New tool estimates how much affordable housing a city needs

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Credit: David Wagner/public domain

Canada needs a more cohesive strategy to help the more than 1.7 million people currently living in unaffordable, overcrowded or poor-condition housing, says UBC expert Dr. Penny Gurstein, head of the Housing Research Collaborative at UBC's school of community and regional

planning.

There is no standardized method in Canada to assess needs by income and future population growth at the federal, provincial and municipal levels, says Dr. Gurstein. Instead, planners have typically used a variety of tools with mixed results.

So, Dr. Gurstein and her team developed Housing Assessment Resource Tools—HART—a new system to fill this gap. HART will help to more accurately assess people's housing needs and set realistic targets for creating affordable and equitable housing.

HART was recently tested in the city of Kelowna, helping pinpoint specific housing needs for lower-income households. Now the UBC team hopes to roll it out across many more cities and regions.

In this Q&A, Dr. Gurstein shares more on HART.

How does HART work?

HART is designed to provide planners with a simple, robust, equity-focused tool that will work across different locations and jurisdictions.

The first part is a housing needs assessment. This is essentially an inventory of the number of households in need, the net change in affordable rental housing units, and changes in population growth. This component also estimates the housing needs of different income levels. And it takes stock of the priority populations identified for that region—for example Indigenous households, people of color or households led by women.

The second part is land assessment. This includes identifying the best locations to deliver affordable housing. It's important to consider if the

sites are located near essential services and amenities, whether public and non-profit land is available (to reduce land costs), whether new housing can be layered on top of existing buildings, and where affordable homes are currently located so that they can be retained.

All these data sets will allow planners to assess specific housing requirements in an efficient, systematic way.

Your group tested HART in the city of Kelowna. What did you find?

Overall, Kelowna is fortunate to have good housing supply, but HART analysis suggests there is room for improvement. Among lower-income households (those with annual income below $30,000), the need for housing is stark. More than half of these families are paying an unaffordable amount of their income on rent, and they need more affordable housing options.

We also found that close to 30 per cent of single mothers and almost 20 per cent of Indigenous households live in need of housing or need more affordable housing.

Analysis also showed that housing need is not limited to one-person households—about one-third of low-income households in need of housing have at least two members.

What are your next steps in this project?

We developed HART after winning Stage 1 of the Housing Supply Challenge, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's callout for new ideas and solutions to help more people find an affordable place to call home. We hope to win Stage 2, which will enable us to roll out this

tool in other cities.

Regardless of the outcome, we hope to disseminate HART widely, and one of the ways to do that is by training planners and other professionals to use this tool through an online certificate program.

More information: HART: housingresearchcollaborative.s … ment-resource-tools/

Provided by University of British Columbia

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