



Abandoned Buildings, Abandoned People

On Tuesday August 26th the street census on homelessness was released and the news isn't good. Turns out the number of people living on Winnipeg streets has almost doubled in just two years.

Yes, you heard that right. In 2022 there were 1256 people without shelter. Nearing the end of 2024 there were 2469 – enough people to fill every seat in the Winnipeg Concert Hall plus standing room. Worse still a staggering 75% of them were indigenous.

So much for truth and reconciliation.

And you can bet, with that many people living on the street, there are 1000s more just one job loss away from homelessness.

Which, to me, is appalling. It's appalling because we're not only willing to tolerate that level of injustice, but worse, whine about our tax dollars being used to support the most vulnerable among us. As if none of us ever had a friend, family member or a loved one who'd on fallen on hard times and needed help.

It's even more appalling when you listen to government officials proclaiming that it will take another 6 years to build sufficient housing for the homeless.

Really? Then how is it that we managed to find shelter for as many as 17,000 victims displaced by this summer's wildfire crisis but have to wait 6 years to house the victims of a homelessness crisis.

Even more puzzling - why are we building *new* social housing units? Why aren't we, instead, retrofitting some of the more than 600 abandoned buildings in Winnipeg to provide homes?



Abandoned apartment block at 748 Banning

Couldn't the province and city enact tougher laws which allowed them to seize buildings that have stood empty for three two or years to create supportive housing? Are they really trying to tell us that it's *less expensive* and takes *less time* to do a new build than renovate an old apartment building that stands empty?

And if our politicians grow weak-kneed at the thought of rescinding the rights of private property owners - even when their empty buildings pose a public safety hazard - then why not create incentives for contractors to buy abandoned buildings and renovate them for social housing.

But no, instead, our governments rattle on about a housing crisis which is, primarily, an affordability crisis. In fact, Canada's housing is among the most *unaffordable* in the world with one of the highest price versus income ratios among nations belonging to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

So, do governments really believe that the real estate development industry will change its spots and suddenly make homes more affordable? Are they really aiming for a better cost to income ratio for housing?

Well, let's take a look at the terms of the Housing Accelerator Fund (HAF) to get a sense of how important social and "affordable" housing is to our governments. Apparently, of the almost 2500 units being built in Winnipeg under HAF, 633 will be "affordable" while the remaining 622 units will be geared to 30% of income.

So, what does "geared to income" really mean? That if I have no income, save what I beg from passing motorists, I'll pay nothing for one of those 622 units? Well the answer to that would be no, because homeless people won't qualify for a HAF apartment. Even if I managed to land a job at Burger King, I'd still be expected to spend 30% of my income on rent. The only question is - could I even manage that given the escalating cost of living?

And what about the broader context of infill, the kind that's being built outside of the HAF program? Are rental prices going up, down or staying pretty much the same?



Well, I can give you a little insight on that based on infill going up in the Glenwood neighbourhood. One of them, a duplex, is currently on the market for \$629,000 and will likely go for more.

Based on that asking price, and assuming you've saved up a 10% downpayment of \$62,000, your monthly mortgage costs would be around \$3600.00 or more. Include heat and upkeep and you'd need to charge at bare minimum, \$2000.00 a month per unit, just to break even.

Not cheap. Certainly not cheap enough for a full time Walmart associate earning \$18.00 an hour, tops, or even a full time bank teller earning, let's say, \$20 an hour. Even if Miss Bank-Teller and Mr. Walmart lived together with a couple of kids, based their after tax income they'd just get by with more than 30% of their joint take-home-pay going toward rent.

And I say "get by," given that over the past five years, food costs alone have risen by close to 30%.

So, am I surprised there are so many people living on the street when employed Canadians are having a tough time finding housing they can afford? Not particularly. Not given the way the market defines affordability, and not when governments think waiting 6 years to get some 2400 homeless people housed is perfectly acceptable.

It's not. And none of us should accept it, and all of us should be outraged by it.