



Canada's National Housing Strategy: A WPR Analysis

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Abstract: *In 2017, the Government of Canada launched the National Housing Strategy (NHS), marking a renewed federal role in housing after decades of limited engagement. Using Bacchi's What's the Problem Represented to Be (WPR) approach paired with a housing justice lens, this paper examines how the NHS and related consultation documents construct the problem of housing in Canada. Rather than evaluating the Strategy's successes or failures, the analysis focuses on how housing inequality is represented, the assumptions underlying these representations, and the implications for the types of solutions considered. The paper identifies two key logics shaping problem representations: the obfuscation of systemic inequities and the legitimization of market-based solutions. This framing shapes which interventions are visible or feasible within the Strategy, highlighting how policy discourse can constrain transformative approaches to housing inequality while maintaining existing structures.*

Keywords: housing inequality; housing justice; settler colonialism; housing financialization; housing policy.



Introduction

In 2017, the Government of Canada launched the National Housing Strategy (NHS), titled *A Place to Call Home*. After decades of limited federal engagement in affordable housing, the Strategy marked a renewed role for the federal government in addressing housing needs (Whitzman 2024). Canada has faced persistent criticism for inadequate housing conditions, particularly for Indigenous peoples, whose experiences have been described as “abhorrent” by the United Nations (Farha 2019; Levac et al. 2025), and for the absence of a coordinated national housing policy (United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 2016). The NHS frames its goals as building “vibrant and inclusive communities where people want to live, work, and play” while ensuring that “all Canadians have a chance at a brighter future” (“What is the National Housing Strategy”).

It is becoming mainstream in Canada to talk about there being a housing crisis. In Whitzman’s recent book *Home Truths*, she outlines both how this impacts both individuals (for example, there are 40,000 people without shelter or in emergency shelters), as well as how the system has changed over time (for example, the average house price has doubled from 2015 to 2021, while the average wage increase is about 7%) (2024: 4). Encampments have become more present and visible in Canada since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic with more people living in them, and as a consequence have become a source of fear, public ire, and increase criminalization of survival mechanisms for people who do not have a home (Flynn et al. 2022).

In this paper, we adopt a critical approach informed by housing justice that centres the right to housing and understands the crucial role that housing plays in people’s lives as more important than profit making (Goodall et al. 2025; Madden and Marcuse 2016). Like other work in housing justice, we are attentive to a particular location – Canada, and these consequences the unequal distribution of housing has on people and communities. In this paper, we use the What’s the Problem Represented to Be (WPR) approach (Bacchi 2009) to examine how the NHS and related documents construct the problem of housing in Canada, particularly in relation to the human right to housing, affirmed in the National Housing Strategy Act (Malenfant et al. 2024). Importantly, this analysis does not evaluate the Strategy’s successes or shortcomings, which are often contested (Levac et al. 2025), but rather investigates how housing inequality is represented, what assumptions underpin these representations, and how certain solutions are made visible while others are foreclosed. Using this lens, we show how systemic issues, such as structural inequities and colonial legacies, are often obscured, while market-based interventions are foregrounded.

We situate the NHS within the broader history of Canadian housing policy to provide context for its emergence and the institutional landscape it inherits. We then outline the WPR approach and its application for housing policy analysis, before presenting the two of the logics through which the NHS frames housing problems: the obfuscation of systemic inequities and the maintenance of market logic. This framework allows for an assessment of how housing inequality is conceptualized and what avenues for intervention are deemed legitimate within the Strategy.



Affordable Housing in Canada: A Brief History

Affordable housing as a public policy approach in Canada emerged in the late 1940s, largely in response to post-war urban growth. At this time, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) was created alongside amendments to the National Housing Act (NHA), introducing income-targeted housing programs. Suttor (2016) notes that policy shifted in the mid-1960s with amendments allowing for provincial housing corporations, resulting in a ten-fold increase in program activity and significant infrastructure development, much of which now faces deferred maintenance (Cooper 2024a).

The 1970s saw an expansion of government involvement in housing and the inclusion of nonprofit providers. By the 1980s, provincial governments assumed greater responsibility for program management, while the federal government focused on policy and funding (Suttor 2016). Hulchanski (2006) describes this period as one of devolution. Scholars such as Clapham (2010) and Skelton (2015) identify these shifts as part of the neoliberalization of housing, characterized by governments withdrawing from responsibility for outcomes and deferring to market processes.

In the early 2000s, while production of public housing increased modestly, grants often prioritized capital investment over maintenance, leaving many buildings at risk of closure (Suttor 2016). The launch of the NHS thus represents a renewed federal commitment to affordable housing, signaling an opportunity to examine how housing inequality is framed within this policy context (for excellent analysis on the housing context in Canada, see Whitzman 2024 and Tranjan 2023).

Methods

What's the Problem Represented to Be

We use Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach to examine how the NHS and related documents represent housing problems. The purpose of this approach is not to evaluate the NHS itself or judge what it has achieved; instead, we focus on how housing inequality is framed and the implications of these representations for what solutions are imagined or rendered invisible. As other scholars have found in the housing context, this approach helps to outline political rationalities that structure housing policies (Barham et al. 2025; Zubrzycka-Czarnecka 2024). WPR is a post-structural, Foucauldian approach that shifts attention from policy outcomes to the assumptions, narratives, and silences embedded within policy texts. WPR involves three propositions: (1) that people are governed through problematizations; (2) problematizations must be studied (not just the analysis of problems but examining problem representations)-examining the underlying logic; and (3) that problematizations must be interrogated for the premises and effects of the representations within them (Bacchi 2009).

We suggest that this method is useful for understanding housing policy, through an application to the NHS as it is "a form of policy analysis (rather than just a way of thinking differently) ...[that] allows us to explore the shape of 'problems' within public policies," (Bacchi 2009: xviii). Given that the release of the NHS signaled the renewed leadership from the federal government in affordable housing problems, it is important to interrogate the assumptions and narratives embedded in the strategy and which will subsequently inform solutions policies.



Following Bacchi's six questions (2009: 2), we examined the Strategy and related documents to identify and unpack the shape and character of problematizations:

1. What's the problem represented to be in specific policy?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?
3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
6. How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated, and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted, and replaced?

For analysis, we selected four key documents: *Canada's National Housing Strategy* ("Strategy"), *What We Heard: The Unique Housing Needs of Women* ("Women"), *What We Heard: Shaping Canada's National Housing Strategy* ("WWH"), and *What We Heard: Report on a Human Rights-Based Approach to Housing Consultation* ("Human Rights"). These texts describe the consultation processes that informed the NHS and present it as a "truly national project, built by and for Canadians" (Bacchi 2009: 4).

As we read through the documents, we used the first two WPR questions to reflect simultaneously on how each text shapes the problem of housing in Canada, noting what is highlighted and what is left unspoken. We traced proposed solutions to uncover the underlying problems they assume. For example, a call for increased shelter space for women experiencing domestic violence represents the problem as a lack of shelter space, but a critical WPR analysis reveals that when availability of units are described as the problem, broader structural issues, such as high rates of domestic violence, are elided. This naming of the problem leads to some solutions or policy interventions over others.

We relied on the What We Heard documents and historical analyses of housing policy to answer the third question about how the problem representation emerged. The fourth and fifth questions—about what is left unproblematic and the effects produced—were particularly important. We examined which interventions are foreclosed, what issues remain unarticulated, and how these silences shape responses to housing precarity. This analysis also aims to inform ongoing discussions about housing inequality in Canada. These WPR questions are embedded in the two logics that emerged in the analysis below.

Limitations of the WPR approach is the focus on how the problem is represented, rather than measuring the impacts of the policy. While this approach allows us to examine and consider how problems are represented, it does not allow room for examining the realities of the policy implementation. Additionally, it should be noted that our analysis emerges from a commitment to housing justice and the right to housing which affirms that everyone should have housing security. This commitment, like any commitment in scholarships whether disciplinary or politically, shapes what we pay attention to in our work.



Obfuscating Colonial Context and Systemic Issues

In this section, we pay attention to how housing problems are named in ways that do not create opportunities for policy intervention in systemic issues. While there are references through the strategy to some systemic issues (as we will demonstrate below), this is rarely the level at which possible interventions are outlined. We suggest that the representation of housing as a simple issue of need (for example a number of nonmarket housing units targeted), rather than as outcomes of systemic inequality reveals a tension and challenge of addressing systemic issues when they are only articulated through one ‘social issue’ (in this case housing). In doing so, the strategy isolates issues such as insufficient housing or affordability challenges from the broader social, political, and historical contexts that produce them. In order to highlight this logic, we pay attention to how housing need for Indigenous people operates in the documents.

In the NHS documents, the sidelining of systemic issues is in tension with a recognition of the colonial context and articulation of disproportionate housing insecurity as experienced by Indigenous people. Central to the NHS is a naming of “priority populations” which, it has been argued elsewhere, works to make the experience of housing precarity seem as though it resides in the population, rather than the housing system (MacDonald 2024). The strategy reads “No relationship is more important to the Government than the one with Indigenous peoples” (Strategy, p. 19). Despite this opening that outlines a relationship and commitment to equity, this declaration falls flat as the federal government continues to fight residential school survivors in court (Rutherford 2025), to push for pipelines built despite United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and Free and Prior Informed Consent (Coastal First Nations say they are open to cooperation, not pipelines 2026; Cox 2021), the lack of safe and drinkable water in many Indigenous communities (Ansloos and Cooper 2023; Cox 2021) and many other ongoing colonial violences against Indigenous people.

Specific Indigenous housing needs are framed as urgent but largely ahistorical, framing challenges in the North as the result of “poor planning, a lack of understanding of the North and declining federal funding for community housing” (Strategy, p. 25), while settler colonial processes, including forced resettlement, residential schools, and state-imposed famines (Daschuk 2013; Porter and Kelly 2023), are largely absent from the discussion. These historical and ongoing acts of colonial violence are foundational to the housing precarity experienced by Indigenous peoples. By eliding these systemic factors, the Strategy represents the problem as administrative rather than structural, limiting both the ways it can be understood and the range of solutions considered.

The What We Heard reports highlight how location and context shape housing needs, noting, for instance, that northern, urban, rural, and remote settings, and on-reserve contexts in particular, impact the cost and feasibility of building and maintaining housing (WWH, p.28). These geographic and social markers reflect the historical and ongoing effects of colonialism, yet the Strategy frames them largely as logistical or financial challenges. The consultation reports for the NHS reveal that people identified the need for a more holistic, people-centered approach, emphasizing the need to consider Indigenous history, agreements, and capacity-building in housing solutions (WWH, p.30). However, these recommendations are largely absent from the final Strategy and commitments.

The Strategy acknowledges the importance of Indigenous control in housing delivery, stating that “key goals are to facilitate greater Métis Nation control of housing delivery and improve



access to more housing options, such as affordable homeownership” (Strategy, p.19). While this appears to address a structural issue, it does so in a limited way: the problem is defined narrowly as lack of control and limited housing pathways, rather than as the result of colonial dispossession. The cause and actor responsible for these problems (colonial governance) recede so that the problems simply exist. Solutions remain programmatic rather than systemic, and fundamental questions of land restitution, treaty rights, or decolonization are left outside the scope of feasible interventions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is no reference to Indigenous sovereignty throughout the document.

By representing systemic inequities in such a narrow, ahistorical way, the Strategy effectively masks the broader social, economic, and political forces that shape housing inequality. The problems of settler colonialism and Indigenous marginalization are rendered invisible, which in turn constrains the kinds of solutions that are imagined. Policies that might challenge these structural inequities, such as land back initiatives, reparative housing programs, or interventions targeting systemic discrimination, are not positioned as part of the policy conversation.

This mirrors important interventions into housing research that calls for dwelling justice that grapples with settler colonialism and the centrality of land and sovereignty (Cooper 2024b; Porter and Kelly 2023). Following Mackey (2016), these “settled expectations” that a settler colonial government will continue and should determine policy reinforce the legitimacy of the settler state, positioning the problem as failed government policy rather than ongoing colonial oppression. This highlights that the tension in naming settler colonialism as a central issue in housing access is to also admit the ongoing colonial nature of the government, undermining its position. In this way, the NHS must frame housing inequality as a fixable issue within the existing system, rather than a symptom of deeper structural inequities which might question the legitimacy of the state.

Similar to the sidelining of calls for Indigenous self-determination, in discussion of women’s experiences of housing inequity the report on consultations with women shared that:

Given the opportunity to express their needs, the women we met with during the engagement sessions took the opportunity to raise a number of systemic issues they felt must also be addressed to truly meet women’s needs. Given their non-specificity to the NHCF, the survey did not review these needs; however, they are important to note and thus have been included in annex 1 (Women, p. 4).

This quote demonstrates a purposeful sidelining of systemic issues raised by women as “non-specific” to housing. Other suggestions made by women including housing specifically for women, including designed for young mothers, Indigenous women, and rural centres which did not get named explicitly in the NHS (Women, p.9). Following a WPR analysis, we might ask what the strategy would look like were it to take seriously that people are not simply in more need, but that their need is constructed and maintained through systems of oppression? What interventions and solutions would come because of this reframe?



Market Logic in the National Housing Strategy

The ways in which systemic inequities are obscured in the National Housing Strategy create space for market-based solutions to be positioned as both natural and sufficient. By framing housing problems as discrete issues, such as insufficient shelter space, lack of control over housing delivery, or affordability challenges, the Strategy sidesteps the structural drivers of inequality, including some important factors such as the financialization of housing, the amalgamation of private landlords, racialized discrimination, and the legacy of colonialism (August 2020; August, Cohen, and Rosenman 2023; Tranjan 2023). In doing so, it implicitly casts the market as a neutral and rational mechanism for addressing housing needs and normalizes housing as a commodity (Madden and Marcuse 2016). Programs developed in the strategy like the Canada Housing Benefit, community-based tenant initiatives, and homeownership pathways are presented as solutions to affordability, while the market itself is left largely unquestioned. While the National Housing Strategy Act (NHSA) affirms this human right to housing, it remains unclear how this will be implemented and the role of for-profit housing providers (Bates 2025; Malenfant et al. 2024).

Within the NHS, private landlords and developers are included in the strategy as partners (WWH, p. 6). They are included along with all levels of government, Indigenous governments and organizations, the non-profit sector, cooperative and community-based sectors, housing experts, academia and Canadians themselves.

Alongside the inclusion of landlords as partners in the provision of affordable housing, the Strategy maintains a tension in recognizing that landlords also contribute to housing inequities. For instance, it notes that “landlords are more likely to take advantage of immigrant and refugee women, many of whom experience cultural and racial discrimination from landlords and service providers” (Strategy, p.25). Yet the solutions offered, such as community housing initiatives, a Canada Housing Benefit, and a human rights-based approach, do not directly address the role of landlords or the structural dynamics of housing as a commodity (Human Rights, p.25). There is no explicit recognition of how the financialization of housing intersects with systemic discrimination, leaving the market largely untouched as a structural force (August 2020; Crosby 2023; Rolnik and Harvey 2019). For example, a landlord registry or easier processes for discrimination claims in housing may also be possible policy interventions to address these issues.

Engagement reports for the NHS demonstrate that Canadians themselves expressed uncertainty and concern about how a human rights-based approach would operate, with questions about whether housing could or should be a legally enforceable right particularly when the market is so central to the provision of housing in Canada (Human Rights, p.9). These questions reveal the complexity and systemic nature of housing precarity, yet the Strategy sidesteps these discussions, framing the problem in ways that make incremental market interventions appear sufficient. For example, in discussing the Canada Housing Benefit, it described as a benefit that “will provide affordability support directly to families and individuals in housing need, including potentially those living in social housing, those on a social housing wait-list, or those housed in the private market but struggling to make ends meet” (Strategy, p. 15). This benefit is intended ensure affordability both in the affordable housing sector as well as the private market. It is presented as a solution to market rents which are unaffordable, rather than to question the rates themselves. Rent supplement works to pay landlords who have units that are unaffordable for many, ensuring that people can be housed. At the same time, this benefit



ensures the rental rate for these units remains the same, subsidized by public dollars while other policy interventions like rent controls are unnamed despite being effective measures for housing affordability and stability (Slater 2021; Tranjan and Vargatoth 2024) and growing evidence that rental benefits are not as effective as nonmarket housing (Leloup et al. 2025; Leviten-Reid, Digou, and Kennelly 2025).

In this way, the representation of housing problems as discrete and decontextualized enables the market to emerge as a logical and primary site for intervention. Housing challenges are individualized and depoliticized, and solutions are framed as adjustments within the existing market rather than transformations of the system itself. As Madden and Marcuse (2016) argue, “it is becoming harder to visualize any alternatives other than minor modifications in the pattern here or there—or even to see the commodified housing system for what it is” (Madden and Marcuse 2016: 50). The Strategy’s framing demonstrates this dynamic: the inability to name systemic inequities legitimizes market-based interventions while excluding solutions (even those named in their consultations) that could challenge the financialized housing regime or address deep-seated social inequities.

Discussion

This WPR analysis demonstrates that the National Housing Strategy (NHS) frames housing precarity as an issue of administrative coordination, resource allocation, or individual circumstance, rather than as an outcome of settler colonialism, systemic discrimination, or the financialization of housing. By articulating the problem in this way, the Strategy delineates the boundaries of what counts as a legitimate or feasible intervention, privileging technical or market-oriented responses over structural transformation.

Two interrelated logics underpin this representation. First, the representation of systemic inequity frames housing problems in ways that minimize or obscure their structural roots. For instance, Indigenous housing needs are presented as logistical or financial challenges rather than as outcomes of ongoing colonial processes that have dispossessed Indigenous peoples of land and disrupted traditional housing practices. Similarly, gendered and racialized inequalities are acknowledged but largely disconnected from the broader social and economic systems that produce them. This narrow framing restricts the policy imagination, rendering interventions that address structural inequities—such as decolonial approaches to land governance or policies that confront systemic discrimination—largely invisible within the Strategy.

Second, the NHS’s reliance on market logics positions private actors, including landlords, developers, and financial institutions, as central to addressing housing needs. Market-based solutions such as rent supplements, homeownership initiatives, and partnerships with the private sector are presented as pragmatic and efficient mechanisms for improving affordability. While these programs may indeed provide benefits for some, these benefits are distributed unevenly and are embedded within a broader housing system that is itself unequal. For example, the racial housing gap by many different measures including that Black homes are valued at 30% less than white homes, Black, Arab and Latin American households have homeownership rates 26% below the national average, and newcomer single mothers looking to rent are 563% more likely to be treated unfairly than those without children (Sioufi 2025: 5). Other researchers have documented that as operating agreements come to an end, housing



providers are prioritizing near market rentals over rent geared to income, meaning those with the lowest incomes will have less opportunity to secure affordable housing (Cooper 2024a).

Understanding housing through this lens reveals that benefits to some—such as asset accumulation through ownership or investment returns—are contingent upon the exclusion or precarity of others. By treating the housing market as both the source of and solution to inequality, the NHS sustains a system in which market participation is equated with security, while those unable to access ownership or stable tenancy remain structurally disadvantaged. The focus on market participation, therefore, obscures how housing operates as an interconnected system in which advantages for some are produced through the marginalization of others. Some ways that this has been documented is through gentrification of neighborhoods that prioritize the housing of higher-income and often white households (Crosby 2023), or through increasing Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) which opposes social integration (Scally and Tighe 2015).

Taken together, these logics illustrate how the NHS frames housing inequality in ways that maintain the existing housing regime and limit the scope of potential interventions. Housing precarity is represented as a manageable or technical issue rather than as a symptom of structural injustice. The WPR approach helps to make these assumptions and silences visible, emphasizing the need to conceptualize housing as an interconnected system shaped by colonial, racial, and economic processes. Recognizing these interrelations is essential if policy interventions are to ensure the right to housing for all Canada.



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