

# 10 ways to provide adequate housing in the COVID-19 era

November 24 2020, by Carolyn Whitzman and Penny Gurstein

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Overcrowded housing is a key COVID-19 culprit. Credit: Nazish Mirekar/Unsplash

COVID-19 is a health, social, economic and political emergency. It is also a housing emergency.

In order to prevent the spread of COVID-19, more than [3.9 billion](#) people—half of the Earth's population—have been asked or ordered to stay at home. But for [a third of the world's urban dwellers](#), that's not a

helpful command.

Too many people cannot practice physical distancing because of [overcrowded living conditions](#). Many Indigenous communities have no [access to clean water](#). Renters are [threatened with eviction](#) because of precarious employment.

In Canada, COVID-19 cases and deaths have been concentrated in nursing homes, [homeless shelters](#) and other [overcrowded housing situations](#).

Globally, the pandemic's health and economic impacts have compounded disparities based on gender (including increased rates of [violence against women](#)), [race](#) and [disabilities](#). But a growing tide of activism has led to [new housing programs and approaches](#).

As housing experts inspired by a call for housing researchers to "[support rapid policy-making that is done well](#)," we've organized a series of global roundtables over the past two months. Participants from all continents identified more than 50 potentially good practices that can inspire better action. We produced a COVID-19 [Housing Policy Database](#) that is searchable by location, type of intervention and target population group.

We used [guidance notes](#) from the former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing, Leilani Farha, and recommendations on "[slum health](#)" from researchers focused on the Global South to analyze 10 categories of actions that can slow the spread of COVID-19 and improve health outcomes and housing conditions for the most marginalized.

## **10 areas for improvement**

The first three categories hinder the spread of COVID-19 through

housing-related measures:

1. Respond to the expressed needs of residents in encampments and [informal settlements](#), including adequate water, sanitation and distancing.
2. Protect those living in shelters and other housing with shared toilets and cooking facilities.
3. Support self-help measures like access to health care and community resistance to evictions.
4. The next three categories improve health outcomes of marginalized individuals and households:
5. Protect renters and mortgage-holders from eviction, foreclosures or utility cut-offs.
6. Provide financial assistance to renters and mortgage-holders with reduced income, including rental or income assistance, and assistance with utility payments.
7. Introduce measures to access justice. These include ensuring distancing in shelters, preventing stealth or illegal evictions and foreclosures and independent monitoring of government policy for adherence to targets.
8. The final four seek to "build back better" by using COVID-19 as a wakeup call to improve adequate housing:
9. Better intergovernmental co-ordination among local, regional, First Nations, national and international authorities.
10. Acquire properties and land for social or rent-regulated affordable housing.
11. Protect land and housing from predatory financialization.
12. New or improved strategies: increased targets, funding or programs for new social and affordable housing.

## **Change can happen with political will**

Our global scan suggests several trends.

Many governments have moved rapidly, though temporarily, to provide homeless people with better shelter, demonstrating how quickly change can happen with sufficient political will. Thousands of homeless people in England were offered [hotel rooms](#), while [South Africa](#) commandeered schools and stadiums as shelters.

In cases where adequate shelter was promised but not delivered, homeless people have voted with their feet. New informal settlements have arisen in cities ranging [from Winnipeg and Toronto](#) to [Cape Town](#).

In [Rio de Janeiro](#), community-led public education, [health care](#) and micro-loans were provided in favelas, but there is no long-term government commitment to support basic services in these areas.

Short-term eviction bans have been lifted in most jurisdictions, leaving accumulated tenant debt that must be paid while unemployment is still high. [Canada's Emergency Response Benefit](#) was an excellent short-term measure, supplemented in the case of British Columbia with [additional support](#) for low-income renters. But a [universal basic income](#) would be preferable in the long term, accompanied by more rent-regulated housing and eviction protection for tenants.

Permanent housing approaches include the sudden resurrection of a stalled project to turn a hotel into [women's housing in Yellowknife](#).

This hotel-to-home conversion precedent inspired Canada's new [Rapid Housing Initiative](#), which allows municipalities and non-profit housing providers to rapidly acquire properties for permanent supportive housing for homeless people. Governments have [taken over the management](#) of private nursing homes where conditions were grossly inadequate.

There are exciting new policy directions. A new [California law](#) was inspired by the activist group [Moms4Housing](#). It's aimed at preventing

large-scale real estate investment trusts from taking over foreclosed housing, evicting renters and raising rents. It allows tenants, families, [local governments](#) and non-profit housing providers 45 days to beat the best auction bid to buy the property and the state government has pledged US\$600 million for that purpose.

Many European cities are [banning short-term rentals](#) like Airbnb and [expropriating vacant properties](#) for use as public housing.

These are all the types of better, long-term choices that must be made by all levels of government in order to redress global systemic [housing](#) inequalities that have been both exposed and amplified by COVID-19.

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