

Housing: Families' needs, parents' concerns and impacts on young children

Results of a survey of parents of young children

The Early Childhood Observatory recently conducted a survey regarding the concerns and needs of parents of children aged 0 to 5. In collaboration with the firm Léger, 1,001 parents, both tenants and owners, were surveyed across Québec between May 16 and 25, 2022.

Québecers are worried about the rising cost of living, and parents of young children are no exception. According to our survey, nearly 4 out of 10 parents worry that they will not be able to make ends meet and pay their bills. This proportion rises to nearly 6 out of 10 among families who are tenants. Paying the rent or mortgage, of course, is an unavoidable expense that takes up a significant portion of a family's budget.



Highlights

In Québec, one in three parents is experiencing **high levels of stress** due to their housing situation.

60% of families who are tenants have had to change their spending habits to pay their rent; e.g., cutting back on groceries. This proportion rises to 76% among **single-parent families**.

Living in a dwelling that does not meet their needs particularly affects:

- families with an income of less than \$40,000 (32%)
- families who are tenants (30%)
- single-parent families (24%)

95% of single-parent families are worried about potentially having to move.

Housing conditions directly affect the **health** of young children and can adversely affect their **development**. They can also negatively affect parents' ability to meet the needs of their young children.

Survey results

› Housing: a source of stress for parents

30% of parents are experiencing high levels of stress due to their housing situation.

This percentage is even higher among families who are already vulnerable:

- single-parent families (**55%**)
- families who are tenants (**47%**)
- families with an income of less than \$40,000 (**46%**)
- immigrant families (**44%**)

The accumulation of sources of stress has an impact on parents and, in turn, on their young children.

These numbers are concerning because these families are the ones who have been most affected by the pandemic. Their numerous sources of stress have multiplied: reduced income, job loss, food insecurity, housing concerns, school and daycare closures, etc.

› Finding affordable housing: more difficult than before the pandemic

Overall **61%** of parents say finding affordable housing is more challenging for them now than it was before the pandemic. For families who are tenants, this figure jumps to **72%**.

In addition, **36%** of parents worry that they will not be able to make ends meet and pay their bills.

Real impact on families and their young children

A total of **60%** of families who are tenants have changed their spending habits in order to be able to pay their rent. This proportion climbs to 76% among single-parent families..

Ways families cut back on spending:

- Limiting activities they do with their children (**39%**)
- Reducing the amount spent on clothing expenses (**25%**)
- Decreasing the amount of food they buy at the grocery store (**19%**)

Paying the mortgage or rent is an expense that cannot be put off, and parents are sometimes forced to cut back on other expenses. **Parents often end up cutting back on groceries, among other expenses.**

› Finding housing that meets the family's needs: a challenge

Accessing adequately sized housing is more challenging for **41%** of parents than before the pandemic.

Among families currently living in housing that does not meet their needs, some are especially affected:

- families with an income of less than \$40,000 (**32%**)
- families who are tenants (**30%**)
- single-parent families (**24%**)

Among parents whose housing does not meet their needs, 77% of them say the reason is **not having enough rooms** for everyone to have their own space.

Among parents who are tenants, **14%** are also concerned about the sanitary conditions of their dwelling (e.g., cockroaches, bed bugs, rodents, mould, etc.).

› Moving: a worrisome prospect

Overall, **88%** of parents are worried about potentially having to move. This proportion rises to 95% among single-parent families and families with an income of less than \$40,000.

The main concerns involve:

- the cost of housing (**70%**)
- proximity to work, daycare and grocery stores in the desired neighbourhood (**54%**)
- having enough bedrooms for the size of the family (**37%**)

Repossessions and evictions lead to **moves that create instability** in the lives of young children.

According to the Québec Survey on the Preschool Path of Kindergarten Students, young children who **have moved twice or more** are more likely to be vulnerable in at least one area of development.

Research shows that **parents at risk of eviction** are more likely to suffer from chronic stress that can impair their ability to interact and take care of their children adequately. For example, they may be more impatient with their children, increasing the risk of deterioration of the parent-child relationship and the risk of abuse.

How inadequate housing affects the development of young children

- Children who live in inadequate housing are more likely to experience cognitive, language or socio-emotional issues.
- Children who live in inadequate housing **do less well in school** than those who live in adequate housing.
- Poor housing conditions increase the risk of developing **serious breathing problems** such as asthma, especially in very young children. They are also at greater risk of **poisoning** caused by lead in the water and **injury** caused by damage in the home.
- A dwelling that is too small and noisy:
 - **adversely affects the quality of parent-child bonding;** the number and quality of interactions are lower;
 - **reduces parental sensitivity** to their children's needs; i.e., parents pay less attention to their children;
 - affects **parents' sense of competence** and makes them less inclined to take care of their child;
 - increases the **risk of abuse.**

Unaffordable housing is linked to food insecurity and inadequate nutrition in childhood, according to the **Canadian Paediatric Society**'s position statement. As a result, children who live in these dwellings often **weigh less than others of the same age because their parents have less money to buy food.**

What are the essential criteria for housing that promotes the healthy development of young children?

Adequate housing generally has these characteristics: affordable*, large enough for everyone to have their own space, sanitary and in good condition, i.e., not in need of major repairs. Adequate housing is located close to services and green spaces, in a neighbourhood where parents feel they can safely let their children play outside.

It is still too early to measure the impact of the normalization of teleworking on the housing situation, particularly for families. Our survey results indicate, however, that this issue is already affecting parents. Among parents whose housing does not meet their needs, **25%** say it is because they **cannot set up an office where they can telework comfortably.**

*According to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), a dwelling is considered unaffordable if a household spends more than 30% of its income before taxes on housing costs.

Something can be done to improve families' access to quality and affordable housing

Nearly four out of five parents believe that access to affordable and family-friendly housing should be a priority for policymakers.



› Encouraging social housing

Unlike Canada, several European countries have high proportions of social housing. By way of comparison, Québec, which has a population comparable to that of Austria, has nearly **160,000 social and community** housing units, while **Austria has 900,000**.

The city of Vienna, in Austria, is a model for the world. It has succeeded in maintaining 220,000 social housing units for low-income households. As such, it is one of the few European capitals that **does not have a major housing crisis**. In addition, Vienna promotes the establishment of local shops in its city centre through its regulations, allowing citizens to do most of their shopping on foot.

› Promoting housing adapted to the needs of families and designed as a living environment, close to services and green spaces

- In June 2019, the **Concerto Building**, a three-storey building with 13 affordable housing units that can accommodate families, couples or singles, was inaugurated in Lac-Mégantic. The Concerto also houses a 42-space childcare centre with regular and atypical (evening) hours, a drop-in daycare centre, and a playground for 0- to 12-year-olds.
- Downtown Granby plans to build a family housing co-operative in 2022, the **Holocie Cooperative**. It will feature 28 housing units, including 5½-room units, adapted to the needs of families. In Phase 2, two multigenerational models will be available. There will also be an urban farm and a childcare centre.
- The **Milton Park Community** in Montréal's downtown core features 616 units in 146 buildings where some 1,500 people with low and moderate incomes live. It is also home to community organizations and commercial spaces.
- The **Communauté Saint-Urbain Project** in Montréal aims to transform the former Hôtel-Dieu hospital into a housing co-operative with vegetable gardens and large family housing units.

These projects have been made possible thanks to active citizen involvement as well as the contributions of various government, municipal, regional and local authorities.

› Ensuring better control of rent increases

A report by the Institut de recherche et d'informations socioéconomiques (Institute for socio-economic research and information) proposes the establishment of a **rent registry** to ensure better control of rent increases. This registry would also improve the transparency of the real-estate and rental markets.

Conclusion

Having a roof over one's head is a basic need. Housing is more than just shelter; it is a key factor in the physical and mental health of families. To give families the chance to thrive and young children a chance to grow and develop properly, housing must be affordable, of sufficient size, sanitary, in good repair, and close to services and green spaces.

The results of our survey indicate that Québec parents are experiencing housing stress, particularly those who are vulnerable, and that the current situation is forcing some of them to cut back on essentials such as food. In addition, studies show that housing conditions can compromise the health and development of young children. Housing is a complex issue that requires the commitment and collaboration of several jurisdictions. Whatever the sphere of influence, whether provincial, regional, municipal or local, everyone can contribute in active and complementary fashion to improve the housing situation in Québec and help our young children thrive.



PORTRAIT OF PUBLIC POLICIES 2021

Among the 14 themes covered in this Portrait, you will find a chapter devoted to housing, including the following topics:

- Data on the scope of this social issue
- Its impact on the development of young children
- Municipal, provincial and federal policies addressing this issue
- Potential solutions to improve public policies, based on research conducted in Québec as well as internationally.



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THEMATIC REPORT

What can we do to foster children's development before they start school?

This Report demonstrates how the quality, stability and continuity in the various environments where young children interact have an impact on their development. The impact of housing on their development is one of the first aspects discussed in this Report.



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OBSERVATOIRE
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ABOUT THE EARLY CHILDHOOD OBSERVATORY

The mission of the Early Childhood Observatory, a project of the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation, is to communicate the current state of knowledge in order to promote informed decision-making about early childhood in Québec. Our goal is to ensure that every young child living in the province has access to conditions that will enable them to develop their full potential, regardless of where they were born or where they are growing up.

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