

Measuring Outcomes in Affordable & Mixed Model Housing

OVERVIEW

Community Housing providers play a fundamental role in community wellbeing that goes far beyond strictly housing outcomes. To equip Canadian affordable housing providers in demonstrating the value of affordable and mixed model housing¹ to the development of diverse and healthy communities, Housing Partnership Canada (HPC), with the support of BGM Strategy Group (BGM) has developed a data collection framework, the Community Wellbeing Assessment.

Through the use of this framework, affordable housing providers will have the ability to track and measure housing and non-housing outcomes housing providers contribute to a healthy community. With this information, affordable housing providers have the ability to assess the wellbeing and social inclusion of tenants within their portfolios to inform service delivery and programming, communicate the value to funders, and advocate for investments in affordable housing.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

To develop the framework for the Community Wellbeing Assessment:

- BGM Strategy Group interviewed and collected materials from 26

members of the International Housing Partnership (IHP) – a collaborative of high performing non-profits from Australia, the UK, the US, and Canada.

¹ This research uses the definition of mixed model established by HPC in their 2020 report, *Canadian Mixed Model Development: A Comparative Analysis of Ten Sites* “A broad definition of mixed

model development is a housing community intentionally designed with a mix of units that vary in affordability for households with a range in income levels

- From these interviews BGM Strategy Group produced a second report detailing the data collection practices of participating IHP members.
 - These interviews resulted in a longlist of over 150 housing and non-housing outcomes providers are collecting that speak to social inclusion and wellbeing of tenants. This longlist of metrics was then sorted into 23 categories.
- With this long-list of outcomes BGM Strategy Group consulted with external experts in housing, evaluation, and inclusion to identify priority categories and metrics, as well as provide advice on data collection methods.
- These consultations determined six categories which form the framework for the Community Wellbeing Assessment:
 1. Positive mental & physical health
 2. Safety
 3. Neighbourhood cohesion
 4. Social connection
 5. Housing that is suitable and in good condition²
 6. Income stability

Data Collection Benefits

While all affordable housing providers collect some form of basic demographic and operational data to inform operations, there is still significant room for expanded data collection in Canada. Providers we spoke to in Australia, the UK, the US, and Canada highlighted several direct benefits, including:

- Informing service delivery and programming
- Building buy-in with evidence
- Provide an evidence base
- Informing advocacy
- Demonstrating ROI

- Combatting NIMBYISM

In the context of tenant research or program evaluation, demographic data adds depth and precision to findings. By collecting demographic data, providers can:

- Determine whether some groups are over-targeted or under-targeted by programming – Demographic data can shine a light on groups who may be underserved and missing out on programs available to them.

² As this study is aimed at affordable housing providers, the affordability of

housing is assumed to already be present.

- Gain insight on what kinds of programs are needed, and for whom – Understanding which groups have sub optimal outcomes or are undersubscribed to assistance programs allows providers to ask why and take action to fill gaps.
- Increase transparency, inclusion, and equity – Certain groups have systematically been left out of data collection processes. By collecting demographic data providers can make groups be seen, and glean information to demonstrate equity or to take steps to achieve it.
- Assess whether a set of responses are representative: By applying a demographic lens consistently providers can develop points of comparison in terms of which groups participate in programming, and which provide feedback to providers.

community housing providers to begin collecting data.³

- The data collected is gathered directly from tenants– these questions can be added to existing surveys, gathered during tenant intake, yearly rent reviews or added to regular communications.
- To form the questions within the Assessment, BGM consulted commonly used questions from existing data collection services such as CMHC and Statistics Canada to allow comparability with larger datasets. .

Community Wellbeing Assessment Framework

The Community Wellbeing Assessment consists of fifteen questions (See table 1) that community housing providers can ask tenants directly to assess their wellbeing and social inclusion. The Community Wellbeing Assessment represents a meaningful starting place for

Table 1: Community Wellbeing Assessment

Health	Safety	Neighbourhood Cohesion	Social Connection	Housing Suitability and Condition	Income Stability
<p>1. Compared to other people your age, how would you rate your physical health?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent • Good • Fair • Poor 	<p>3. How safe do you feel from crime when walking alone in your area after dark?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very safe • Reasonably safe • Somewhat unsafe • Very unsafe • Do not walk alone 	<p>6. Of the people in your neighbourhood, how many do you know?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most of the people • Many of the people • A few of the people • None of the people 	<p>9. How often do you feel lonely?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Never • Rarely • Sometimes • Often • Always 	<p>11. Do you feel you have enough bedrooms to comfortably house everyone who lives in your home (e.g. a maximum of two persons per bedroom)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No 	<p>14. What is your major source of income?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-time employment • Part-time employment • Pension • Child benefit • Alimony, child support • Social assistance/employment insurance

<p>2. In general, would you say your mental health is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent • Good • Fair • Poor 	<p>4. Compared to surrounding neighbourhoods, do you think your neighbourhood has a higher amount of crime, about the same or a lower amount of crime?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower • About the same • Higher 	<p>7. How many people in your neighbourhood do you know well enough to ask for a favour (e.g. picking up the mail, watering plants)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over 10 • 6 to 10 • 1 to 5 • None 	<p>10. Approximately how many relatives and friends do you have who you feel close to or at ease with, can talk to about what is on your mind?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ten or more • Six to nine • Three to five • One or two • None 	<p>12. Is your home in need of any repairs?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No, only regular maintenance is needed (painting, furnace cleaning, etc.) • Yes, minor repairs are needed (missing or loose floor tiles, bricks or shingles, defective steps, railing or siding, etc.) • Yes, major repairs are needed (defective plumbing or electrical) 	<p>15. In the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have enough income to pay rent on time?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always • Often • Sometimes • Rarely • Never
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				wiring, structural repairs to walls, floors or ceilings, etc.)	
	<p>5. How do you feel about your safety from crime when alone in your home in the evening or at night?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not at all worried • Somewhat worried • Very worried • Never alone 	<p>8. How would you describe your sense of belonging to your local community?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very strong • Somewhat strong • Somewhat weak • Very weak 		<p>13. Do you currently require any modifications to your home to carry out basic daily living activities (e.g. handrails, ramps)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No 	

The Community Wellbeing Assessment explores tenant outcomes along six interconnected categories of social inclusion and wellbeing (see figure 1). These categories are not exhaustive of all factors that comprise social inclusion and wellbeing. While we recognize there are other categories that could be included within the Community Wellbeing Framework, the six selected areas represent a meaningful starting place for community housing providers to begin collecting data.⁴

The Assessment defines wellbeing and social inclusion as:

- Wellbeing – The combination of “social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political conditions identified by individuals and their communities as essential for them to flourish and fulfill their potential.”⁵
- Social Inclusion – A situation in “which individuals have the resources and opportunities to be involved in society to the extent that is satisfactory to them.”⁶

⁵ Wiseman, John, and Kathleen Brasher, “Community wellbeing in an unwell world: trends, challenges, and possibilities.” *Journal of public health policy* vol. 29,3 (2008): 353-66. doi:10.1057/jphp.2008.16

⁶ Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). 2018. “The National Housing Strategy Glossary of Common Terms,” <https://cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/nhs/guidepage-strategy/glossary>

Figure 1 Diagram of Healthy Communities



COMMUNITY WELLBEING ASSESSMENT CATEGORIES AND RATIONALE

Mental and Physical Health

Research has shown an association between social inclusion and positive impacts on health, particularly mental health.⁷ Social inclusion is a recognized social determinant of health and integral to promoting mental health and wellbeing. Without social inclusion, people are more likely to experience poor health outcomes such as premature mortality, substance abuse, loneliness, isolation, and poor self-esteem.⁸

Because housing is a recognized social determinant of health⁹, and studies showing that perceived mental health is one of the most reliable measures of someone's overall health,¹⁰ the

⁷ Toronto Public Health and Wellesley Institute, Promoting health and well-being through social inclusion in Toronto: Synthesis of international and local evidence and implications for future action. (January, 2019),1, <https://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Social-Inclusion-Report.pdf>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Raphael, D., Bryant, T., Mikkonen, J. and Raphael, A, *Social Determinants of Health: The Canadian Facts*. (2020). Oshawa: Ontario Tech University Faculty of Health Sciences and Toronto: York

Community Wellbeing Assessment includes two questions asking about the tenant's perceived health, both overall and in comparison to others their age. The questions are derived from Statistics Canada studies. These data provide additional insights when analyzed through a demographic lens.

Safety

A sense of personal safety is linked to overall feelings of wellbeing and social inclusion.¹¹ Safety can act as a greater barrier to social inclusion for individuals who are most vulnerable to crime, notably seniors, women, and people with disabilities.¹²

University School of Health Policy and Management, 38.

¹⁰ Lundberg O, Manderbacka K, "Assessing reliability of a measure of self-rated health" *Scand J Soc Med*. (1996) Sep;24(3):218-24. doi: 10.1177/140349489602400314. PMID: 8878376.

¹¹ Statistics Canada, "Canadians' perceptions of personal safety and crime, 2014," Last modified December 12, 2017, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/171212/dq171212b-eng.htm>

¹² Senate of Canada, *In from the margins, Part II: reducing barriers to social inclusion and social cohesion*, Report of

While we recognize that there is little that an affordable housing provider can do to influence crime rates within a neighbourhood, they can impact the safety of buildings and units under their control to some extent (such as through lighting and repairs).

This category of the Community Wellbeing Assessment contains three questions relating to perceived safety from crime, particularly at night, and in comparison to other surrounding neighbourhoods. While crime rates are measured by municipalities and have quantifiable data to reference, the measure of perceived safety can be directly correlated to social inclusion; if a person does not feel safe in their community, they are less likely to participate in it.¹³

Neighbourhood Cohesion

Social connectedness between neighbours is an integral motivator to community participation and social inclusion. Research has shown that people with a very strong sense of community belonging have a much higher

the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, 41st Parliament, 1st Session, 26th report, (June 2013), 8, http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collect ion_2013/sen/yc17-0/YC17-0-411-26-eng.pdf

¹³ The Smith Institute, "Communities Social Exclusion and Crime," (2004), 76,

likelihood of reporting good perceived health than those with a weak sense of community belonging.¹⁴ Affordable housing providers can have an impact on neighbourhood cohesion by prioritizing safe communities so people can gather without hesitation, community programming, or regular tenant get-togethers (barbecues, clean-ups, potlucks, etc.).

This category of the Community Wellbeing assessment poses three questions to evaluate how connected people feel to their neighbourhoods and neighbours. This includes questions asking how many neighbours they know, how many neighbours they could ask a favour of, and how much they feel they belong.

Social Connection

Friendships and strong social connections have a beneficial effect on social inclusion. Conversely, a lack of connection and friendship can lead to greater isolation. Research shows that those with strong social connections and access to healthy friendships have a

<http://www.smith-institute.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/CommunitiesSocialExclusionandCrime.pdf>

¹⁴ Shields, Margot, "Community belonging and self-perceived health." *Health reports* vol. 19,2 (2008), 56.

reduced risk of social exclusion and premature death.¹⁵

Similar to other categories, housing providers may not be able to directly impact social connections among their tenants, but they can have an indirect influence, such as having units in good repair where clients feel comfortable hosting guests or investing in community programming that fosters connection.

This category contains two questions which evaluate how connected the tenant feels with friends and family. These questions ask tenants to evaluate their perceived level of loneliness and with how many people they feel close and at ease.

Housing is Suitable and in Good Condition

Safe, affordable, and good quality housing is a social determinant of health that affordable housing providers can directly influence to improve a person's physical and mental health outcomes. Further, affordable housing provides the foundation for interacting with the broader community and for general wellbeing and social inclusion.¹⁶

This portion of the Community Wellbeing Assessment contains three questions to evaluate the suitability and condition of the tenants housing. They pose questions which ask the tenant to evaluate whether

they have enough bedrooms, have a need for repairs, or need renovations for the home to be suitable for their daily needs.

Income Stability

People whose incomes are insufficient to secure stable housing, food, and other necessities can be easily caught in a downward spiral of deprivation. Both low income and precarious income have a detrimental effect on health and wellbeing.

While tenants' income is outside of an affordable housing provider's direct influence, they are immediately affected by it. Beyond ability to pay rent, income stability is an indicator of other forms of precarity. When someone has difficulty paying rent, it usually means they have difficulty affording food, paying bills, and accessing other vital resources. When tracked at a portfolio level, providers can gain a larger view of how many residents are having difficulty paying rent and accessing stable income. This information will also add nuance to any analysis of rental arrears rates.

Affordable housing providers can use this information to inform programming, partnerships, or funding applications to

¹⁵ Plan H, "Social Connectedness."

¹⁶ Ontario Human Rights Commission, *Human Rights and rental housing in Ontario: Background paper*, (March 28,

2007),
<https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/book/export/html/2504>

assist tenants with income instability (e.g. rent banks, food banks).

The two questions contained in this category ask about main income sources, as well as how often tenants feel they have enough income to pay rent on time.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

In addition to collecting data through the Community Wellbeing Assessment, collecting basic demographic data including race and ethnicity, age, gender, citizenship, sexual orientation, Indigenous identity and household composition, adds significant insight to results. As mentioned above, demographic data are integral to understanding the full picture of the health of our communities.

By collecting demographic data, providers can:

- Assess whether a set of responses are representative
- Determine whether some groups are over-targeted or under-targeted by programming
- Gain insight on what kinds of programs are needed, and for whom
- Increase transparency, inclusion, and equity

UNDERSTANDING THE RESULTS

The responses to the Community Wellbeing Assessment can be understood through several lenses. The six categories in the framework allow community housing providers to understand the overall health of their community, but also break down the responses to ascertain the specific areas in which they can seek to improve outcomes for tenants. Collecting demographic data enables further specificity. This will assist community housing providers in determining and improving program interventions in their communities.

Assessing results within each of the six areas of social inclusion and wellbeing,

and using a demographic lens, providers can use the results to launch targeted discussions with relevant groups of tenants. Data on outcomes by population group enables deeper discussion with those groups to ascertain the ‘why’ of a result (positive or negative) and ‘what’ can be done in the instance of less than desirable outcomes.

By repeating the questionnaire with tenants at intake and over time, community housing providers will begin to amass evidence on the impact of housing on a person’s social inclusion and wellbeing. This too could inform programs and help contribute to a powerful narrative about the impact of affordable

housing. The results of the Community Wellbeing Assessment can inform advocacy for supports that tenants need, as well as demonstrate the value of affordable housing as part of diverse and healthy communities.

Further, community housing providers can share results to inform a community of practice or comparative research between projects, to begin to understand what forms of affordable housing and programs are most strongly correlated with greater social inclusion and wellbeing for tenants.

FUTURE AREAS OF RESEARCH & CONCLUSION

The Community Wellbeing Assessment is an important first step in expanding data collection and analysis practices of community housing providers around social inclusion and wellbeing. Additional measures can be taken at multiple levels to expand study into this topic.

Recommended areas for further development include:

- Creation of a tool to process and analyze results more effectively
- Enabling the centralized collection of results to better understand results across the sector to allow for a provincial or national picture to emerge.

- Collaborating with tenants to weight and evolve the Assessment
- Coding responses to produce a quantified result

The Community Wellbeing Assessment is an important first step in equipping affordable housing providers to assess and demonstrate the health of their communities through the social inclusion and wellbeing of their tenants. Internally, this data can help change the way services are organized, inform programming, make services more equitably distributed, and build buy-in. Externally, it will create powerful narratives that can be shared to build understanding and support for affordable and mixed-model housing.