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Introduction

The housing assessment resource tools: Charting the course for data-driven housing in Canada

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Canada faces an alarming housing crisis, with millions of homes needed to address the shortage. Immediate government responses are needed, tailored to the right size and location of homes, as well as tools to maintain the existing stock of affordable housing. In recognition of the dire need for federal involvement, the Government of Canada enacted the *National Housing Strategy Act* (NHSA). The NHSA “recognize(s) that the right to adequate housing is a fundamental human right affirmed in international law.” The legislation also commits Canada to progressively realizing the right to adequate housing through the development and maintenance of a national housing strategy. The strategy needs to set out a long-term vision for housing and focuses on improving housing outcomes for those in greatest need.

In 2021, an interdisciplinary group of faculty and expert advisors launched the Housing Assessment Resource Tools project (HART), hosted at the University of British Columbia, to answer these very questions. The goal was simple and ambitious: develop standardized, easy to use, free, equity-focused, comparable, and replicable housing need, land, and acquisition assessment tools to improve the quality of housing supply decision-making at all levels of government across Canada.

The primary goal of HART is to provide reliable cross-country housing data. In Canada, no single government is responsible for housing outcomes. This lack of accountability is exacerbated by different requirements across jurisdictions. For example, federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal programs use different definitions of housing affordability, and efforts across governments are often uncoordinated. Each province has different requirements for municipalities in developing housing need assessments. While some jurisdictions make information on public lands available, others charge thousands of dollars for the data. There are also data gaps: some metrics of housing need—like the number of people couch surfing and who are homelessness—aren’t necessarily available at all.

To address these data gaps and lack of coordination, HART successfully received funding from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) to develop tools to support a partnership approach to housing, ultimately to help with the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing embedded in the NHSA. We created three tools: the *Housing Needs Assessment Tool*, which measures need according to affordability thresholds of different income groups, household size and priority populations; the *Land Assessment Tool*, which assesses government-owned land across Canada, scoring land parcels using a proximity measures index developed by Statistics Canada and

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CMHC; and the *Property Acquisitions Tool*, which draws from case studies of multi-family property acquisitions to offer best practice recommendations for policies that reinforce the supply of existing affordable housing.

We started with the development of a prototype from the housing need and land assessments with the City of Kelowna. Following this successful pilot, we moved to a proof-of-concept stage to hone the two replicable assessment tools with 13 government partners, including the six cities and regions in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA), that together house almost 20% of Canada's population. We chose partners based on geographic range, major population centres, different scales of government, and willingness to implement these tools to achieve better policy and housing outcomes. We also created an Advisory Board to capture other regions and housing organizations. We provided close to 100 workshops with our partners, other governments, and a range of stakeholders, attended conferences, won a national award, and have continued to scale up our tools. The research team includes national experts in urban planning, municipal law, GIS (geographic information systems), and housing policy, as well as the next generation of researchers hired as associates and student researchers.

The articles in this special issue detail the methodologies, approaches and findings of this exciting and novel project.

The article, "Lessons from the First Round of Mandatory Housing Needs Reporting in British Columbia," authored by Julia Gabriele Harten, Craig Jones, Andres Peñaloza, Morika DeAngelis, Anam Bashir, and Cameron Leung, focuses on the rationale and methodology of the housing need assessment tool. The article examines housing need reports which cover 126 BC municipalities, as required under provincial legislation. In concluding that the legislation was successful in meeting its mandate, the article argues that housing needs assessments in BC and Canada could be improved with a centralized, standardized, transparent, equity-focused, and automated system similar to the HART project for producing most of the data needed under BC legislation. The benefit of a uniform approach like HART is to increase the amount of information provided, free up staff time, be more cost effective, reduce the need for consultants to provide basic analysis, and facilitate direct comparisons between municipalities.

In "More than just new supply: Acquisitions for affordable housing in Canada," Martine August and Joe Daniels present a case for a federal response to financialization. The third article in the special issue notes that options exist for addressing the supply of affordable housing stock beyond building new homes. The article first outlines the costs and missed opportunities of singular, ideological attention to new supply for low to moderate income households at greatest risk of being in core housing need. Next, the authors explain that housing security and affordability are dependent on protecting and preserving existing affordable housing stock, particularly in the rental market where the majority of need resides. Finally, the article sets out housing acquisitions programs as a key solution to the crisis of affordability, the loss of affordable housing, and the impacts of financialization, with policy examples from across the world.

The article, "Is municipal planning responsive to urban Indigenous housing needs? An examination of housing plans and policies in British Columbia," written by Maggie Low and Cleo Breton, presents findings from a study conducted in partnership with British Columbia's Aboriginal Housing Management Association (AHMA), exploring how municipalities are responding to Indigenous housing needs through Official Community Plans (OCP) and housing strategies. The authors examine how cities perceive barriers to address urban Indigenous housing need, and offers key considerations for municipal planners for identifying and responding to urban Indigenous housing needs in municipal level housing policies. To better address urban Indigenous housing needs, municipal housing planners must first identify Indigenous housing needs as distinct needs in urban settings. Further, municipal policies and programs aiming to respond to Indigenous housing needs must be developed through Indigenous-led and Indigenous-informed processes to uphold Indigenous rights.

The HART project builds on similar work in Australia and this collection importantly includes an analysis of lessons learned from that country. In "Canada's National Housing Strategy: A suitable case for Australia," authors Julie Lawson, Hal Pawson, and Chris Martin engage with national housing strategies developed in two similarly developed federal states, Canada and Australia. A strategy helps to define priorities and to provide a rationale for ongoing decision-making. It is the antithesis of an incremental or reactive approach. Best practices in strategic housing action involve a process with causal analysis, relevant policies and evidence-based design, implementation, and then evaluation. However, in many liberal democratic countries, housing policy is often reactive, fragmented and incoherent or, at best, incremental. Many governments struggle to develop coherent approaches to housing which coordinate policy action across relevant domains, often overlooking the role of relevant policy levers, such as mortgage regulation and real estate taxation. This paper focuses on Australia and Canada's efforts, highlighting the

strategic focus, governance and accountability of each nation-state. The authors argue stress the importance of taking a broad view of housing policy to adequately change housing outcomes.

The HART project has solidified the importance of community-driven research within universities. We thank those who supported this crucial work, particularly Dr. Carolyn Whitzman, without whom this project would have never happened. We hope that scholars and practitioners will continue to build on the bold efforts undertaken by the HART project, as well as address the shortcomings, through sound and replicable housing data.