

## Queer Households and Possibilities for Shared Housing in Canada



### What this research is about

Although Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (2SLGBTQI+) rights are protected in Canada, many housing policies are still based around heteronormative expectations. These policies assume or privilege a family structure based around the nuclear family ideal, with a mother, a father, and child(ren).

This context presents problems for 2SLGBTQI+ people, whose kinship structures and community connections often differ from this model. One area where this is apparent is the housing market, in which housing policies, initiatives, and zoning bylaws tend to favour heteronormative families and single-family dwellings. This study examined how such policies limit housing opportunities for 2SLGBTQI+ people.

### What the researchers did

This study reported on the first phase of a larger multi-year project on shared housing among 2SLGBTQI+ adults in Canada. It explored heteronormative assumptions within Canadian housing policies, and how these restrict cohabitation and affect the housing situation of legally unrelated adults in Toronto.

The researchers used a qualitative case study approach to examine the availability of housing options for 2SLGBTQI+ adults. They examined 15 federal, municipal, and provincial policy documents to assess how these policies assisted or deterred housing practices in 2SLGBTQI+ communities. Two policies where these themes were most evident were chosen as case studies: the Multigenerational Home Renovations Tax Credit (MHRTC) and the Expanding Housing Options in Neighbourhoods (EHON). The MHRTC is a federal program, and EHON is an initiative by the City of Toronto.

### What you need to know

It is not uncommon for 2SLGBTQI+ persons to be alienated from their birth family. Often, they will instead form “chosen families” consisting of partners, friends, and others with whom they have formed close familial ties. For economic, social, and support reasons, many 2SLGBTQI+ people choose to cohabit. Canada’s housing policies and initiatives, like other governmental policies, were created with a heteronormative nuclear family structure in mind. This can lead to barriers and challenges for 2SLGBTQI+ families to find appropriate housing that meets their needs.

This study examined housing policies and initiatives in Canada and, specifically, Toronto. The researchers found that the heteronormative family assumptions in these policies, as well as who can be considered “family,” present barriers to 2SLGBTQI+ people and their chosen families in the type and location of available housing, as well as the availability of certain housing tax credits.

### What the researchers found

The three themes identified by the researchers were: 1) variations in the definition of the term “family” across documents; 2) identification of 2SLGBTQI+ as a vulnerable group deserving of equity in housing; and 3) diversity of housing types and restrictions.

The MHRTC was implemented in 2022 to support and promote the construction of secondary dwelling units by allowing for a tax credit of 15% of building costs up to \$50,000. Families who wish to build additions to their house (secondary units) for qualifying persons who may not be able to live on

their own can apply. Qualifying persons include elderly parents or relatives with a disability. However, the tax credit comes with certain restrictions. Qualifying persons must be blood relatives or relatives by marriage.

EHON was created as part of Toronto's Official Plan (OP), which outlines land use and the City's future vision. EHON was designed to combat rising housing costs and population density, as well as the lack of walkable neighbourhoods. EHON also addresses some problems with Toronto's restrictive zoning bylaws, allowing for a broader range of housing types such as multiplexes. At the same time, however, it conflicts with the OP, which limits new builds to those that conform to an area's existing character. This significantly limits multi-unit housing in established residential areas consisting of mostly single-dwelling detached homes.

Both policies are saddled with a heteronormative bias. The MHRTC requires that families claiming the tax credit conform to the ideal of ties formed by blood or marriage. This presents a barrier to 2SLGBTQIA+ people who may cohabit as chosen families, or other adults who may live with friends or non-related persons.

EHON is limited by the OP, which restricts the housing types that may be more favourable to 2SLGBTQIA+ families or shared households. This prevents the introduction of clustered or low-rise multi-unit housing in established areas that are predominantly single-family dwellings. Statistical data suggest that 2SLGBTQI+ Canadians may have fewer financial resources than their heterosexual counterparts, making shared housing more attractive or, in some cases, even essential.

### How you can use this research

The legal definition of "family" could be broadened to include non-heteronormative kinship structures in housing policies. This definition could be applied across every level of government. 2SLGBTQIA+ communities should be recognized as an equity-deserving group at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels. Consulting 2SLGBTQIA+ communities could guide the development of more inclusive housing policies.

### About the researchers

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*Research Snapshot by Erika Cao*

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