

Higher density living is changing the way neighborhoods work in Canada

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Credit: Andre Furtado from Pexels

There is growing concern about people's unwillingness to get to know their neighbors. This concern is significant enough to have spurred research into what has been termed the "[emerging asocial society](#)"—one of the [challenge areas of an initiative called Imagining Canada's Future](#).

To contribute to this challenge, our research examines what we do and do not know about neighbors in densifying Canadian cities.

Over the past three years, we have partnered with community housing providers seeking to improve resident quality of life in challenging conditions of change. Understanding whether residents are willing to get to know their neighbors is an important initial step.

The more willing people are to make ties, the better the prospects are for building social interactions into mutual feelings of trust, welcome and belonging in urban neighborhoods. These feelings are [linked to a number of positive impacts](#), including physical and mental health, voluntarism and participation, cost-effectiveness of urban planning and safety.

We specifically used the question "would you like to get to know your neighbors better?" to assess neighbor willingness. Comparing our results over the past three years suggests that concerns about the decline of neighboring are not unfounded: growing numbers of people are not seeking to deepen their neighborly ties.

Rather than sound the alarm about anti-social communities, we argue that the situation is more complex. Before we draw conclusions about the implications of social isolation, we should check our expectations of how, when and why neighboring does or does not happen.

Many of the classical assumptions of neighboring may not apply today.

By the same token, we can't expect old fashioned emblems of what neighborly communities look like—[think of the Neighborhood Watch or Block Parent programs](#)—to fit today's picture.

Rapidly changing demographics

[Federally](#), [provincially](#), and within many regional and municipal governments, efforts to increase the supply of homes in Canada are at an all-time high. A growing share of these homes are in high-density buildings.

At the same time, the demographic composition of fast-growing neighborhoods is changing. [Canada set immigration records in 2022 and 2023](#), leading to changes in both the population and living environments of our cities.

When we [scanned the research literature](#) to understand what these changes might mean for the social dynamics of urban communities, and how to support neighboring in this new context, we found very limited research about the kind of neighbors that high density and high social mix make, in Canada. Our research aims to fill this gap.

Our research focuses on the social aspects of urban life for residents of community housing, an umbrella term for non-market and non-profit housing that is home to many of those [classified as vulnerable by the National Housing Strategy](#).

Through resident surveys and other methods like focus groups and [photovoice](#), we seek the perceptions and experiences of neighboring within contexts of rapid change that often involve poverty, immigration, social exclusion, resident turnover and eviction, and bias related to age, race, Indigeneity and other factors.

Our research demonstrates there are valid reasons for the ambivalence many people feel about their neighbors. Community housing residents may [be prone to higher risks of conflict with higher stakes for their housing security and mental and physical health.](#)

When people's [housing is unstable, inadequate, unaffordable, and doesn't provide access to the amenities and resources they need, they may be less likely to have the sense of welcome, belonging, and trust](#) to engage in neighboring behavior. This can result in less interest and less capability to be a good neighbor, classically understood.

At the same time, neighboring remains possible and important in community housing. Our research shows the important role neighboring plays in neighborhood quality of life.

Neighboring is a spectrum

[In our focus group research conducted in Vancouver](#), we discovered that it makes more sense to consider neighboring not as good versus bad but as a spectrum of different behaviors in challenging contexts.

Residents of community housing experience neighboring in ways that run the gamut from pro-social to anti-social, with a significant middle zone of asocial activities and relationships. Rather than associating certain behaviors with bad or good neighbors, different contexts and dimensions of vulnerability can determine where a behavior falls on the neighbor spectrum.

Our focus group participants defined good neighbors as residents who understood the importance of social recognition, respect for difference and need for privacy, offering help, and opportunities for shared social activities.

In the middle zone, we found asocial neighboring activities that defied categorization. Depending on the circumstances, these activities could be the source of conflict or a path to generate a more pro-social sense of neighboring. Activities included mutual aid; sharing food; noise and odors; responding to illness and loss of life; observing rules; response to emergencies; attitudes about privacy; and organized social activities.

People who may appear disillusioned with their neighbors often still had the capacity to be good neighbors—but they struggled to be good neighbors under the weight of poverty, inequality, and the structures and regulations in place at home.

The more the participants discussed with one another and with us, the more willingness they demonstrated to improve the functional neighborliness of their buildings. This willingness proves the potential for new programs, rules and spaces to support neighboring within community housing. However, it also provides a warning.

New realities of neighboring

Social connections are not a natural, synergistic outcome of living in close quarters with other people. New understandings of the spectrum of neighboring may open up more meaningful neighbor behaviors for those facing social isolation who are most at risk from anti-social behaviors.

At the same time, making better neighbors is not always the place to start to improve quality of life in high density neighborhoods undergoing rapid change. Neighboring can be politically and emotionally charged. Pro-social neighboring work should be treated with cultural and situational awareness in mind.

In the [context of refugee settlement](#) in particular, there is a need for both restraint and understanding of specific conditions and cultures before

advancing social connections.

As urban and neighborhood planning gears up to meet the demands of changing Canadian cities, we also need to consider neighbor dynamics.

We are in need of community development strategies that reflect new realities of neighboring across a spectrum of structural and social expectations, risks and rewards. For rapidly changing neighborhoods, with high levels of diversity and vulnerability, neighboring carries risks and constraints, but still matters.

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