or without any notice at all; it was similar to harassment based on our origin. At \$1300 a month, we were expecting to be at peace! After a few misunderstandings on the date of payment, we were evicted by a bailiff and we have been living in a temporary shelter for the last two months. Looking for a new apartment is not easier: on the telephone, they tell us quickly that the apartment is already rented out as soon as I speak of our family of 7... I imagine that my accent doesn't help either.

Faustin, in Gatineau

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Photo: Véronique Lafamme

Fighting discrimination: what recourses do I have?

Discrimination in rental housing in Quebec is a well-known reality. We often hear about it, we have specific examples of it, but it is not possible to measure discrimination concretely. Every year, the housing committees and associations of Quebec receive complaints from people who were refused housing under false pretexts. Landlords will usually not directly mention their prejudices to justify a refusal, particularly in front of witnesses.



Photo: Comité logement Rosemont

There are many grounds for discrimination that are possible and that are prohibited by the Quebec and Canadian charters of human rights: ethnic origin, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, etc. When it comes to housing, discrimination based on ethnic origins or on the colour of a person's skin can begin on the telephone by listening for an accent; but it will also often take place during the first meeting. The most frequently heard cases in the last years have been those of immigrant families with children: those facing double discrimination.

Since the Rental Board does not deal with such cases, the legal body mandated to intervene in cases of discrimination in Quebec is the Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse (CDPDJ) – or the Commission of human rights and youth rights. Those who feel that they have been wronged can file a complaint there and begin a procedure that can result in a ruling or a judgement. According to the Commission, the complaints regarding discrimination in access to housing are initially treated quickly. If the case doesn't get a ruling at this initial stage, the Commission will present other avenues available; such as mediation and investigation. On the one hand, complaining to the CDPDJ will not necessarily give access to housing and it may be a

complex procedure in certain cases. On the other hand, complaints to the CDPDJ are the only way we have to record the existence and extent of discrimination in our society.

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We did a test with a friend because we wanted to know if it was really racial discrimination. Often, they listen to the answering machine to find out if you are from here and they determine this from your accent... They called back and told me that the apartment was already rented, and that they forgot to take off the ad. As for my friend, she got a call to go visit the apartment because it was vacant! We went to visit the place together. The whole time, the landlord kept verifying who was going to be living in the apartment... You can have a dog... but a child is too much!

Nona, Rosemont neighbourhood, Montreal

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Profile of housing conditions of immigrant populations

Immigration in Quebec¹

According to the 2006 census, over 900,000 residents of Quebec were born outside of Canada, or 14% of the total population². More than 400,000 households are immigrant households, which is an increase of 20% from 2001³.

About 20% of all non-immigrant households of Quebec reside on the island of Montreal, as do 70% of all immigrant households. If we include Laval, Montréalégie, Lanaudière and the Laurentides, the greater metropolitan region welcomes 90% of immigrant households. Close to 85% of the tenant immigrant households that arrived since 1986 live on the island of Montreal. While the phenomenon is not limited to Montreal, for more than a century, the metropolis has attracted the majority of new arrivals.

Furthermore, immigrant households tend to have more children: 37% of non-immigrant households have children compared to 50% of immigrant households; including both couples who have children and single-parent families. The number of people living alone is higher in non-immigrant households, particularly in Montreal (44%). Furthermore, one striking statistic is the young age of the main provider in immigrant households that arrived after 2000: 45% are less than 35 years old, whereas this is the case for 18% of non-immigrant households. On the other hand, less than 2% of these new immigrant



households are primarily supported by a person of age 65 and over.

The situation of tenant immigrant households

In Quebec, 62% of non-immigrant households are homeowners as compared to 51% of immigrant households. The immigrant households that inflate the rate of homeownership are those who arrived before 1986, and are mostly from Western Europe.

“When you have more than two children, you even have to lie to find housing. Having children is a problem! I was looking for an apartment, but that man didn’t want black people in his building, he just didn’t want us. He came down the stairs all the time to tell us that we were bothering him. Since I’ve been living at Bellechasse (a non-profit housing building), I’ve been sleeping better at night; the owners don’t make people feel uncomfortable.

Jeanne, Rosemont neighbourhood, Montreal

1. The numbers that follow only relate to persons or households where the main provider was born outside of Canada. There are no statistics available on racialized people whose families have been here for generations, but who also face situations of discrimination and poverty as tenants. The statistics also do not include refugees (people who are not permanent residents), those waiting for a status, or those in so-called irregular situations.
2. Statistics Canada, 2006 Census.
3. Most of the statistics mentioned in this article were taken from: Société d’habitation du Québec, *Le bulletin d’information de la Société d’habitation du Québec*, autumn 2009 and winter 2010.

Photo: Étienne Grandmont



mobility, or the fact of having to move often. All Quebec households, immigrant and non-immigrant alike, move regularly: between 2001 and 2005, around 60% of them changed their home. However, for recent immigrants (arrival after 2000), that number is 92%!

The gap between non-immigrant and immigrant households widens when we look at the percentage of household income spent for housing. Conventionally, the 30% mark is used to determine if a household is devoting too high

By comparison, only 16% of immigrant households that arrived after 2000 own their homes.

Furthermore, overcrowding (defined as the presence of more than one person per room) is a problem that primarily affects poor households, and thus, many immigrant families. In the non-immigrant population, less than 1% of households face this, whereas, in immigrant households, it is 8% and even more than 10% for newer arrivals.

Another particularity of poor households is higher

a share of their income for housing. Among non-immigrant tenants, 34% exceed this rate; whereas, among immigrant households, 42% pay too much for their home. For recent immigrants (after 2000), the number rises to 52%.

When we look at the number of tenant immigrant households that devote more than 50% of their income to housing, the numbers still remain very high: 22% or 48,000 households. As for non-immigrant households, 15% of them pay more than 50% of their income for rent or 155,500 households.



My family consists of 7 people, of which 5 are children (2 girls, 20 and 13 years old, 3 boys who are 18, 14, and 11 years old). We live in a crammed 4 ½ that is in an awful condition and costs way too much. I allocate 40% of my salary for our housing, which means I have to cut in all kinds of things: no travelling, no outings, no activities, no internet, no residential telephone, and so, no social life. And despite my 5-year-long participation in the struggle for social housing, the situation still stagnates because of government policies in this field.

Lahcen, Montréal-Nord



Photo : Étienne Grandmont



Extremely urgent needs!

The case of the Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood

The neighbourhood of Côte-des-Neiges¹ is a large area full of contrasts, with huge gaps in socio-economic conditions: it encompasses the big cottages on the mountain, the students from Université de Montréal along with unhealthy, unsafe and overcrowded housing units inhabited by different immigrant communities. There is a total of 43,000 households living in the area and the borough it belongs to also includes Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. In Côte-des-Neiges, 59% of the households are born outside of Canada, against 33% for the whole of Montreal, out of which 15% have arrived in the last five years.

Tenants account for 81% of the population, as is the case in Park Extension. In Côte-des-Neiges, 41% of tenants allocate more than 30% of their income for housing, and 23% of them allocate more than 50% of their income for housing which is the case for 19% of Montrealers. In Côte-des-Neiges, social and

1. The numbers in this text come from the same source: Statistiques Canada, customized tables of the 2006 Census; Compilation: Ville de Montreal, SMVTP-DH, 2009.

Up until December 31, 2006, 70% of family households with children were waiting for low-rent housing for at least two years in Montreal. On average, there are more than two households waiting for each existing family-size housing unit (5 ½ and larger). The effect is particularly harsh on people of diverse origins who are looking for large apartments at an affordable price.

Nathalie Morin, Montreal Municipal Housing Office

community housing makes up for 8% of rental housing. On November 2011, the waiting list for an HLM (low-rent housing) in the Côte-des-Neiges/Notre-Dame-de-Grâce borough was the second longest in Greater Montreal, with 2,400 households waiting.

Housing rights: Everyone in the same struggle

Ever since the federal government withdrew in 1994, no new low-rent housing unit has been built in Quebec. The waiting list for a place consists of about 40,000 households and the average delay is 4 years. The few cooperative and non-profit housing that have been built since cannot even respond to the most urgent needs.

The FRAPRU demands 50,000 new units of social housing in five years.

To get involved, contact the housing association of your city or neighbourhood.



Photo : Simon Dumais

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