



CULTURAL DIVIDE

A neighbourhood study of immigrant
rental housing in Vancouver





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Volunteer survey teams from MOSAIC, a multilingual non-profit organization dedicated to addressing issues that affect immigrants and refugees, and Pivot Legal Society, an anti-poverty legal advocacy group, canvassed the residents of four buildings in the neighbourhood identified as North Mount Pleasant by the City of Vancouver.

Background

North Mount Pleasant is an area bordered on the north by Great Northern Way, on the east by Clark Drive, on the south by 12th Avenue and on the west by Main Street. All four buildings canvassed were low-rise residential buildings built approximately 30 to 40 years ago. Three of the four buildings were predominantly occupied by tenants renting from the building owners. One of the four buildings was a former rental building that had been converted to a strata building and had numerous units rented out by the strata title holders.

Buildings in North Mount Pleasant were selected because the City of Vancouver is anticipated to be undertaking a new planning process in the area shortly to produce plans for the shopping areas and neighborhoods, action plans for pressing social concerns, and longer-term policies to address community-wide issues. The surveying agencies felt a complete demographic picture was required to assist the City in making responsible decisions to accommodate low-income communities in that area, and in particular, long-time immigrant and refugee communities that are strongly associated with the neighbourhood.

Residents were canvassed in the hopes of answering three key questions:

1. What is the demographic profile of the tenant population in North Mount Pleasant;
2. What common issues arise for tenants in North Mount Pleasant; and,

3. What changes, if any, are taking place in the North Mount Pleasant neighbourhood's demographics.

Findings

Response rates for each of the four identified buildings were high, with over 70 percent of residents participating.

Results of the survey indicate that overcrowding is widespread in North Mount Pleasant. Thirty-two of the 77 participating tenants lived in overcrowded households with three or more people per bedroom living in the unit. 88 percent of the overcrowded units were occupied by first-generation immigrant-headed households. Seventy-five percent of overcrowded households are families with children. The average length of tenancy was 4.1 years in the overcrowded units, compared to 2.25 years in the non-crowded units.

The survey also found some evidence that significant shifts in tenant demographics are occurring in the rental housing stock: newer residents of North Mount Pleasant tended to be Canadian-born singles or couples with no children, rather than the immigrant families that defined the longer-term residents. 77 percent of residents who had lived in the neighbourhood for more than two years were first-generation immigrant headed households. In comparison, only 31 percent of residents who had lived in the neighbourhood for two years or fewer were first-generation immigrant-headed households. Further study is required to determine whether this trend indicates that fewer immigrant-headed households are moving to North Mount Pleasant, or whether immigrant-headed households are more



likely to maintain longer tenure than non-immigrant-headed households. Qualitative data provided by survey participants suggests the more likely result is the former, and not the latter.

When rental housing is converted to strata housing, the changes in demographics in comparison to rental buildings in the neighbourhood are stark. Strata residents in buildings that are indistinguishable in every other way from the rental buildings surveyed are almost exclusively Canadian-born. Further, a high number of those residents moved to North Mount Pleasant from higher-income neighbourhoods in Vancouver. These findings suggest that an emphasis on strata over rental housing in any development plans for North Mount Pleasant can reasonably be expected to displace the traditional long-term residents of the neighbourhood. In the strata building, four percent of residents were families headed by first-generation immigrants, and their tenure in the neighbourhood averaged 1.5 years. In comparison, 58 percent of the survey participants were families headed by first-generation immigrants whose tenure averaged 3.9 years. Seventy-seven percent of the residents with more than two years tenure in the neighbourhood were families headed by first-generation immigrants.

The participating agencies' research shows that low-income tenants in North Mount Pleasant are threatened by develop-

ment that does not include adequate provision of lower-income rental housing, and places a disproportionate emphasis on strata developments. Recommendations from the authors to address the concerns of the residents of North Mount Pleasant are as follows:

1. Every effort must be made by all levels of government to preserve the existing rental housing stock of the area, to expand existing low- and middle-income rental stock, and ensure its affordability into the future.
2. Vancouver must take a strict "zero displacement" approach to future development planning for the neighbourhood, with the principle of maintaining and complementing the current demographic mix of the neighbourhood guiding any new development proposals.

In addition to commenting on issues surrounding their housing, many residents, unprompted, identified concerns for personal safety during the survey. Additional study is required to determine the source of this concern, which may include: differential policing practices, displacement of drug users and homeless individuals from commercial areas by increased policing and security crackdowns, or a lack of City-supported community improvement initiatives. The authors recommend the City of Vancouver and Vancouver Police Department work with this neighbourhood to address these concerns.



INTRODUCTION

North Mount Pleasant is a trendy neighbourhood of boutiques, restaurants and coffee shops, complemented by numerous new loft-style condominium buildings built in recent years to the east of Main Street. Venture a few blocks further east from Main Street and another side of Mount Pleasant is revealed; the streets are lined with old houses, dozens of apartment blocks and many social housing developments.

This area houses a large population of low-income tenants, consisting largely of immigrant families, who have made this relatively affordable area their home. It is, by all appearances, a vibrant urban landscape, a classic example of revitalization and an income mix not typically seen in other areas of Vancouver. Geographically, the area is roughly bordered on the north by Great Northern Way, on the east by Clark Drive, on the south by 12th Avenue and on the west by Main Street.

Within this area, there are many opportunities and challenges: a high proportion of youth and children; a growing population of homeless people; significant numbers of problem premises; and one of the city's largest stocks of low-cost rental housing. Because of the area's high proportion of renters (about 70 percent of all households), the population is transient, which may challenge the development of strong community groups to advocate or represent tenant interests. A new Community Plan is coming to Mount Pleasant for the first time in 20 years. The City has implemented a 30 month planning process which promises to deliver comprehensive, sustainable, long range policy guidance.¹ It will also deliver short term action on pressing social issues within the community. The plan intends to introduce changes in both shopping areas and residential areas. The protection of low-cost rental housing stock must be given priority in any redevelopment.

As a result of this initiative being brought forward by the City of Vancouver, the neighbourhood of North Mount Pleasant could be at risk of uncontrolled gentrification. Gentrification is

typically defined as the process of rapid market development of residential areas and the influx of new residents who can afford higher prices for housing. Gentrification is already occurring in several Vancouver neighbourhoods, and if not managed properly can lead to poorer residents being forced to seek more affordable housing elsewhere, far from established social networks and in areas that may be poorly serviced – if they are able to find affordable housing at all. In the extreme, gentrification can push low-income residents into substandard housing or homelessness.

This report presents the findings of a survey of tenants in North Mount Pleasant conducted by volunteers from Pivot Legal Society and MOSAIC. The study was conducted to assist the City of Vancouver in planning the inevitable development that is bound to take place as Mount Pleasant continues to grow and densify. The report also sheds light on the human dimensions of a growing housing crisis, and is intended to influence planning decisions that will protect yet another low-income population at risk of displacement in Vancouver.

Context

Residents were canvassed in the hopes of answering three key questions:

1. What is the demographic profile of the tenant population in North Mount Pleasant;
2. What common issues arise for tenants in North Mount Pleasant; and,



3. What changes, if any, are taking place in the North Mount Pleasant neighbourhood's demographics.

Even from preliminary qualitative observations, it was apparent to the survey teams that the Survey Area is experiencing significant demographic change evidenced by the many new condominium buildings recently constructed, or currently under construction, in the area.

The survey was designed to look, in particular, for evidence of the potential for displacement, or the existence of a current displacement trend. Particular characteristics of displacement, including: changing demographics in residents, overcrowding, and lengths of tenancy were identified to be of particular interest. Face-to-face survey interviews were chosen as the means of data collection in recognition of the fact that populations in illegally overcrowded living arrangements, who may not speak any official language, are more likely to be undercounted or missed entirely by the Census or other official statistics.

Main issues of concern identified by tenants

Participation rates in all four identified buildings were high, with an average of over 70 percent of identified residential units in the buildings participating. Broad trends emerged from the field research, from both qualitative and quantitative survey results.

The lack of affordable housing in Vancouver. Tenants repeatedly expressed concerns about the continuous decline of affordable rental housing in both quality and availability. Residents expressed concern over the conversion of low-income rental housing to condominiums, and rising rental prices.

Overcrowding. The quantitative survey data expressed that a large proportion of households in the Survey Area, especially first-generation immigrant headed families, are living in significantly overcrowded conditions (three or more people per bedroom) due to issues of affordability.

Gentrification. Tenants qualitatively, and without prompting, made observations to surveyers that were consistent with findings of rapid and increasing gentrification. Quantitative data also suggested that newer residents to the area were wealthier non-immigrants, suggesting the arrival of a new demographic

population that could displace existing residents and pointing to gentrification occurring within the rental housing stock.

Safety Concerns.² Although safety was not a part of the survey, residents indicated that drug trafficking and openly conducted street-level sex work, as well as public drug and alcohol abuse, are common within the Survey Area, and associated with subjectively reduced feelings of personal safety for the survey participants. These observations were not particular to either new or long-time residents. Despite these observations, many tenants agreed that conditions in their surroundings are improving with the implementation of a Block Watch program.

Methodology

Data collection

The data for this report come from door-to-door surveys conducted by teams of volunteers during October and November 2007. The geographic survey area is bordered on the north by Great Northern Way, on the east by Clark Drive, on the south by 12th Avenue and on the west by Main Street ("Survey Area"). The tenants who participated gave oral responses which volunteers recorded on the questionnaire sheet. The volunteers surveyed tenants of three rental buildings, and residents of one strata condominium building in the Survey Area.

Response rates in each building were generally high (over 70 percent), and 100 households participated in the survey. All surveys were conducted under the condition of anonymity for respondents. While not originally part of the research design, a strata building was surveyed in order to compare results with the rental survey. For this reason responses to the strata building survey are not included in the analysis of the rental survey.

Participants answered questions about their ethnicity, immigration status, household composition, length of tenancy, the size of their home, and rental rates. They also provided longer responses to the following qualitative, open ended questions:

- Why did you choose to live in this neighbourhood?
- What kinds of changes, if any, have you noticed in the neighbourhood?



- What do you like about living in this neighbourhood?
- Is there anything you don't like about living in this neighbourhood?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

Data analysis

The data generated from the survey were analyzed in two ways. First, descriptive statistics of survey responses about household composition and characteristics were tabulated in order to identify any trends in the data, and provide profiles of renters in the Survey Area. Second, residents' open-ended responses about their housing challenges and experiences living in the neighbourhood were analyzed qualitatively, and typical responses are included in the findings. Qualitative data is included so that residents' own voices, views and concerns can be heard and expressed in this document.

Limitations

This project focuses on information gathered from surveys in three rental buildings and one strata building that was once a rental building within the Survey Area. The survey was conducted in three rental buildings which were selected by the

research team at random, but with an eye to particular characteristics including building age (greater than 30 years), size (30 to 40 residential units), cooperation of building management, and location in the Survey Area.

As a result of this selection process, the buildings may not be representative, and the greatest limitation of the survey is that it does not constitute a statistically representative sample. Therefore findings of this research may not necessarily be representative of the low-income rental population of North Mount Pleasant, although the results of the research combined with qualitative observation by the survey team provides no apparent reason to think that the surveyed buildings are not typical of the area.

The surveys were conducted primarily in English, which in some cases proved to be a barrier in the completion of the survey. Despite this challenge, many of the volunteers that worked on this project spoke various languages which helped bridge the gap when needed, and few residential units were not surveyed for this reason. However, challenges of interpretation of survey questions to respondents and answers from respondents may mean that qualitative or quantitative data collected may be subject to the interpretation or misinterpretation of the survey team, as the volunteers are not certified interpreters.



FINDINGS

The survey data indicates that Mount Pleasant is a vibrant and diverse neighbourhood. The data also indicate overcrowding and displacement threaten that diversity and the health of the neighbourhood.

Trends in the Survey Data Table 1 summarizes some of the key findings of the survey. The results show that the Survey Area is a very diverse neighbourhood: about half of all respondents were first generation immigrant headed families, and over 25 different ethnic groups are represented among the 77 households.³

“There are many types of people living in this neighbourhood. It is a less wealthy area. There are a lot of immigrants and young families trying to start out and make a life for themselves.”

Survey Respondent #93

The survey also revealed that there are high rates of overcrowding among renters in North Mount Pleasant, with overcrowding in 41 percent of households surveyed. Overcrowding was defined as housing with three or more people per bedroom.⁴ Other indicators, such as the ratio of household members to those paying rent, show that many households may be living in financially precarious situations and be vulnerable to rising housing costs and gentrification-induced displacement.

“It is difficult for people looking for reasonable rent. There are more and more people buying condos. There are definitely less places for people to rent.”

Survey respondent #86

Demographics of overcrowded households

The middle column of Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of respondent households identified as living in overcrowded conditions. There was an average of three people per bedroom among overcrowded households, and six instances in which four or more people, often from multiple generations of a family, were sharing a single bachelor apartment. When compared with data for the whole sample, and with those not

living in overcrowded housing (the right-most column in Table 1), clear differences emerge in the demographic profile between crowded and non-crowded households.

The vast majority of overcrowded households are composed of first generation immigrant-headed families. In addition, households living in overcrowded conditions have also generally lived in North Mount Pleasant for longer periods of time (average 4.1 years) than those living in non-crowded housing. Seventy-five percent of overcrowded households are families with children, and a full 97 percent are households with family members living together.

Table 1 – Summary statistics of total tenant survey and for overcrowded and non-crowded households

	All tenants surveyed (n=77)	Overcrowded households (n=32)	Non-Crowded households (n=45)
Average number of people per bedroom	2.0	3.0	1.2
Average length of tenancy	3.9 years	4.1 years	2.25 years
Percent Immigrant households	58	88	37
Percent living with family	48	97	13
Percent with children at home	35	75	2
Average Ratio of Residents to Rent Payers	1.7	2.6	1.1

The findings from the survey suggest that the Survey Area is a neighbourhood in which low-income families, particularly immigrant families, are disproportionately represented. The



authors expect that, in accordance with the results, if affordable rental housing in North Mount Pleasant disappears, this low-income population, along with other low-income renters, will be most immediately and severely affected.

When compared to overcrowded households, the demographic profile of non-crowded households is significantly different. Only 13 percent of non-crowded households live with family, and only two percent of those with children. 84 percent of non-crowded households consist of a single person. The survey data indicate there are also far fewer first-generation immigrant-headed families among this group than among those living in overcrowded housing. A result that may suggest changes occurring in the Survey Area’s demographics is the fact that the average length of residency among non-crowded households is approximately half the length of tenancies for crowded households (2.25 years vs. 4.1 years respectively).⁵

Neighbourhood demographics by tenure

Table 2 shows the differences between those who have lived in the Survey Area for two years or fewer, and those who have lived in the Survey Area for longer periods of time. Differences in demographics here too are pronounced.

The numbers of family households and households with children at home among longer-term residents are nearly double (45 percent) the numbers for more recent arrivals (22 percent). Also, longer-term residents are generally immigrant households (77 percent vs. 31 percent) living in more crowded conditions. These survey results suggest it is not unreasonable to expect that a large proportion of long-time resident households, characterized primarily by first-generation immigrant-headed families, would be badly affected, if not displaced entirely, by gentrification due to increasing rents or conversions of rental buildings to strata housing.

“The area is becoming like Kitsilano. There has been a change in the types of people that have been moving into the area. People with money are replacing the poor. They are being pushed out as people sell rental properties... it’s not affordable anymore.”

Survey respondent #90

As a point of comparison, respondents who moved to North Mount Pleasant more recently were overwhelmingly Canadian-

born, live in less crowded conditions, and have a greater proportion of household members contributing to rent. Though occupational, income, or education data were not collected in the survey, the fact that newer residents appear to be able to more easily afford their housing and do not have to overcrowd to pay rent could signal the beginning stages of gentrification within the Survey Area.

Table 2 – Summary statistics comparing all tenants surveyed to tenants with shorter and longer periods of residence in North Mount Pleasant

	All tenants surveyed (n=77)	Residency 2 yrs or fewer (n=32)	Residency more than 2 yrs (n=45)
Average number of people per bedroom	2.0	1.8	2.1
Average length of tenancy	3.9 years		
Percent Immigrant households	58	31	77
Percent living with family	48	28	64
Percent with children at home	35	22	45
Average Ratio of Residents to Rent Payers	1.7	1.6	1.9

Demographics in strata building populations vs. rental populations

“There are a lot of single family condos developing in the area. What this is doing is starting to bring a younger, richer clientele into the area. People in this building couldn’t even dream of living in places like that.”

Survey Respondent #1

The survey team also surveyed the residents of a condominium building in North Mount Pleasant in order to assess what types of people are moving into new developments, and how this population compares with households in the rental housing survey. To control some of the challenging variables in such a comparison, a strata building that had been converted from a 20 year history of rental housing to strata condominiums roughly three years ago, was selected. A survey participant indicated that previous tenants of the building were evicted with



three months notice, and the survey results indicate that none of the previous tenants, including families, returned to live in the building once it had been stratified. The survey respondents from the condominium building have all lived in North Mount Pleasant for three years or fewer, and the majority (18 of 24) have lived there for two years or fewer.

The social characteristics of households in the condominium building are significantly different from those of the rental buildings, and especially from those of longer-term and over-crowded residents (see Table 3). For instance, only one of the 23 respondents in the strata building was a first-generation immigrant-headed family, the rest were families headed by Canadian-born people. Only one household in the survey had any children at home. 19 of 23 of the households in the strata building consisted of either singles in their own unit, or couples with no children, both of whom were contributing to paying rent or a mortgage. The relative homogeneity of household structure in the condominium survey suggests that this type of housing may be beyond the reach of lower-income immigrant families.⁶ Of interest, however, was the fact that many of the recently stratified units were occupied by renters and not the property owners.

Table 3 – Summary statistics comparing strata building residents to tenant survey and long-term tenants

	Strata building (n=23)	All tenants surveyed (n=77)	Residency more than 2 years
Average number of people per bedroom	1.4	2.0	2.1
Average length of tenancy	1.5 years	3.9 years	
Percent Immigrant households	4% (1 of 23)	58	77
Percent living with family	26% (6 of 23)	48	64
Percent with children at home	4% (1 of 23)	35	45
Average Ratio of Residents to Rent Payers	1	1.7	1.9

Almost half of the respondents in the condominium building had moved to North Mount Pleasant from neighbourhoods in Vancouver’s west side such as Kitsilano and Fairview. Qualitative data indicated that residents had moved from west side neighbourhoods due to increasing rents in those areas.

“I’ve noticed that there are more people moving in from the West Side. I think that this is because rent is just becoming unbelievably expensive.”

Survey Respondent #46

*Volunteer: “Why did you choose to live in this neighbourhood?”
“Much cheaper than Kits. It’s funky.”*

Survey Respondent #76, strata resident

Qualitative responses to questions about reasons for living in the Survey Area varied between respondents in the tenant survey and strata survey. Qualitative responses from strata occupants more frequently identified the cultural and social amenities of the neighbourhood including restaurants, shops, and cafes, as well as proximity to downtown. Longer-term tenants more frequently identified that the Survey Area was one of the few neighbourhoods they could afford, and that they found accommodation through networks of friends or relatives.

“This is a neighbourhood in transition. It’s on the verge of getting more popular. There are more young people moving in. I looked at this area a couple years ago and it was a bit too sketchy for me, but it has really cleaned up.”

Survey Respondent #82, strata resident

Finally, it is important to point out that these comparisons between surveys are not merely measuring differences between renters and owners, because nearly two-thirds of respondent households in the strata building were renters as well. As a result, newcomers to North Mount Pleasant, whether renters or owners, clearly represent a shift in demographic for the neighbourhood. The findings for this building suggest strongly the significant displacement and population change that can occur if affordable rental housing is not part of any redevelopment scheme.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The Survey results, through overcrowding and rent contribution statistics, suggest that there is a high concentration of households in danger of displacement from their housing in the Survey Area.

Through changing demographics – most starkly in stratified buildings – the Survey results indicate that uncontrolled gentrification is already starting to take place within the rental housing stock in the survey area.

The results indicate that those living at the margins of housing affordability and at greatest risk of displacement tend to be immigrant families, most of whom have young children, and are long-time residents of the Survey Area.

Given that the City of Vancouver is in the process of drafting a new community plan for Mount Pleasant, it is of utmost importance for any new plan to take into consideration the housing needs and rights of the existing low-income tenant population in the area, in particular first generation immigrant-headed family households. Based on the Survey results, we make the following recommendations to the City of Vancouver based on the areas identified in the above section:

1. Every effort must be made by all levels of government to preserve the existing rental housing stock of the area, to expand existing low- and middle-income rental stock, and ensure its affordability into the future. The City of Vancouver has already moved to protect rental housing from conversion; however, little legislation is in place to protect prospective immigrant family tenants from rising rents and eviction for renovations to upscale current rental units. Further, existing legislation does not protect buildings that are entirely rental, owned by a single owner, but already approved as a strata, from converting. Joint government efforts to build targeted social housing for this community are needed in addition to stricter legislative controls over increasing rents and conversions.

2. Vancouver must take a strict “zero displacement” approach to future development planning for the neighbourhood with the principle of maintaining and complementing the current demographic mix of the neighbourhood guiding any new development proposals. All “ecodensity” or other redevelopment initiatives must take as a guiding principle the need to preserve, enhance and expand low- and middle-income rental housing to ensure a diversity of residents in Vancouver neighbourhoods.

3. Vancouver must address safety concerns of low-income residents. Many residents, unprompted, identified concerns for personal safety during the survey. Additional study is required to determine the source of this concern, which may include: differential policing practices, displacement of drug users and homeless individuals from commercial areas by increased policing and security crackdowns, or a lack of City-supported community improvement initiatives. The authors recommend the City of Vancouver and Vancouver Police Department work with this neighbourhood to address these concerns.

The qualitative survey data indicate that the most likely cause of increased perceptions of insecurity in the Survey is increasingly visible poverty due to insufficient welfare rates and increased homelessness in Vancouver. The authors encourage the federal, provincial and municipal governments to pursue a multi-tiered response to poverty in Vancouver that includes addressing issues of homelessness, addiction and mental health in a manner that avoids a “crackdown” type response of increasing policing that will not address the problem in the long term.



ENDNOTES

- 1 The complete document outlining the City of Vancouver's Community Planning Program for the Mount Pleasant area can be located online: <http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvcs/planning/cpp/mountpleasant/pdf/tor.pdf>
- 2 While housing issues were the focus of this research, safety was mentioned so frequently that we feel it is important to include it in the report, though its inclusion is limited to this section and the recommendations.
- 3 In the survey data, economic immigrants and refugees were not distinguished and are all referred to by the identifying label of "immigrants." Further study may be undertaken to further identify the particular demographics of the neighbourhood.
- 4 Overcrowding was identified in accordance with the Canadian National Occupancy Standard from survey questions about household composition.
- 5 The actual average is 3.8 years when including three outlier households who have lived there for decades, but including them would misrepresent the characteristics of the vast majority of these households.
- 6 It not just that the types of units or not suitable for families; Many of the condominiums had two bedrooms, a rarity in the rental building survey.



