

# Study shows international students are not to blame for the housing crisis

August 1 2024, by Chantal Vallis



During the interviews, the researchers used a method called mental sketch mapping to invite young participants to contribute to the conversation through drawings/paintings/sketches of their rooms, homes, streets and neighbourhoods. As the interviews continued, they asked children prompt questions to find out the story behind the drawings, what home meant to them and how children relate to those places. Credit: University of Waterloo

There have been ongoing accusations that international students are flooding university towns and taking up all the affordable housing. These narratives paint international students as the culprit, but a [new study](#) affirms that there is no basis for blaming international students for Canada's housing crisis and looks to change the narrative.

The study was led by a team of researchers at the University of Waterloo's Faculty of Environment and debunks popular myths about international students. For example, international students are often perceived as temporary visitors who are young, hyper-mobile and care-free individuals.

While some may fit this demographic, the researchers point out that the reality is much different. Currently, one in five international students is estimated to live with their partner and children during their studies, and these families are overlooked in Canada's policy and planning in higher education, migration and housing.

"The needs of international student families haven't really been discussed," says Dr. Alkim Karaagac, researcher in the Department of Geography and Environmental Management and principal investigator of the new study. "There is an invisibility and silence, which is a perfect recipe for vulnerability and exploitation."

Focusing on this vulnerable population, the researchers conducted a two-year case study on the housing experiences of 21 international student families living off-campus in the Waterloo region. The region is a unique location to investigate given it has the largest purpose-built student [housing market](#) in the country and is reported to have one of the least affordable housing markets among Canadian university towns.

Their interviews centered on the lived experiences of international students making a home in Canada and the challenges they face in the

housing market. The findings suggest that all international student families face many hurdles to finding adequate housing, plus there are not enough diverse options to meet their needs.

"We talked to a family who had been living in an Airbnb for the last eight months who used up all their savings on tuition and housing," Karaagac says. "While the Airbnb is expensive, when you settle somewhere and the kids start school, you cannot just move somewhere else. Especially when there aren't a lot of options."

Other countries don't share these problems. Subsequent interviews with experts that can speak about the [housing crisis](#) detailed how the United States and United Kingdom support their international students with subsidized housing. From these conversations, plus a review of government documents and reports, Karaagac and her team put forward a series of recommendations.

"We don't have to wait years for major policy changes. There are small changes that we can make now to have a positive impact. One thing is that international students should receive accurate information on university housing, waiting lists, cost of living and housing in the local context. They also need hands-on support when applying for housing, so they don't fall victim to fraud, and help upon arrival as they navigate their first week," Karaagac says.

The researchers believe these short-term actions can be complemented by longer-term actions, such as implementing policies and bylaws that curb rental scams and discrimination by property owners. They also share that creating partnerships with housing market actors can lead to creative affordable housing solutions and that it is essential to expand how universities in towns can be more interconnected with town centers.

At Waterloo, international students comprise 19% of our total graduate

student body. Developing solutions within the institution and with partners to improve the graduate student housing experience is a key area of focus. For example, the Graduate Student Association, a key project partner, is using the findings to propel their advocacy work for [affordable housing](#) in the region and recently held an event with international student families.

Moving forward, they would like to continue creating events to bring together international student families and share resources and programs available within the region.

Later this year, Karaagac and the team will be presenting their findings and recommendations with actors in the community. They are also scheduled to present at conferences held by the Canadian Association of Geographers and British Association of Geographers.

"We need to see [international students](#) as complex and more than one type of student. They are a diverse group which you can't house in a standard dormitory. We need to step up and be prepared as towns, universities and provinces to support them."

**More information:** Learning from International Student Families, Making a Home in Canada: <https://www.makeahome.ca/publications>

Provided by University of Waterloo

Citation: Study shows international students are not to blame for the housing crisis (2024, August 1) retrieved 6 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-international-students-blame-housing-crisis.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.