

STUDENT HOUSING IN CANADA: DEVELOPING A METHODOLOGY TO COLLECT DATA AND INFORMATION

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2001, an estimated 645,000 full-time students were enrolled in Canadian universities while an additional 410,000 full-time students were enrolled in postsecondary programs in Canadian colleges. Over the last 20 years, students outside the 18- to 24-year-old cohort have accounted for an increasing proportion of university and college enrolments and today, students over the age of 24 account for approximately 25 per cent of university enrolments. While Canada has a high percentage of postsecondary education enrolment, information on how students are housed and on the student housing market is limited. This is despite their meaningful impact on the market, due not only to their sheer numbers but also due to the fact that there has been an important increase in the number of older students who are more likely to seek lodging away from the parent family.

Despite an extensive review of the literature and a search of the major databases available, very little statistical information specific to student populations and their housing was uncovered. The available information is limited, scattered and uncoordinated. No inventory, even of post-secondary-owned student housing seemed to be available and no organization dealing in post-secondary student affairs seemed to have focused on the state of student housing.

Students are faced with a variety of accommodation options while attending postsecondary institutions. These alternatives range from on-campus housing (facilities owned and operated by the college or university) to off-campus choices from living at home or in a family-owned secondary residence to shared or unshared accommodation in the rental market.

OBJECTIVE

The intent of the study was to assess the feasibility of developing a data collection methodology that is actionable and which would be able to generate student housing-related data that is valid, reliable and timely. The developed methodology would then be assessed to determine its ability to gather information on the state of student housing in Canada and the housing options available to students. Benchmark student-housing data and information would focus on, but not be limited, to: student housing costs; housing supply and demand; types of accommodations used by students; and characteristics and location of accommodations, including size, quality and amenities.

METHODOLOGY

To address the research objectives, a comprehensive research design consisting of a number of different elements was used. The approach focused on all Canadian post-secondary institutions and on all types of post-secondary students. In order to provide scope to the research, definitions for these variables were needed:

- 1) Post-Secondary Institutions (“eligible” institution): All institutions in Canada based on the lists compiled by the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC) in co-operation with provincial/territorial education ministries and the National Association of Career Colleges (NAAC). Only post-secondary institutions who owned housing stock, offered programs of nine months in duration or more and had a total student population of 500 or more were included in the scope of the methodology.
- 2) Post-Secondary Student: An individual enrolled at an “eligible” institution and registered as either a full-time student or part-time student registered in a minimum of nine hours of course/program work per week. Part-time students were excluded if working 30 or more hours per week. Co-op students are considered full-time students. Distance learning students are excluded.

The research design included qualitative and quantitative components and all activities were geared towards the development of a comprehensive, actionable methodology to obtain reliable, representative student housing data.

The purpose of the qualitative research elements was to gain a broader understanding of the issues of post-secondary student housing and to aid in the development of the quantitative methodology. These elements included:

- key informant interviews that increased the level of understanding of how post-secondary institutions provide and facilitate access to student housing;
- in-depth interviews with stakeholders including post-secondary institution staff, students and student association representatives to better understand the student housing market from a variety of perspectives and to obtain robust qualitative data on the issues of relevance;
- focus groups to pre-test the content of the surveys and related collateral materials.

FINDINGS

The results of the interviews and focus group sessions shaped the methodology for an online survey targeted to both post-secondary institutions and students. These were deemed as the best instruments and medium to use to obtain the desired data. Interview and focus group results also helped to narrow the content of the surveys and provided insights to maximize participation rates and data collection results. Aside from the content found in the post-secondary institution survey and the student survey, the following are key findings from the interview and focus group sessions.

- A variety of issues were seen as important to post-secondary student housing stakeholder groups. These included: the cost of various types of units, types of units being constructed, costs associated with student housing, residence-type information (for example, upkeep), amenities included in rental costs, types of public/private partnerships for accommodation management.
- Most institutional representatives indicated that institutions should have no concerns or issues in providing the information requested, as long as it did not include any requests for personal information about students.
- It was unlikely that institutions would provide direct contact information for students for the administration of the student survey. Limiting access to students has always been an important issue in post-secondary institutions.
- The complexity of the data and information required and the quantitative nature of that data suggested the use of surveys. The multiple audience types necessary to retrieve all desired data elements suggested the use of two survey instruments for student and post-secondary institution audiences.
- The best manner to contact students to achieve a random sample would be through in-person contact at selected and representative campuses in each test centre.
- An online survey was deemed the more appropriate quantitative data collection method than focus groups, paper or hard-copy surveys or telephone surveys. Target respondents (post-secondary housing providers and students) are extremely familiar in the use of the technology and were likely to have e-mail addresses. Additionally, using an online survey complements the typical lifestyle of students as target respondents—as there is no set schedule for delivery and completion and students can complete it at their leisure.

- The best time of year to implement both surveys would be February or March, before or after the study break, before the pressure of final exams. Also, students will have more to say about their housing as they will have been living there a while.
- Intercept interviews, e-mail reminders and incentives, such as prizes, were uncovered as ways to encourage student participation in the survey.
- Sharing findings was recommended as the best way to encourage post-secondary participation, particularly information allowing comparison between institutions.

Data and information collection using the developed methodology proved to be useful. The supporting qualitative research helped to ensure appropriate survey content and optimum qualitative data collection design. The student and post-secondary institutional surveys proved to be actionable and provided valid and reliable housing data. Based on the assessment of the quality of the data, the survey instrument was strong overall and data found to be reliable and useable. Response rates were sufficient to provide representative data for all data. However, despite the positive assessment, a few areas warrant mention in an effort to improve these rates for each survey type to allow for greater analysis.

- The present length of the survey may be a hindrance to an optimal response rate. The majority of uncompleted surveys contained data up to the first 10 per cent of the survey. The survey length for this type of audience might have been considered lengthy following the first 10 per cent of survey completion.
- An analysis of the questions contained within the survey performed well. There was a low incidence of “don’t know/refusal” and unambiguous responses for all questions.
- The fieldwork was undertaken from March 29th through May 31st. The research was designed to coincide with the student pilot test, as well as to accommodate the typical schedules of housing officers. That is, through the qualitative phase of this research, it was determined that mid-way through a semester would likely be the least busy time for housing departments. In terms of future administration, it is advisable to implement the survey mid-way through either the fall or winter semesters.
- The selected methodology represents a very economical way to administer a survey to this target audience without compromising efficiency and accuracy. Through the qualitative research components, it was also clear that this was also the preferred way for housing officers to participate in a survey of this kind. The budget for the

pilot test, aside from professional time, was negligible. Alternative methods of survey deployment include telephone, mail-back and online. A brief analysis of these alternatives demonstrated that significant cost savings were realized by deploying the survey instrument online.

Survey of Post-Secondary Institutions

Feasibility of the Methodology

The institutional survey, designed to obtain information about the housing stock supply, structure types, amenities offered, vacancy rates and other issues, was administered to 288 post-secondary institutions across Canada. Targeted institutions were based on the lists obtained from the CICIC and the NAAC and amended to be reflective of the predefined research definition of “post-secondary institution.” The finite and manageable list of “eligible” institutions provided the opportunity to conduct a census of post-secondary institutions rather than surveying a representative sample. In total, 88 institutions responded, representing a 31 per cent response rate. Based on a sample of this size, the findings can be considered accurate within +/-8.8 per cent, 19 times out of 20 (adjusted for a finite population). The response rate for this survey fell within relatively standard range for this type of survey method and target audience.

Post-Secondary Institution Survey Results

The following are summary results from the survey of post-secondary institutions.

- The schools who responded to the survey had a range of on-campus housing capacity. Over half (60 per cent) of responding schools own student housing (either on or off-campus) with 77 per cent of these schools saying their student housing was located on-campus. Two thirds (64 per cent) of responding schools that own on-campus housing can house less than 400 students and 22 per cent said their capacity was over 1,000 students. Dormitory residences were the most common type of housing on-campus. Among schools that own on-campus housing, 82 per cent offer dormitory-style residences and 63 per cent have apartments, townhouses or houses. Only one in ten responding schools offers family units.
- Smaller post-secondary institutions appear to have greater on-campus housing options for students than institutions with larger student populations. At the time of the survey, only 23 per cent of institutions responded as having fewer than 1,000 registered students; however, 75 per cent of institutions responded they were capable of housing between 0-1,000 students.

- The results showed a range of rents and amenities available. For example, rents for a single dormitory ranged from a low of \$155 to a high of \$1,268. Average rents also varied by the number of bedrooms contained in the on-campus unit—the greater number of bedrooms, the lower the average rent (Table 1). The majority of the rents included heat, electricity and laundry. There was considerable variety in the other amenities included in rent, for instance some included meal plans and some did not.

Table 1: Average Monthly Rents (Costs) Reported for Post-Secondary Institution Accommodations to Students

by Type of Unit and Target Market

Type/Target	Average	Rent Range	
		Low	High
Single dormitory	\$397	\$155	\$1,268
Twin dormitory	\$405	\$145	\$948
Bachelor	\$412	\$215	\$692
One-bedroom	\$511	\$249	\$850
Two-bedroom	\$466	\$210	\$884
Three+-bedroom	\$413	\$155	\$885
Family unit	\$659	\$420	\$1,100

- There is a wide variety of amenities included in the average rent of post-secondary institution student housing. Regardless of whether the student housing units were owned or leased by the post-secondary institution, the large majority included heat, electricity and laundry facilities in the cost of the rent. Following these items, there is a considerable variation in the services included in their accommodations.
- Students in all responding institutions face low on-campus vacancies rates when looking for housing. At the beginning of the school year most institutions reported that their housing is filled to capacity. A majority of housing officials said that the vacancy rate for on-campus, off-campus and leased housing has stayed the same in 2004 compared to the past two—three years.
- Only one out of every five post-secondary institutions in Canada has short-term plans to increase student housing. Despite the fact that more than 50 per cent of responding post-secondary institutions expect an increase in student population over the next five years, only 21 per cent of responding institutions have plans to

increase student housing on- or off-campus. Some post-secondary institutions have already begun planning for expected student population increases. When asked if they are currently building new student housing units, 15 per cent of post-secondary institutions responded yes.

- Schools commonly provide student assistance to find housing. More than four in five (84 per cent) institutions who responded to the survey provide information or assistance to students looking for off-campus housing.

Survey of Students

Feasibility of the Methodology

The student survey was administered online to a random sample of students enrolled in selected post-secondary institutions in two selected urban centres. Cost considerations and the initial survey response rates were factors that limited the implementation of the student survey to only one larger and one smaller urban centre—Toronto and Halifax. Also, by including only two cities, the pilot was expected to yield data that enabled greater sub-group analysis. Five institutions were selected in each city (Table 2).

Toronto	Halifax
Ryerson University	Dalhousie University
University of Toronto— St. George Campus	University of King's College
Humber College of Applied Arts and Technology	Saint Mary's University
George Brown College of Applied Arts and Technology	Nova Scotia Community College—Institute of Technology Campus
York University	Mount Saint Vincent University

Table 2

Students were recruited through an intercept methodology that involved:

- Interviewers canvassed the selected campuses for either a half or full day and handed out flyers that contained information about the survey.
- Students were asked to read the flyer and were told about the survey, the prize draw, etc.
- Those who agreed to participate in the survey were asked for their e-mail address (for reminders and prize draw notification) and to show their student ID to verify eligibility for the survey.
- Students were given a password/PIN to access the online survey. Use of the password/PIN prevented students from logging back on to complete the survey more than one time.

- Interviewers were instructed to maximize coverage at the institutions by moving through the campus (for example, different faculties, student union centre, residences, etc.) to ensure strong recruitment.

In total, 1,372 random students from various post-secondary campuses were recruited to participate in the online survey—632 students from Toronto and 740 students from Halifax. Of the 1,372 students recruited, 332 students completed the survey for a response rate of 24 per cent. The sub-group response rates are 27 per cent for Halifax and 21 per cent for Toronto. Based on a sample of this size, the findings can be considered to be accurate within +/-5.38 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

Student Survey Results

The following are selected summary results from the survey of students.

- Despite the range of on- and off-campus housing options available to students, most students choose to live at home while pursuing their post-secondary education. Nearly half of the survey respondents said they were living at home with their parents/guardians during the school year. In most cases, cost consideration was the primary driver for respondents who choose to stay at home during the school year. There were slight differences in reporting between centres. A greater proportion of post-secondary students attending school in the Toronto area were living at home compared to students in Halifax. At the time of the survey, approximately 54 per cent of students in Toronto were living at home, compared to only 36 per cent of students in Halifax.
- The proportion of students living at home is even greater for those students whose origin was the same as the centre in which the institution was located. Almost three out of every four respondents, whose hometown was the same institutional location, remained at home with their parents/guardians during the school year.
- The majority of respondents who were not living at home with their parents/guardians were living off campus during the school year. The propensity for living in on-campus accommodations was greater in Halifax than in Toronto, with more than 30 per cent of students in Halifax not living at home choosing to live on campus, as compared to approximately 20 per cent of students in the Toronto area living on-campus.
- The foremost choice of dwelling types for off-campus housing was apartment living. This was consistent in both Toronto and Halifax, where more than 60 per cent of off-campus students indicated they lived in this type of

accommodations. However, the second most common dwelling type differed by centre, where 21.6 per cent of students in Halifax reported living in a single-detached house (rented or owned) while in Toronto 20.8 per cent reported living in a rooming house or “rented room.”

- From the survey results, there did not appear to be a preference for the various bedroom types (such as, number of bedrooms) among students. Overall, students appeared to be almost equally likely to be living in one-bedroom accommodations (27 per cent), two-bedroom accommodations (28 per cent) or three-bedroom accommodations (29 per cent). Students in Toronto were more likely to be living in one-bedroom accommodations while students in Halifax were more likely to be living in two- or three- bedroom units. These results coincide with the likelihood of students to be sharing accommodations, as almost three out of every four respondents shared their accommodations with others.
- On average, the cost of living for off-campus students in Toronto was higher than the cost of living in Halifax. At the time of the survey, there was a lower percentage of students in Toronto paying less than \$400 per month for their accommodations, as compared to Halifax. At the same time, there was a greater percentage of students in Toronto paying more than \$500 per month versus those in Halifax.
- Reasons for living in on-campus accommodations versus off campus accommodations varied. Students often chose to live in on-campus accommodations for reasons such as location, ease of access to the institution, shared lifestyles with the community and safety. The most commonly cited reasons for choosing off-campus accommodations included the need for privacy, perceived independence, cost and the greater tranquility that is seen to come with off-campus accommodations.

CONCLUSION

The methodology designed to obtain representative, quantitative student housing data in Canada proved to be feasible and provided valid and reliable housing data.

Based on the study’s findings-coupled with detailed analysis of the research by CMHC, the following conclusions are made and recommendations offered to enhance the survey methodology:

- 1) Alternative methodologies were explored and found to have greater cost implications and likely lower response rates from both the post-secondary institution and student perspectives.

- a) Costs associated with implementing the methodology can likely be reduced by partnering with post-secondary institutions and others who use the information. Others might include but not be limited to associations, education departments of provincial governments and private stakeholders. Post-secondary institutions and others find value in this data and information for business planning purposes and would likely consider such arrangements.
- 2) Depending on data and information requirements and funding availability, limiting the implementation of the methodology to the individual urban centre level(s) is suggested:
- a) Both institutions and the students that attend them are predominantly found in urban areas, limiting the ability to gather data representative of the provincial or national level. It should be noted, data and information can be collected from a sample of students at institutions across a province(s), region or for Canada to obtain results representative for these jurisdictions.
- b) While the proposed methodology proved to be less costly to administer than the suggested alternatives, a national implementation would likely prove to be more challenging and costly than implementing the methodology at individual urban centre level. A national implementation would require conducting the student survey in each urban centre where the more than 250 post-secondary institutions reside, resulting in exorbitant administrative costs.
- 3) Technical personnel involved in the programming of the online survey should be included in the design phase of the survey to prevent survey design and administrative problems.
- 4) Although the proposed methodology proved to be the most suitable alternative for gathering housing data and information from the various sources, additional strategies to improve the response rate should be explored.

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Housing Research at CMHC

Under Part IX of the *National Housing Act*, the Government of Canada provides funds to CMHC to conduct research into the social, economic and technical aspects of housing and related fields, and to undertake the publishing and distribution of the results of this research.

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