BC GENERAL EMPLOYEES' UNION
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Evaluating Prospects for

Vacancy Control Policy in B.C.'s Housing Affordability Crisis

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B.C.'s housing affordability crisis continues to deny working class and low income members of our community the ability to own or rent a home that meets their needs. Rents are skyrocketing and wages are not keeping up.

The BCGEU's Affordable BC campaign has focused its recent activity on exploring solutions to the shortage of affordable rental supply, the dramatic rise in prices, and the overall (and increasing) precarity experienced by tenants and households. To do this, our campaign decided to take a close and thorough look at vacancy control as an area of policy and regulation that needs much wider and more serious consideration in the current crisis.

The following is an abbreviated summary of a much more comprehensive and rigorous assessment of vacancy control policy as viewed both in comparative perspective, and through a critical review of the theory, expert literature, the empirical evidence, public debate and discussion.

Below is a condensed version of this important study, focusing primarily on the high-level themes, debates, myths and misunderstandings, and broad conclusions and findings for policy presented by its author.

We think this offers an enlightening, as well as encouraging, source of information about what is possible in our province and in our communities, and what would benefit renters, tenants and working households. However, we also urge activists, and especially policymakers and elected officials in government, to carefully read and consider the working paper in its entirety, with its crucial insights for a misunderstood, and often misrepresented, avenue for policy and regulation.

Introduction

For decades, discussions of rent control have been mired in misconceptions and fallacies that have become a central feature of discourse on the subject.[1] The complexity of rent control policies, their diverse contexts, and limited comprehensive data make it challenging to analyze or compare their effectiveness across jurisdictions.[2] Moreover, the dominance of econometric modelling in explaining housing markets has perpetuated a blind faith in the efficiency of the market, which has distorted debates and solutions.[3]

The prevailing ideas around rent control have important effects on our social and political landscape. Landlords benefit from the belief that rent control is harmful to tenants, while non-specialists tend to rely on assumptions made by economic "experts" without considering other viewpoints. Policymakers tend to perceive rent control as fringe or radical, which limits debate on housing precarity and affordability. As a result, civil society groups are left in the difficult position of challenging widely held misconceptions while advocating for change.

Due to an unprecedented housing crisis, discussions of rent control are growing in British Columbia. Wage stagnation and soaring rents have led to a situation where up to 30 per cent of Canadian and U.S. households are spending more than half their income on rent.[4] B.C.'s current model of rent regulation, called vacancy decontrol, regulates rents only during an individual tenancy. Landlords are free to raise rent without restriction upon tenant turnover. This system leaves a regulatory gap that incentivizes landlords to evict tenants for minor renovations to dramatically increase rents—so-called "renovictions." The lack of vacancy control has resulted in the erosion of affordable housing units, exacerbating the affordability crisis. Average rents in B.C.'s major metro areas have risen between 10-23 per cent year over year since 2019.[5] With existing annual rent increases normally capped at 2 per cent (i.e., per CPI inflation), these increases can only be attributed to rent hikes achieved on tenant turnover, in addition to increases in luxury supply.

The loophole created by the lack of vacancy control has led to a loss of affordable units across Canada. One analysis estimates 46,000 units of lower priced rental stock (under $1,000/month) were lost annually in Canada between 2016-2020, largely due to runaway rents.[6] Vancouver alone lost 47,055 units of affordable housing over seven years, outpacing any addition of affordable stock by orders of magnitude.[7]

Deregulation and disinvestment in the rental housing sector have been the chief contributors to housing inequality. The erosion of post-WWII welfare state social policies, the decline of social housing, and attrition in tenants' rights and protections have reshaped housing policy over five decades.[8] Although some regulatory mechanisms have been implemented, economic restructuring and neoliberalization have prioritized market-based solutions, ultimately leading to the state-led abandonment of affordable housing.

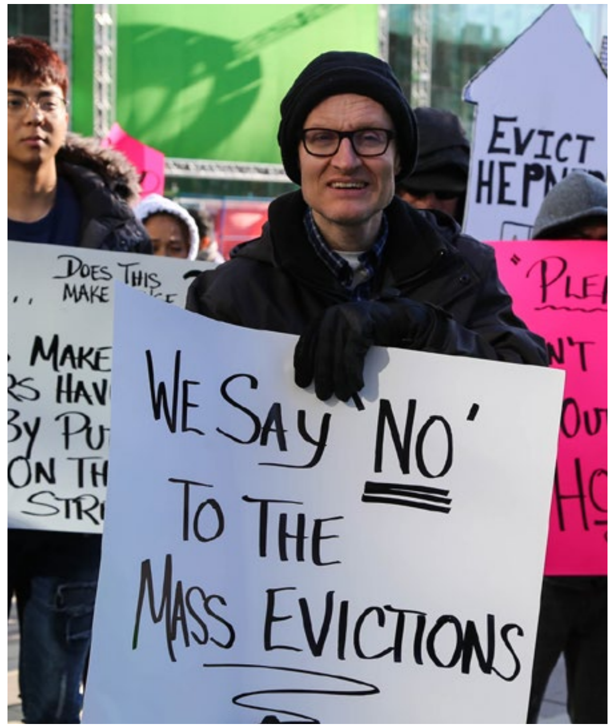
The financialization of the rental sector, coupled with speculation and policy loopholes, has worsened the crisis. Private equity funds and asset management firms have fueled financialization, treating housing as primarily a financial asset for generating investment returns. Corporate landlords and Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) have become major players in the rental market. Local policies aimed at encouraging rental housing construction have at times inadvertently supported corporate landlords, leading to increased institutional investor ownership of housing stock.

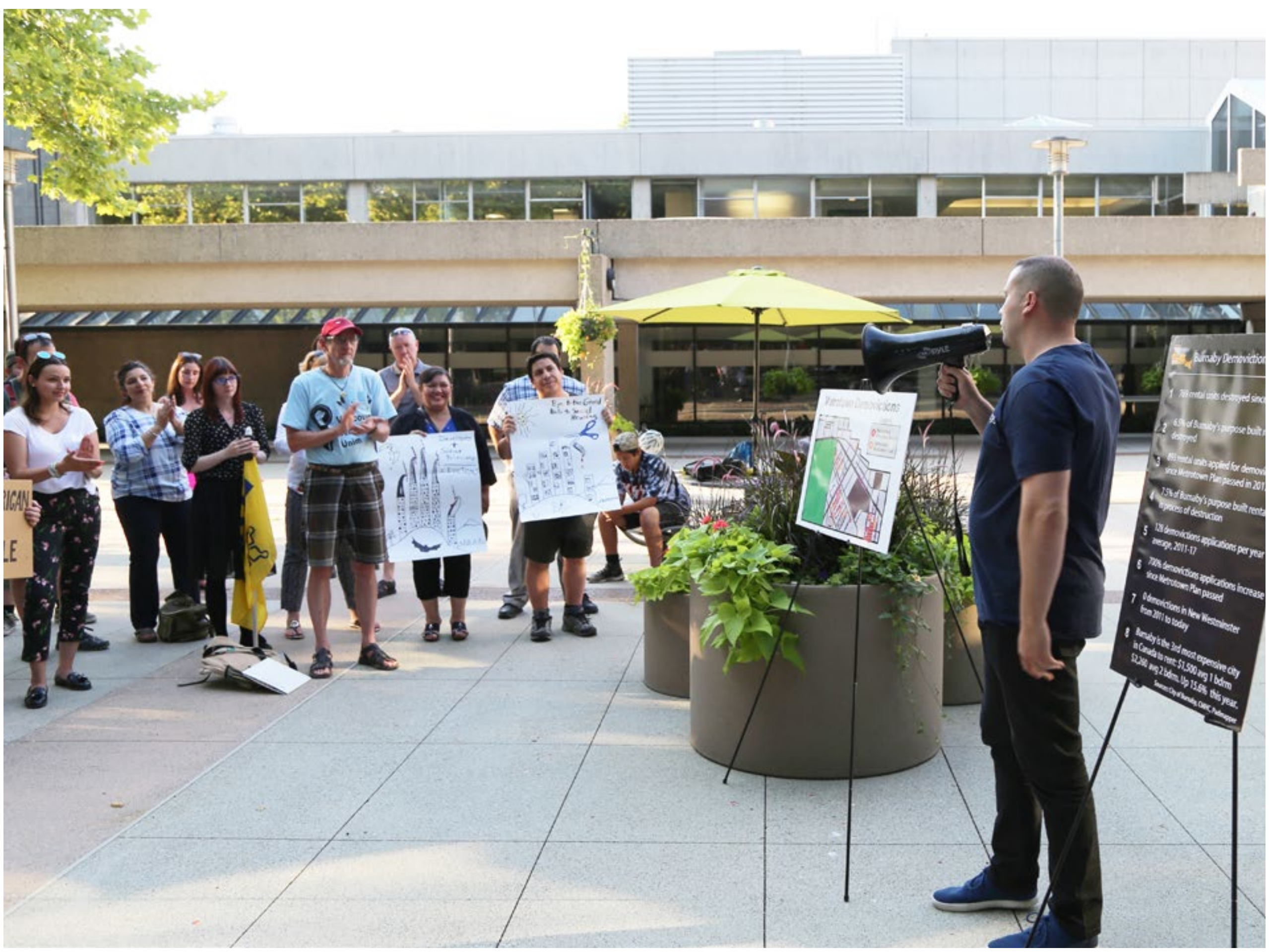
Today's extreme levels of housing insecurity and homelessness are the predictable outcomes of a decades-long reshaping of the housing landscape. Vacancy control represents a policy pathway that can respond to these changing market forces and prevent further harm.

Reviewing rent control literature

Mainstream debates have long been entrenched in a discourse that argues rent control is harmful. Despite substantial research that suggests otherwise, the idea that rent control is bad persists as a conclusive and seemingly scientific claim. Understanding how knowledge about rent control is produced is crucial to stemming this assumption.

A close analysis of the wider literature on rent control suggests there is in fact no meaningful consensus, and that there are long-standing problems with data and significant flaws in the econometric methods relied upon by opponents of rent control. At a deeper level, analysis also suggests that the notion of market efficiency amid minimal government intervention does not reflect the reality of how rental housing markets actually operate.





Five key lessons about rent control research

1. No consensus exists, historically or now, even among orthodox economists

Beyond the confines of conservative economics, conclusions about rent control are mixed.[9] Researchers have long been raising questions about the utility of econometric modelling and conventional market theories in the study of housing and land markets.[10] Two recent major literature surveys describe a wide diversity of conclusions in rent control studies, arguing that contradictory findings are largely due to assumptions authors make in their modelling approaches.[11]

2. Longstanding problems with data plague all rent control research

Longstanding data limitations pose major challenges to rent control research, with the specificity of policy and economic contexts making it difficult to isolate and compare specific effects of rent regulation. For example, rent control is typically implemented alongside other forms of housing regulation, such as inclusionary zoning,[12] affordable housing covenants,[13] protective building codes, progressive tax policies, and so on. Other factors such as social welfare regimes and land value, ownership and used patterns also interact with housing policies.

Few standardized data sets across jurisdictions exist for housing, particularly for interpreting investor and landlord behaviour.[14] Moreover, important data relevant to the performance of rent control is often not recorded or is not consistent enough for comparison. Considering these contextual factors and data limitations, readers should be skeptical of studies that conclude with blanket certainty any obvious or incontrovertible results from available rent control data.

3. Econometric approaches are based on inappropriate methods

Econometric approaches dominate rent control literature, but do not adequately capture the complexities of housing and land markets. One review estimates nearly 67 per cent of studies over the last four decades owe their analysis and conclusions entirely to modelling.[15] Even orthodox economists debate whether modelling is an appropriate tool for understanding actual housing market dynamics. Despite their apparent sophistication, these models are ultimately hypothetical scenarios rather than descriptions of real-world experiences.

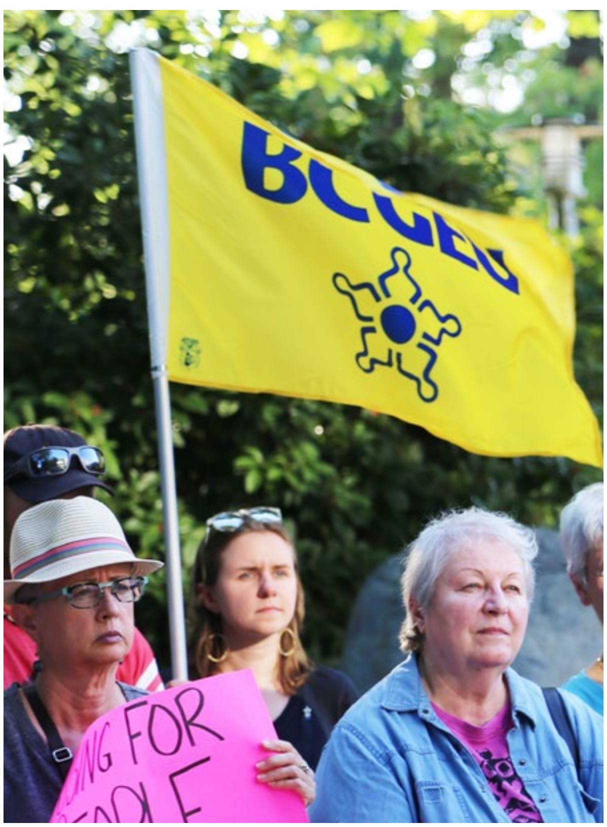
Most economic models begin with the incorrect assumption that housing markets are perfectly competitive and that all actors operate under the same motivations.[16] In contrast, many researchers have pointed out that rental housing is an extremely complex good, where many factors, internal and external to the market, influence supply, demand, investment, disinvestment and so on.

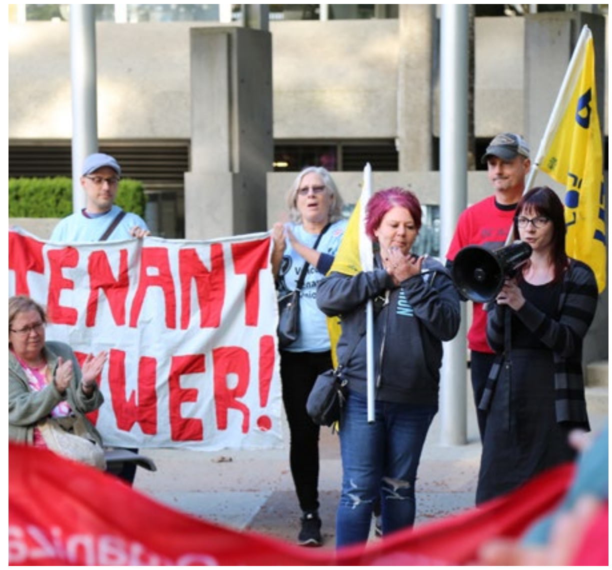
It is worth noting that economists' assumptions about price controls have been wrong before. The current shift toward more favourable research on rent control mirrors a similar unravelling of orthodoxy regarding the minimum wage. Many economists incorrectly argued for years that legislated minimum wages would harm workers by creating widespread unemployment.[17]

4. There is no evidence that unregulated markets are the most efficient providers of housing

A central argument of market orthodoxy is that if markets are sufficiently competitive, they will allocate resources efficiently. But evidence suggests this is not the case with housing. Given the entrenchment of housing inequality and market crises over the last forty years, evidence points mostly to the contrary: unregulated markets are not capable of providing housing to all members of our society.

Orthodox approaches often ignore the influence of government intervention on housing markets. Opponents of regulation argue against state interference, in spite of the fact that markets always exist in direct relation to state programs, subsidies, investments, taxation, labour market inputs and regulation, finance and bank regulatory systems, public works and infrastructure, and so on. In fact, rental housing stands out historically as an example of extensive and wide-ranging government intervention in the market.[18]





5. Political economy reveals the blind spots in orthodox market economic approaches

This project looks at rental housing policy primarily through the lens of political economy. Political economy researchers critique orthodox market economics for its failure to meaningfully include political and social processes as factors in the analysis of economic activity. Simple, abstracted explanations about rent control within today's orthodox economics are only possible with overly simplistic assumptions about market efficiency that assume housing is simply a commodity like any other.

Political economy asserts that economics and power relations cannot be separated, and treats markets as multi-sectoral constructs constantly shaped by state intervention. This calls into question many of the core assumptions orthodox economists employ to model housing markets. Similarly, political economy questions the orthodox assumption that markets have a tendency toward equilibrium or efficiency, instead understanding markets as defined by crisis, contradiction, and non-economic influences.

Orthodox economics also generally assumes a narrowly defined objective of economic "efficiency," ignoring other societal and moral goals. A political economy approach can highlight social impacts and analyze rental housing as something other than an opportunity for private investment and profit. As one political economy paper succinctly phrases it, "one person's inefficiency is another person's home."[19]

Thematic debates: myths and realities

A comprehensive discussion of rent control requires going beyond econometric modelling to incorporate research that uses qualitative methods, descriptive statistics, and other approaches to understanding how policies impact tenants and landlords.

The discussion that follows applies a wider lens to examine key debates around rent regulation, including vacancy control where such research exists. It critiques prominent development industry myths that have come to dominate discussions of rent control.

Housing Supply

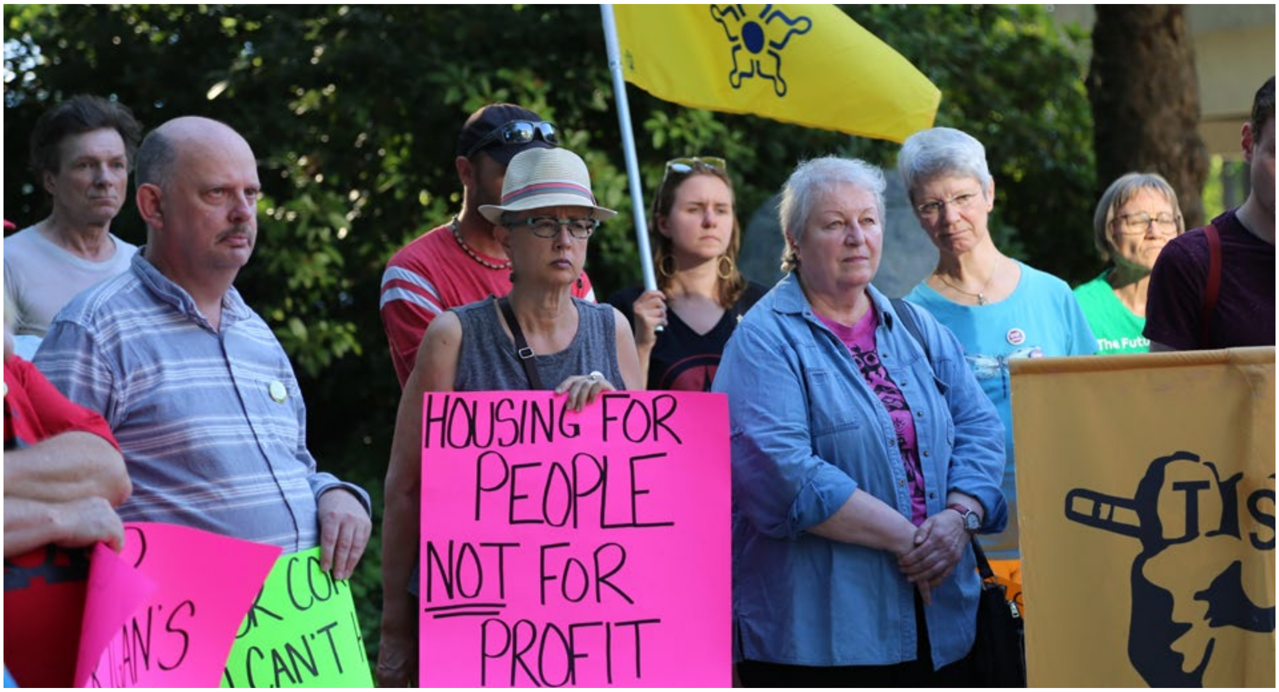
Development industry myth: The main problem with the housing crisis is the lack of supply of available rental units to meet demand as evidenced by low vacancy rates. Affordability can only be addressed with market and policy strategies that increase supply across all rental submarkets for all levels of income. Regulations on rents would ultimately scare investors away from the purpose-built rental sector thereby constraining our already low supply. This hurts tenants in the short and long run, resulting in an even more severe housing crisis.

Current debates typically frame supply as the core problem in our housing crisis. The basic argument is that there is a lack of available rental units to meet demand, resulting in low vacancy rates where renters are forced to pay more to access that limited supply. Proponents of this myth argue that addressing affordability simply requires increasing the overall supply of rental units. From this perspective, rent regulations are a deterrent to investors, leading to lower supply and a worsening crisis.

Two key features of this myth are:
a) that housing markets demonstrate price elasticity responses to supply (and demand) inputs like any other market; and
b) that market efficiency is the most important factor in determining the so-called "health" of the housing market.

Critics of this myth point out that most orthodox modelling is premised on the false idea of a single homogenous market, rather than what is in reality a heterogeneous set of interrelated submarkets.[20] Moreover, housing markets are not as competitive as commonly believed, and tend to be controlled (increasingly) by a few powerful players.[21] This means that developers and landowners can manipulate supply to keep real estate prices high using techniques such as land assembly and slow release.[22] This in turn provides landlords with monopoly power over rent levels in an environment of scarce supply and limited housing resources.[23] Given the strong incentives the development industry has to maintain tight supply, its insistence that price regulations would irreparably hamper an increase in supply is disingenuous at best.

Much research suggests that factors other than rent control, such as regional and local economies and specific characteristics of local housing stock, have a greater influence on housing supply.[24] In this respect, longitudinal studies have shown that rent control has little short or long-term impact on construction rates.[25] Studies examining the effects of rent control policies in North America have also found that the removal of controls did not lead to a significant increase in construction activity.[26] Similar findings have been observed in countries such as Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece. [27]



Rental Filtering

Development industry myth: Increases in supply of any kind (high-market rentals or even owner-occupied stock) will eventually ease vacancy rates and usher in a process of consumer "filtering," whereby those who can afford new units will vacate their current more affordable units for the benefit of down-market tenants.

The concept of rental filtering asserts that increasing the supply of higher-end housing will lead to the movement of more affluent tenants up the housing ladder, making their vacated units available to lower-income renters. However, research shows that this theory lacks empirical evidence and filtering is not an effective solution for increasing supply and affordability.

Most research supporting filtering relies on hypothetical modelling,[28] whereas real world studies have found the concept unsound, possessing "little empirical validity."[29] Critical research has highlighted several challenges for ensuring units filter down to lower-income renters, including factors such as demolitions, conversions, and gentrification.[30] Analysis has found that new construction is typically focused on higher-income submarkets, and thus unlikely to benefit lower income renters.[31]

Even in instances where limited filtering seems to occur, it takes a long time to impact affordability. Research in Canada suggests that it could take up to 40 years for filtering to produce meaningful benefits.[32] A review of Canadian data from the 1970s to 1990s found that the filtering process was so slow and had so little effect on providing housing to lower income tenants that it could not be pursued as a serious policy strategy.[33]

Recent studies have highlighted the phenomenon of reverse filtering, where affordable units are pulled away due to upscaling and gentrification. One study found reverse filtering in all major Canadian metropolitan areas since 1981 and concluded that "filtering is now contributing to housing problems, not solving them."[34]

This mirrors U.S. research, including a 2015 study which found that new construction in higher-end markets led to higher overall prices in lower tiers of housing.[35] A 30-year scan of median incomes and rental rates in U.S. cities found that filtering is not a meaningful method for producing affordable rental housing.[36]

Landlord Repairs

Development industry myth: *Purpose-built rental housing is very challenging for owners to maintain, particularly among small landlords. Rent controls already limit how much income landlords can generate, and vacancy control would severely constrain their ability to sustain regular maintenance and to make major capital upgrades in aging rental stock. Those investments will not occur under vacancy control and the health and safety of tenants will be put at risk.*

Research on landlord repairs has typically relied on models that assume a single homogenous housing market, where landlords coexist as rational economic actors under perfect competition. Under these assumptions economists conclude that without regulation, landlords will maintain housing quality to maximize profits.

The fatal error with this reasoning is that it assumes landlords maximize profit by actively improving the quality of housing. Instead, many do so by minimizing maintenance. Since 2018, more than 10 per cent of Canadian renter households report housing that needs major structural repairs, while a staggering 67 per cent of renter households report their basic maintenance needs are not being met by property owners.[37] Moreover, research shows that institutional landlords are more likely to engage in profit-seeking behaviours that erode housing suitability and neglect basic maintenance.[38]

Analysis of landlord responses to rent control have found that market context is a bigger factor in shaping maintenance behaviour. Multiple studies have found no major maintenance reductions under rent control,[39] and housing economists have concluded that the relationship between rent control and maintenance is "theoretically ambiguous" at best.[40]

Orthodox modelling also fails to account for tenant maintenance and makes the false assumption that housing units deteriorate universally over time. Research has shown that tenants in rent-controlled units were more likely to stay longer and be proactive in maintenance.[41]

Small (or "Mom and Pop") Landlords

Development industry myth: *Rent control will place an unfair burden on small or "mom and pop" landlords who make up a significant portion of the private market for housing providers. Rent controls will scare away this important segment of the landlord community from participating in the market and will further decrease the number of units available.*

The rent regulation debate is mired in the myth that most landlords are individual owners. While there has been some recent increase in Canadian homeowners reporting rental income, this is far outstripped by the growth and extent of holdings in rental housing by corporate investors. If we narrow analysis to truly "mom and pop" landlords—those who own one rental unit, or households that report rental income from a portion of their only owned property—data suggests this is a very small segment of rental housing. The 2016 Statistics Canada Survey of Financial Security showed that of the 7.6 million homeowners that own their residence and no other property, only 340,000 households reported rental income.[42] Moreover, second generation rent controls are typically implemented with provisions to help support these types of small owners.[43]

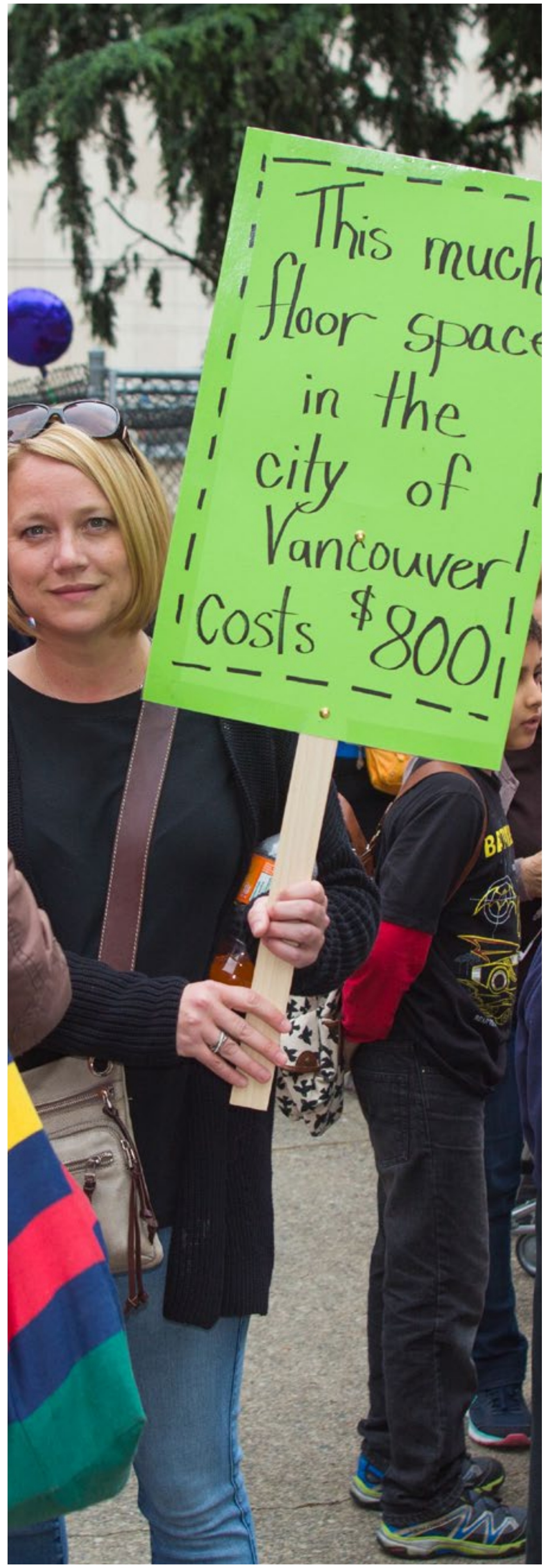
At the other end, large institutional investors, such as Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs), have made unprecedented rental acquisitions in recent years, with a concentration in large urban centres and a documented preference for jurisdictions with limited rent regulation, weak tenant protections, and loopholes for above-guideline increases.[44] These institutional investors have frequently been associated with eviction-seeking business models, above-guideline rent increases, and higher rates of rent appreciation.[45]

Policy Implementation

Development industry myth: Rent control will require significant administrative resources to create a meaningful system for compliance and enforcement, and large amounts of onerous bureaucracy that would be a high cost to staff and maintain. Such a system also comes along with significant privacy risks.

Detailed research on the implementation and administrative costs of rent control is limited, but the better-documented costs of housing precarity and homelessness likely outweigh any vacancy control policy implementation costs by orders of magnitude.[46] A 2011 Manitoba study noted the annual cost of administering that province's rent regulation program was less than $2 per capita.[47] Other housing policies, such as rent subsidies and public buildouts of affordable housing are important, but are nonetheless much more costly than rent control implementation.[48]

Several literature reviews contend that rent control is an effective way to protect low-income renters with relatively low cost or cost-neutral implementation.[49] Rent boards in California cities provide a useful model of policy implementation, compliance and data gathering. These are often cost-neutral, with funding earned via per-unit fees on landlords.[50]



Case studies in Canada

Provincial and municipal experiments with vacancy control in Canada in the 1970s (and after) provide useful insights and lessons going forward.

Development industry discourse about rent controls—specifically, mid-1970s vacancy control—blames the policy for the withdrawal of developers from rental housing from that decade onward.[51] But such assessments ignore the economic context of housing in Canada during the global recession and the exceptional inflation of the 1970s and 80s, including property market booms and busts during that time.[52] Also crucial was the federal government's near-total disengagement from stimulative programs for rental housing in the same period, which ended the post-WWII phase of state-facilitated rental housing expansion.[53] This public disinvestment was accompanied by decades of tax changes that disincentivized purpose-built rental construction, and instead incentivized the condominium market.[54]

Experimentation with vacancy control was in part an effort by policymakers to protect renters during a time of serious economic crisis and the beginning of the federal withdrawal from the national housing strategy.[55] Though Canada's experience with vacancy control to date has been limited, studies have debunked claims that it is directly related to negative impacts on new rental supply.

British Columbia

The BC NDP introduced the *Residential Premises Interim Rent Stabilization Act* in 1973 as an emergency measure to respond to rising inflation and record-low vacancy rates. This legislation modified the Landlord and Tenant Act by tying rent to the unit. This was in line with a subsequent federal request for provinces to develop rent control measures as part of a wider anti-inflation program for the country.

However, amendments in 1974 undermined the original vacancy control provisions by establishing a Rentalsman Office to set rental increases. Though rent controls enjoyed support across the province, a new Social Credit government made moves to weaken vacancy control in 1977.

Successive Social Credit governments further weakened rent controls until they were abolished in 1984. B.C. would not have any regulation on rents for a twelve-year period, until 1996 when the BC NDP reintroduced a rent increase dispute model similar to the one used in Quebec today (whereby a landlord must justify a rent increase with evidence). In 2004, BC Liberals introduced our current regime of vacancy decontrol with annual increases tied to inflation.

Development industry discourse claimed that the elimination of rent controls in the 1980s was intended to encourage new construction, which had collapsed following state-led disinvestment. However, purpose-built rental construction in B.C. continued to decline through the 1980s and 90s.[56] One study of rent controls in B.C. from 1974-1989 found that development industry behaviour was primarily shaped by the wider economic context and that there was no discernible relationship between the decline in supply and rent controls.[57]

Ontario

Ontario implemented vacancy control in 1975, also in response to a housing crisis and federal anti-inflation policies. In the first ten years, rent controls were enforced only on housing built prior to 1975, presumably to discourage development industry withdrawal from construction. New builds were initially exempt for 5 years post-construction, but in 1979 this exemption was extended indefinitely. Rent on multi-family stock built prior to 1975 could be raised annually, but only using cost-pass through provisions.[58]

A 1988 study shows how the structure of Ontario rent controls created a two-tiered system.[59] On one hand, average rents for one-bedroom suites decreased in buildings built prior to 1975, which preserved some affordable units. On the other, uncontrolled units (both new builds and conversions) experienced run-away rents, producing a significant split in the market. Multiple modifications were phased in and out from 1975 to 1986. In 1986, the overall formula for rent control was reindexed to inflation, thereby eliminating vacancy control on pre-1975 units.[60] Vacancy controls were ended by the Progressive Conservative government in 1997, and the now long-critiqued loophole of "above-guideline increases" (AGIs) were introduced, which allowed landlords to download significant amounts of their repair costs onto tenants. Rent controls were ended by the Progressive Conservative government in 1997, and the now long-critiqued loophole of above-guideline increases (AGIs) was introduced, which allowed landlords to download significant amounts of their repair costs onto tenants.

Rental housing was already in steep decline in the early 1970s across North America, and in Ontario fell by almost half in 1975. However, disinvestment was so intertwined with the introduction of controls that, when reviewing historical data points, it is almost impossible to make causal inferences.[61] In fact, new rental starts in Ontario continued to remain depressed all the way to 2016, twenty years after the removal of vacancy control. As in other examples, the development industry did not deliver growth in construction after the removal of vacancy control.

Manitoba

In 1976, Manitoba introduced rent regulation much like Ontario's. Vacancy control was implemented for buildings with three or more units, with units built after 1976 being exempt for five years. In 1978, the province began tying annual rent increases to inflation, and weakened vacancy control by allowing landlords to raise rents at tenancy turnover in order to equal the average rent for comparable units in the same or nearby complexes. Rent regulations were replaced with an arbitration system in 1980, but regulations were reintroduced in 1982, with maximum allowable amounts set annually by the government along with wide-ranging provisions for cost-pass through.[62]

As of 2023, Manitoba retains a limited form of vacancy control in buildings with four or more units, whereby limits on annual rent increases set by government apply even when a tenancy changes. However, there are several exceptions to this policy, including the exemption for buildings with three units or less:[63]

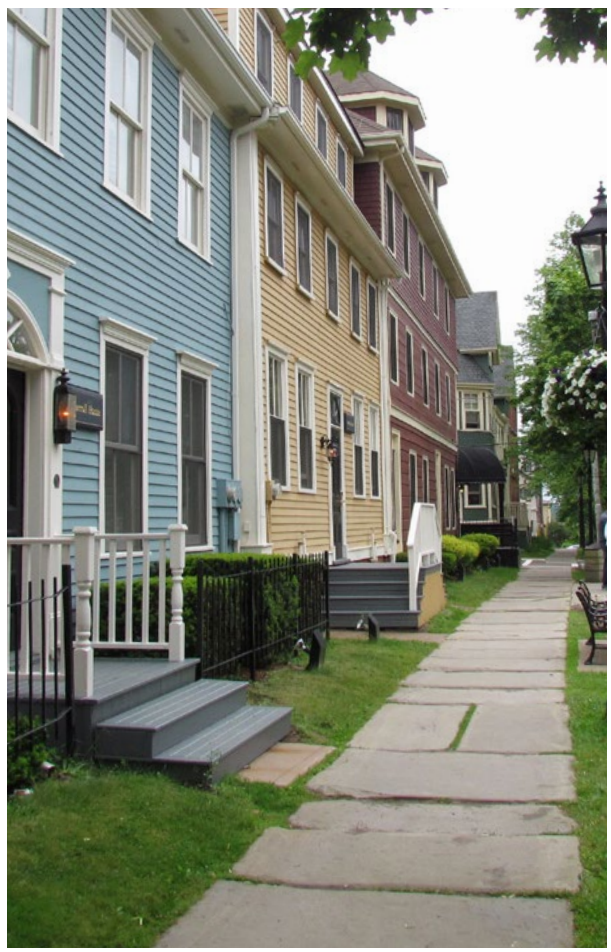
First, a landlord can increase a new tenant's rent if they provide a "notice to new tenant" form. The new rent cannot be more than the average of the rents charged for similar or comparable units in the complex, and the tenant has the right to ask the Residential Tenancy Branch to determine the average rent. Second, rental complexes built and occupied after March 7, 2005, are exempt from rent control for a period of 20 years.

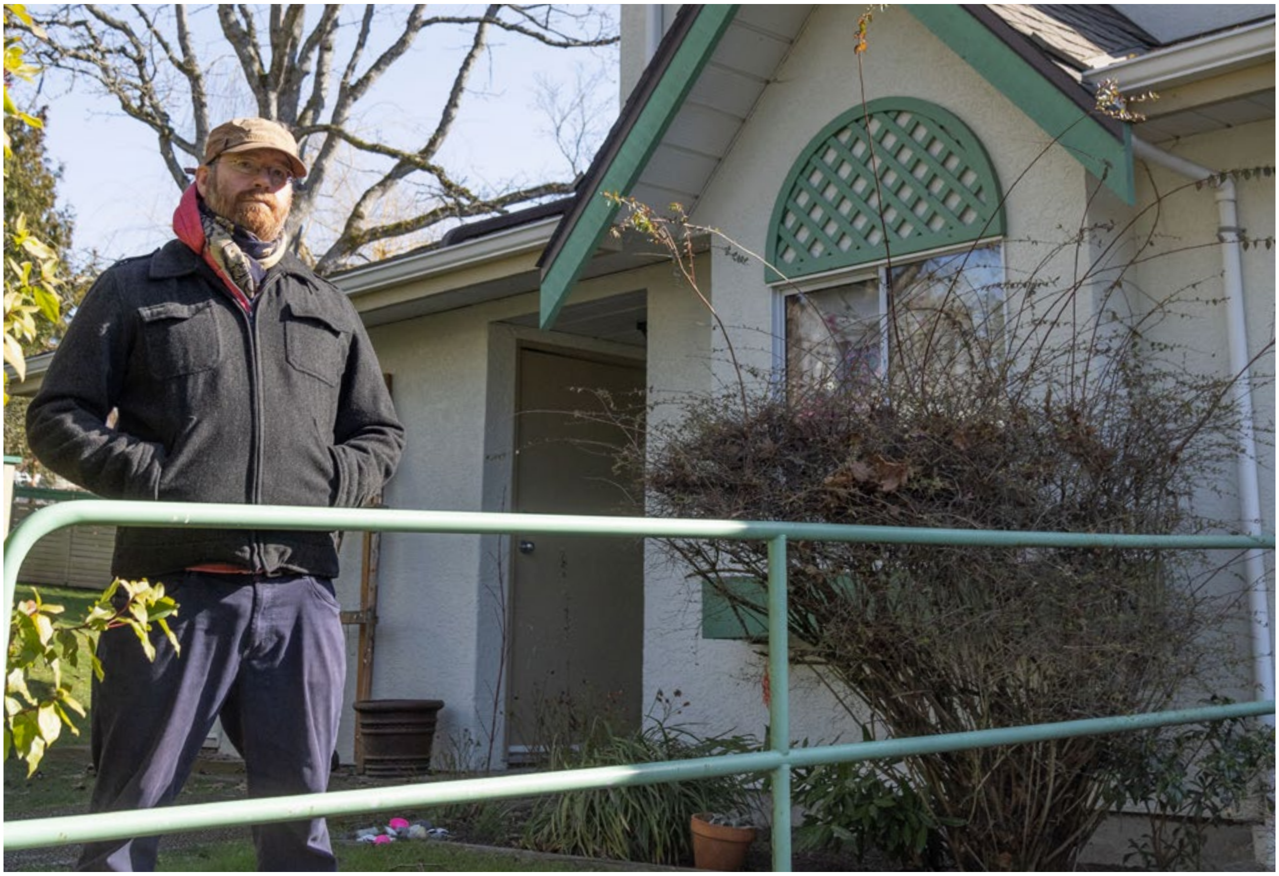
The few studies that have been focused on Manitoba have found that rental housing construction was not negatively affected by rent controls.[64]

Prince Edward Island (P.E.I.)

P.E.I. has long-standing rent control provisions, first implemented in 1975. However, the effectiveness of rent control in P.E.I. has been hampered by weak compliance, enforcement, and data collection. P.E.I.'s current affordability crisis is comparable to other provinces, with high rent burdens and steep annual increases. Vacancy control exists on paper, but tenants have very little real-world leverage.

Nonetheless, vacancy control does not appear to have had any negative impact on rental housing supply. The P.E.I. government's own reporting does not attribute its present-day housing woes to vacancy control, instead citing lagging public investment in affordable housing, increased immigration, increases in tourism/short-term rentals, and gentrification as core reasons for P.E.I.'s rental housing pressures.[65]





The potential in vacancy control

The housing crisis in North American cities is characterized by racial, gender and economic inequality.[66] Research shows that housing instability and involuntary displacement negatively impact health, social attainment, and educational outcomes, particularly for women, non-white, and immigrant communities.[67] Indigenous people in Canada are disproportionately affected by inadequate housing and homelessness.[68] Addressing these issues requires policies that promote racial and economic justice.

Rent control, specifically vacancy control, has shown to be effective in slowing displacement, preserving affordability, and allowing lower-income and racialized individuals to stay in their communities. Even moderate second-generation rent controls have been found to increase housing stability. Rent controls also protect against upscaling and gentrification in urban areas and improve both short- and long-term affordability.[69] However, careful implementation is necessary to ensure that those who need rent control the most receive its benefits.[70]

Recent research shows rent controls help reduce inequality by lowering capital-wealth ratios, increasing disposable income among tenants, and reducing landlord incomes.[71] Vacancy control, in particular, seems to have a major impact on reducing inequality.[72] Rent control also promotes racial diversity and inclusiveness, as shown in case studies where vacancy control led to lower rent increases, decreased tenant turnover, and increased racial representation among renters.[73]

Rent control policies can contribute to economic and racial justice by supporting lower-income households within historically marginalized communities, allowing them to achieve greater economic security while preserving the vitality of local neighborhoods.[74] Efforts to pursue vacancy control should highlight these types of contributions to economic security and social justice.[75]

Recommendations

Approach rent control as evidence-based social policy

Rent control should be advocated as a progressive, evidence-based social policy, rather than a purely economic or market-oriented control (for example, correcting for inflation). The current housing crisis demands a shift in thinking, and the incorporation of a wider range of research opens the door to significant potential social benefits resulting from improved rent control frameworks. If housing is understood as a human right, then rent control is much more than an economic policy. Policymakers should view rent control as a domain of social policy that can help address serious social problems and injustices.

Enact interventions directed against institutional investors

The power of institutional investors over Canada's rental housing stock has reached alarming proportions.[76] To be effective, tenants and activists who want to address housing affordability must confront the impacts of corporate ownership. Policies that can help with this include ownership disclosure, property data transparency, and limitations on speculative investment in rental housing. Provincial legislators can enact stronger tenant protections, including vacancy control, to discourage financialized landlords from targeting multi-family housing inventory. In turn, the federal government should curb favourable CMHC-backed lending to corporate investors and/or make lending and interest rates contingent on tenant protections.[77]

Nest regulatory approaches alongside complementary policies

Vacancy control is not a silver bullet. Rent control policies should be complemented by other measures that target housing inequality. For example, landlords should be held accountable for maintenance and upgrades; eviction-seeking behaviors should be penalized; and marginalized tenants should receive meaningful support. Progressive income tax schemes alongside increases to social assistance amounts can further enhance the effectiveness of better rent regulations.[78] Establishing a provincial landlord registry is another complementary, if not crucial, policy that should be prioritized.

Eliminate cost-pass through and above-guideline provisions

The evidence is clear that many landlords respond to regulation with eviction-seeking behaviour (e.g., renovictions), particularly if significant cost-pass through and above-guideline provisions are built into rent control policies.[79] Cost-pass through or above-guideline provisions should be eliminated. Instead, legitimate maintenance, repairs and upgrades can instead be supported through public investment programs.[80]

Develop multijurisdictional legislation and enforcement mechanisms

Provinces and municipalities should collaborate on tailoring policies to local needs, ensuring they are effective for the context in which they are implemented and applied. Evidence from California's model of rent control and ordinance boards shows municipal governments are well-positioned to facilitate locally tailored policies, and to provide meaningful oversight, accountability, and data collection.[81] At the same time, broad-based provincial (and sometimes federal) legislation is crucial for providing a protective regulatory backdrop.

Focus policy development on those most impacted and with the least power

Those most impacted by rent costs and housing precarity should have meaningful involvement in policy development. To be effective, new rent control policies will have to address key questions, such as:

- How will allowable increases be decided and by whom?
- Which buildings are excluded and for what reasons?
- Will a just cause for eviction need to be redefined?

Policy solutions for these types of questions should not be left to landlord and/or development lobbies or be constrained by narrowly defined ideas about market efficiency.

Invest deeply in the non-market supply of housing

To be most effective, vacancy control should also be accompanied by major public investment in housing. The federal government, in particular, should commit to a dramatic and accelerated increase in public investment for non-market housing. Social or subsidised housing rentals currently comprise an abysmal 6 per cent of the multi-family inventory in Canada, almost all of which was built in the postwar boom.[82]

In the context of what we know about the little relief that market-rate supply (via filtering) will ultimately provide to low income renters, research clearly shows that subsidised housing has more than double the impact in reducing displacement pressures and providing real affordability.[83]

Endnotes

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