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by Grant Schellenberg and Jonathan Fonberg

Release date: May 4, 2020

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Published by authority of the Minister responsible for Statistics Canada

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Housing characteristics and staying at home during the COVID-19 pandemic

by **Grant Schellenberg** and **Jonathan Fonberg**

With ‘stay at home’ essential to the COVID-19 response, the dwellings in which people live take on added importance in their lives. In Statistics Canada’s Canadian Perspectives Survey Series (CPSS) fielded the week of March 29, 90% of respondents reported they were avoiding leaving their home as part of their COVID-19 response. Extended time indoors is likely to raise various challenges, such as getting physical exercise, maintaining social contacts, or balancing telework, children and home schooling, and household routines in a confined space. Such pressures are reflected in the March CPSS responses, with one-third of Canadians reporting concerns about confinement and family stress. ‘Stay at home’ may raise other challenges, such as maintaining physical distance in multi-unit buildings where lobbies, elevators, or laundry facilities are shared.

Dwelling type and ownership status provide a useful housing lens through which issues relevant to Covid-19 can be viewed. In Canada’s large urban centres (i.e. Census Metropolitan Areas, or CMAs), the largest share of households (40%) resides in single detached houses that are owned.¹ The second largest share (26%) resides in apartments that are rented (see Table 1). The shares of households residing in owned, single detached houses are lower in Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia than in other provinces.² Information from the 2018 Canadian Housing Survey (see Methodology) shows that the outlooks and characteristics of households in owned single detached houses and rented apartments differ considerably.

Table 1
Dwelling type and housing tenure of Canadian households, by area of residence, 2018

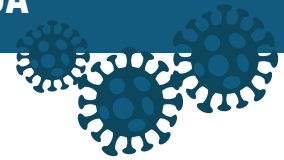
	Large urban centres (CMAs)	Cities and towns (CAs)	Rural and small towns (outside CMAs & CAs)
	percent		
Single detached – Total	43.2	61.5	83.4
Owned	40.1	56.4	77.4
Rented	3.1	5.1	6.0
Semi-detached, row – Total	19.6	16.3	8.4
Owned	13.8	9.4	4.2
Rented	5.8	6.9	4.2
Apartments – Total	37.2	22.2	8.2
Owned	11.0	3.9	1.0
Rented	26.2	18.3	7.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Statistics Canada, 2018 Canadian Housing Survey.

Satisfaction with living space and indoor temperature varies across dwelling types and housing tenure

Living space and comfort are relevant to ‘stay at home’. Among households in CMAs, 70% of those in rented apartments are satisfied with their overall adequacy of space while this is the case for 88% of those in owned, single detached houses (Chart 1). Satisfaction with number of bedrooms follows a similar pattern (see Table 2).

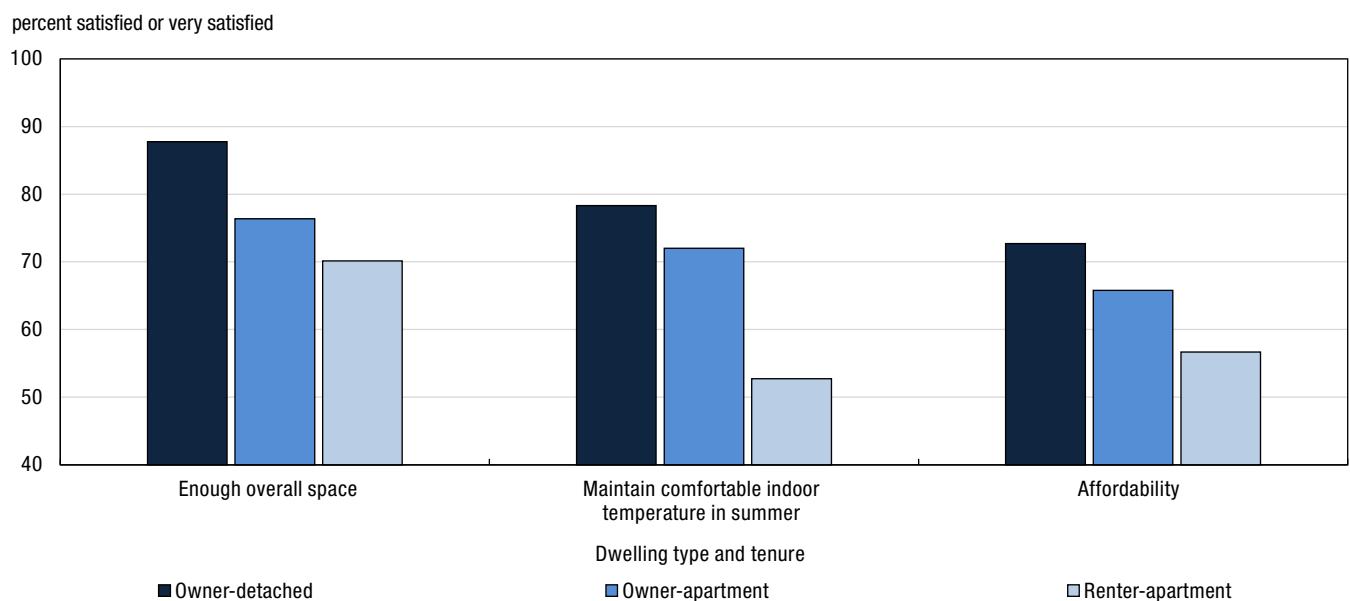
1. This includes ownership with or without a mortgage.
2. See *Canadians’ satisfaction with their housing*, Appendix Table 1, as listed in the references.



Households in rented apartments are also less likely to be satisfied with their ability to maintain a comfortable indoor temperature during the summer. Just over half (53%) are satisfied in this respect, compared with 78% of households in owned, single detached houses.

Among apartment residents themselves, satisfaction with ability to maintain a comfortable indoor temperature is 19 percentage points lower among renters than owners. Rising temperatures in early summer could pose a new challenge to households staying-at-home, particularly those facing tighter space constraints and lacking air conditioning.

Chart 1
Percent of households in CMAs that are satisfied with selected aspects of their dwelling, by selected dwelling type and tenure



Source: Statistics Canada 2018 Canadian Housing Survey.

Table 2
Dwelling satisfaction and selected characteristics of households in CMAs, by dwelling type and housing tenure

	Owner detached	Owner semi-row	Owner apartment	Renter apartment	Renter semi-row	Renter detached
percent						
Percent of households satisfied or very satisfied with:						
Enough space overall	87.7	81.6	76.4	70.2	75.6	81.6
Number of bedrooms	90.3	86.0	78.4	75.1	83.0	87.6
Ability to maintain summer temperature	78.3	73.3	72.0	52.7	57.7	72.8
Affordability	72.7	68.5	65.8	56.7	65.8	65.8
Percent of households that:						
Experienced financial difficulties last year	17.2	21.4	14.2	30.0	33.3	34.2
Are comprised of one person living alone	14.1	19.6	44.0	48.2	27.0	20.2
Are comprised of one senior living alone	6.5	6.7	18.2	15.8	8.0	4.3
Rate general health as poor or fair	11.3	13.3	12.5	19.7	16.8	15.7

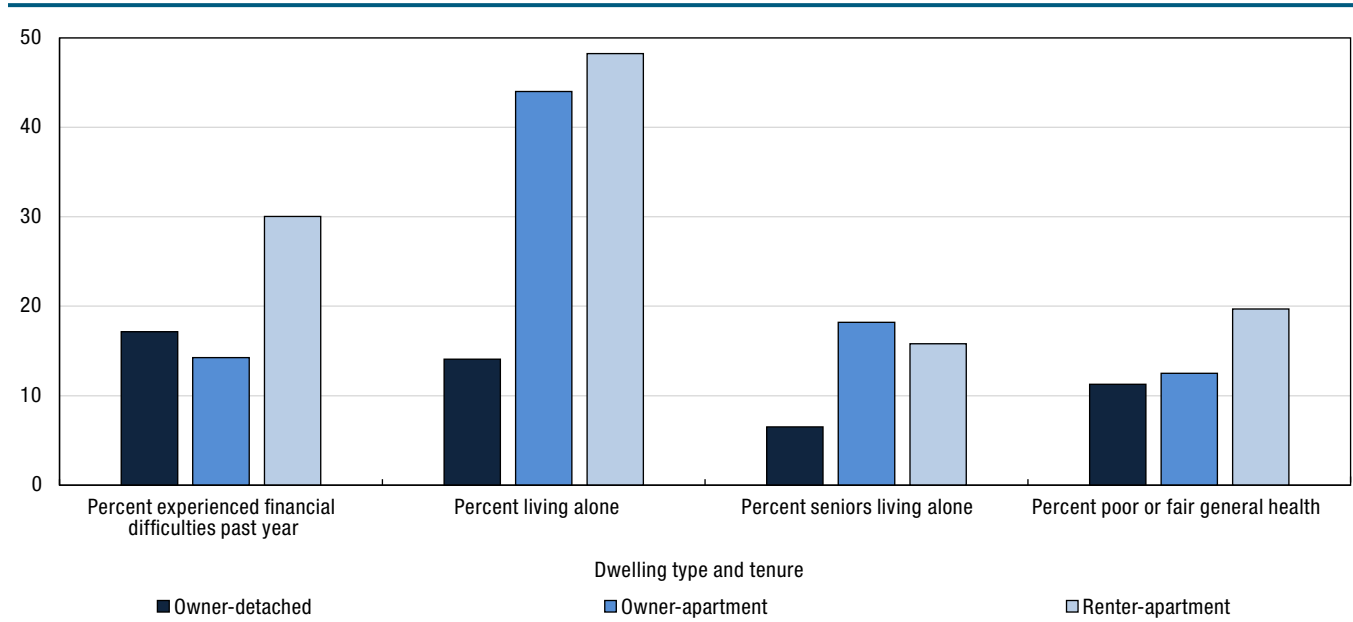
Source: Statistics Canada, 2018 Canadian Housing Survey.



Socio-economic vulnerabilities vary across dwelling types and housing tenure

Exposure to other vulnerabilities varies when observed through a housing lens. In terms of financial outlooks, renters are less likely than owners to be satisfied with the affordability of their dwelling (Chart 1) and more likely to have experienced financial difficulties over the past year (Chart 2). Household composition too may pose risks. Around 45% of households in apartments are comprised of just one-person. The absence of a second income recipient implies more limited capacity to respond to financial shocks, while the absence of a partner or roommate suggests greater risk of social isolation. The risks of social isolation may take on added importance for seniors. In CMAs, seniors living alone account for about one-in-six households in apartments (16% to 18%), whether rented or owned. Finally, households in rented apartments are more likely than others to report that their general health is poor or fair.³

Chart 2
Selected socio-economic characteristics of households in CMAs, by selected dwelling and tenure



Source: Statistics Canada, 2018 Canadian Housing Survey.

Households with health vulnerabilities

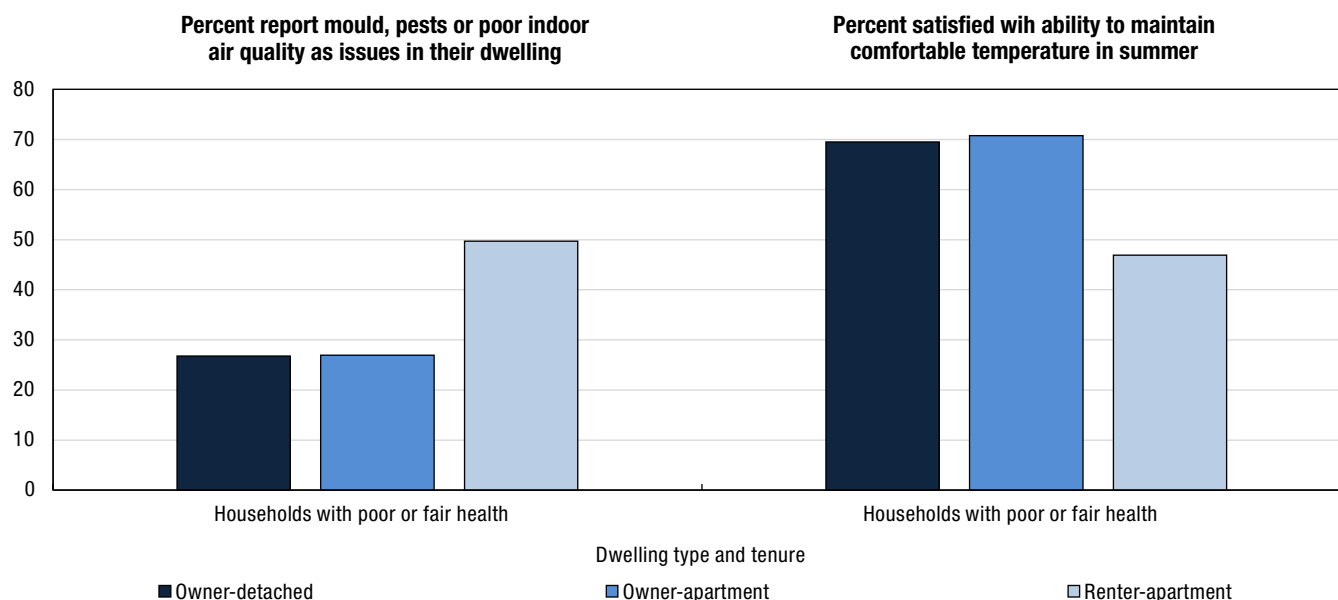
Households rating their general health as poor or fair may be at higher risk of having an underlying condition associated with vulnerability to COVID-19. Such households account for one-fifth of those in rented apartments (Chart 2). Among this group, one-half report that mould, pests or poor indoor air quality are issues in their building, and less than half are satisfied with their ability to maintain a comfortable indoor temperature in the summer. Households in poor or fair health who own their homes are far less likely to express these concerns.

3. See *Canadians' satisfaction with their housing*, Appendix Table 1, as listed in the references.



Chart 3

Percent of vulnerable households in CMAs reporting selected dwelling issues, by selected dwelling type and tenure



Source: Statistics Canada 2018 Canadian Housing Survey.

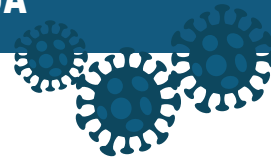
Methodology

The Canadian Housing Survey is a biennial survey jointly developed by CMHC and STC to gather information on the housing needs and experiences of Canadian households. It was first fielded from November 2018 to March 2019 in all provinces and territories. The target population is private households. Collective dwellings, such as nursing homes, seniors' residences, and shelters, are excluded. A reference person in each sampled household, identified as the household member responsible for housing decisions, was asked to complete the questionnaire.

Conclusion and next steps

Extended periods of time at home make the characteristics of one's dwelling all-the-more important. Households in rented apartments appear vulnerable in this respect, both because they are more likely to express concerns about the characteristics of their dwelling and because they are more likely to be vulnerable in terms of finances, health or social contacts.

The Canadian Perspectives Survey Series mentioned at the outset of this article has subsequently been completed on-line by over 200,000 Canadians. Survey responses will be integrated with neighbourhood-level information, such as population density, prevalence of specific dwelling types, and average household income, providing more direct evidence on the relationships between where people live and their COVID-19 outlooks and responses.



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