

If you are reading this and live in Metro Vancouver, there is a good chance you belong to one of the 35% of households that rent, rather than own, their homes. If you live in the City of Vancouver, the odds are even higher at 52%. If you yourself are not a renter, your best friend, your sister, your bus driver and your barista probably are. It is no secret that renters have a rough go in this region, but despite regular media attention to high rents, low vacancy rates and “reno-victions”, the voices of average renters remain quiet. In an attempt to change this and to illuminate the statistics with stories, Metro Vancouver launched the Renters Speak Up website in 2010. It aims to bring attention to the region’s housing shortage, to understand the true impacts on renters and to support a push for senior government action on affordable rental housing. Over 200 renters have shared their experiences in the region’s rental market. While each story is unique, a number of common themes emerge that begin to tell a larger story about what it means to rent in Metro Vancouver.

### **Unaffordable rents and rent increases**

Not surprisingly, high rents and constant rent increases were the most commonly cited challenges. Many renters reported spending upwards of 40-50% of their incomes on rent and spoke of rents that increase every year faster than their incomes.

*“If my rent had ever been only one third of my income I’d have felt like I won a lottery. It was usually at least 50 percent and once was 70 percent.”*

*“I am paying \$750 for a room with no kitchen, no sink, just a room plus bathroom. I can’t find anything cheaper and it’s because people are renting out their places for so much that even a dump or hole in the wall is expensive.”*

### **Poor condition of suites**

Many respondents reported viewing or living in rental units that were in poor condition or disrepair. There were also a few reports of odd or inappropriately structured suites being offered for rent—dubbed “Franken-suites” by one respondent.

*“I eventually found a place that is slightly cheaper than the average apartment in the area, but I think it is probably an illegal suite (it should be illegal, the house is falling apart, holes in the walls, mould, no fire extinguisher or even a working smoke detector). It’s not an adequate place to live but it’s all I can afford right now.”*

*“Last year I was looking for a shared apartment. I answered an ad on Craigslist to share a 3 bedroom apartment. When I arrived I was taken into a one bedroom condominium by the landlord to discover that the living room had been subdivided by blankets into two additional bedrooms.”*

### **Landlords refusing to repair or renovate suites**

Landlords refusing to make basic repairs or renovations to suites was another common story. There is a sense among renters that landlords can get away with keeping suites in poor condition because the shortage of rental housing means they will still be able to find a renter desperate enough to take them.

*“The place I’m living in has dysfunctional heat, a dysfunctional toilet, dripping faucets, black mould (even in my mattress), carpet mushrooms and mice...all for a studio at \$750 a month...way more than half my income. The landlord won’t fix things and black mould isn’t a concern to the RTO – I’ve checked. Besides, in order to fix it, I would be evicted and where to go that I could afford? So I keep my mouth shut.”*

*“The owners know what needs to be fixed and refuse, instead forcing out long term tenants and replacing them with new young ones who don’t know any better.”*

### **Uncertainty or insecurity of tenure**

The uncertainty that comes with renting appeared in many respondents’ stories. Many reported high levels of stress and anxiety, stemming from fear of not knowing where they will go if or when their landlord sells the property, wants to move themselves or a family member into the suite, or evicts them in order to do renovations and increase rent with new tenants.

*“I have been renting the same apartment in East Van for 10 years. Recently our building was sold to a ‘renovictor’ and the stress and anxiety I live with now is indescribable.”*

*“The stress and anxiety this is causing my whole family is so immense I can barely touch on it here. It effects every aspect of our lives. The uncertainty and instability of our HOME...is shaking us all to the core. We don’t know what is next. We don’t know if we will be able to stay here. We don’t know where else we will go when this place sells or we get kicked out.”*

### **Landlords refusing to accept pets and children**

Several renters reported landlords’ refusal to accept pets or children as a major barrier to finding a good-quality, suitable rental suite.

*“I have never encountered this level of refusal to allow pets of any kind in rental properties. Why is Vancouver so pet unfriendly?”*

*“Issue one: finding a place to rent with two little kids; a leper would have a better chance; even if many places were available, not many want little kids.”*

### **Difficulty finding suitable suites for large families**

In addition to discrimination, families with multiple children reported that there are few affordable and suitable rental suites available to them. These families often require 3 or more bedrooms, while most rental suites have only 1 or 2 bedrooms.

*“Something must be done to protect families who rent. I am currently renting in a family friendly building (I pay market rent though the building is run by a non-profit), but before we found this place we had a very difficult time finding anyone who would rent to us, a family with 1 child. Almost everywhere we went, the story was the same: We only rent to kids on the first floor (and of course there were no first floor vacancies), the suite is too small for a family (even if it was a 2 bedroom), or the blatant declaration - no sorry, we don't rent to people with kids. Discriminating*

*against a renter based on family size is against the law, but there is absolutely no recourse for someone who has been told that they are being discriminated against because they have kids.”*

### **Long wait lists for BC Housing and Co-ops**

Frustration over long wait lists for housing assistance and for co-ops was mentioned by several respondents. Long waits may extend precarious living situations and contribute to stress and anxiety.

*“I applied for the frequently overlooked third option-- co-op housing. I went to a few interviews and ended up on several waiting lists for tiny studio apartment units in the downtown area. Last month I finally heard back from them requesting a second interview. The only problem? I have since moved to Australia where the minimum wage is higher and the housing market manageable. I was on that waiting list for 4 years. Affordable housing just isn't an option for thousands of young people like me with limited funds. In my heart Vancouver will always be my home. Someday I hope to be able to afford to return.*

*“My co-op's subsidy agreement with CMHC is due to expire in two years - we don't know whether residents requiring subsidy will be able to afford to stay in the co-op after that time. Most other co-ops already have no vacancies for those needing subsidies, as well as long waiting lists.”*

### **Difficulty getting assistance or compensation from the Residential Tenancy Office**

A number of respondents described either their own experiences with the RTO or stories they have heard from others. There is a sense that it is difficult for tenants to get assistance or compensation when issues arise, and that rulings are not always enforced when tenants do win a case.

*“I was taken aback by the lack of support I received from the RTB and strongly feel this govt run operation has become seriously corrupted. I received a raw deal from them and consequently was forced out of my suite. Is there anyway to set up an independant board to help tenants as the RTB should be done away with they have no interest in the tenants and serve only the landlords and owners presently.”*

*“I understand that rental housing is a business, but to be an acceptable business plan to buy buildings and evict the long term tenants in the guise of renovations or use the geographic increase clause is a obvious REPEATED abuse of the RTA and needs to be STOPPED NOW!!!”*

In addition to these common challenges, the responses to Renters Speak Up also highlight the experiences of groups that are particularly vulnerable in the rental market:

#### **Seniors**

Many seniors are long-term tenants who may be paying comparatively low rents in places that are accessible and convenient for them. Seniors expressed fear that rent increases and

evictions, coupled with their fixed incomes, will force them to leave their communities and lead to further isolation.

*“I have worked hard for most of my life while raising two children and have contributed to society as a good citizen and find it appalling to face the future with the fear of not being able to afford decent housing in my senior years.”*

*“I’m sure there are many other seniors that have had to uproot from their communities to a place where they don’t know anyone and end up alone, sad and very seriously depressed.”*

### **Young adults**

On the other side of the spectrum, young adults reported a great deal of difficulty stabilizing their living situations and a fear for their future prospects in the region.

*“I grew up here...so why should I have to leave Vancouver because I don’t make millions???? There won’t be culture without us artsy, creative, young people. You won’t have a diverse city if everyone has to work at extremely high paying jobs!”*

*“I’m like every other 20-something, Vancouver. How on earth do you expect us to settle down, have children, and support the economic growth of Vancouver when we can’t even support ourselves?”*

### **People with disabilities**

Individuals with disabilities reported that assistance rates are very low and have not kept pace with rent increases, which leaves them with very little protection and security in their housing situations.

*“I can’t hold down employment and because assistance rates are so out of date with the times I walk a very shaky ledge. I speak for all of those like myself who demand dignity and equality within our society.”*

*“...not only are Disability benefits horrifically outdated and out of touch with reality and the cost of living, but 70-80% of most disabled people’s benefits have to go to pay rent.”*

### **Single people**

This group of vulnerable people is perhaps the least visible, as they may be more likely to appear fine from the outside. Many responses from single, middle-aged, professional people described a difficulty maintaining stability and a decent quality of life in Vancouver.

*“I’m not sure who can afford to rent the places I’ve seen advertised, but from my point of view, the only way to afford an ‘average’ apartment in Vancouver is with two paycheques. What about those of us who are single and need somewhere to live?”*

*“One of the major factors in my financial life is that I am the only income-earner I have no husband to help take the financial pressure off. No vacations, no event tickets, and sometimes no*

*money for food or gas for a few days until next payday. Double income families are far and away ahead of the game. Now, here's the surprise. I have a fairly high profile stable job, for a well known employer, supporting high profile and highly paid people. No one would ever suspect that I'm living paycheque to paycheque. Not my family members, not my colleagues. And I would never tell them."*

The stories that have been shared so far on Renters Speak Up make it clear that unaffordability and insecurity in Metro Vancouver's rental market have very serious and wide-ranging impacts on people's lives. Renters commonly experience anxiety, stress and fear over precarious living situations. High rents reduce the amount of money left over for fun and recreation, or even for basic needs. Young people fear they can't get ahead while older people fear living their senior years in poverty. Moving in search of affordable rent can often mean a trade-off for longer commutes to work. However, unaffordability does not stem only from high rents. Low pay is the other side of the coin with several respondents mentioning that they are being paid less for their job here than they would be paid in other cities.

As part of their stories, many respondents to Renters Speak Up expressed a sense that their experiences in the process of trying to secure a safe and affordable home have been unfair and unjust. Whether young or old, singles or families, renters in this region have a common fear that they will not be able to survive here and that they will be forced to leave the place they call home. A sense of stability and a degree of choice in where one lives are crucial to the health of individuals and communities. As one respondent summed up:

*"I believe affordable housing creates a more stable, financially healthy population who can make plans and fulfill their dreams."*