



# **Displacement in Kitchener's Inner Suburbs: Experiences and perspectives from low-income tenants**

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## Summary

This report is a collaborative project continuing the ongoing work conducted by the Social Development Centre Region of Waterloo (SDCWR) and the University of Waterloo on lived experience, gentrification, and displacement. The specific purpose of this report is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of gentrification and displacement occurring in inner suburban communities, and the role that groups such as property management firms play in shaping low-income tenant experiences. Despite concerning living conditions, growing unaffordability, and advancing displacement, these marginalized communities have, until now, been left out of important planning, policy and political conversations.

This work is supported by three interconnected research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of displacement in inner suburban communities?
2. What forms and patterns of displacement are taking place in the inner suburb?
3. To what extent do these forms and experiences differ from what is happening within gentrifying neighbourhoods in the urban core?

A key aim of this report is to centre the experiences of low-income tenants, focusing on their day-to-day experiences and the knowledge that they have about changes in their buildings and wider communities. Too often, these voices are omitted from mainstream planning and policy debates. By assembling and amplifying these voices, we can shift beyond isolated stories and anecdotes in order to identify trends which shape the lives of communities that are rarely heard.

## Methodology

We integrate a number of research avenues into this report, including thirteen detailed interviews with inner suburban residents and community connectors. Community connectors are inner suburban residents who have built strong relationships with SDCWR and act as a bridge between residents within their communities and non-profit advocacy groups like SDCWR. They speak with their peers and neighbours on a regular basis and therefore draw on their own lived experiences, as well as assembling knowledge from within their own communities. We also interviewed the newly operational Eviction Prevention Waterloo Region (WR) team consisting of two peer-outreach workers who identify as members of the BIPOC and 2SLGBTQ+ communities and provide support to tenants renting across the region with a focus on marginalized communities. Again, their knowledge goes beyond their own personal experiences as these outreach workers are privy to many stories and experiences of local tenants. Both the community connectors and the peer-outreach workers therefore should be viewed as key informants whose knowledge extends far beyond their own personal experiences. Planning reports generally rely on key informants who are planners, policymakers, politicians, business

leaders or developers; we assert that many members of marginalized communities are also key informants for planning and policymaking, and therefore their voices, knowledge and experiences are central to this report.

Additionally, we have analyzed detailed field notes from community engagement and outreach work by the SDCWR within the Traynor-Vanier community between 2013 and 2017. Finally, we are able to draw on work from the ongoing partnership between the SDCWR and University of Waterloo researchers. Through these methods, we explore nine locations and twelve buildings within the inner suburbs of Kitchener that were owned by a combination of large real estate investment trusts (REITs), other large firms and smaller, privately-owned properties. Buildings were chosen because of the knowledge that community connectors and the SDCWR have of these locations and are situated throughout the inner suburbs of Kitchener. Within Canadian cities, inner suburbs were primarily constructed between 1946 and 1980. They exist between increasingly gentrified core urban neighbourhoods that predate World War II, and new suburban areas on a city or region's edges. Across Canada, these areas are increasingly home to low-income and marginalized communities that are underserved in a number of ways (Grant et al., 2020; Pitter, 2020). This raises an important question of whether the experiences of low-income tenants differ in these social and spatial peripheries compared to parts of the city that are witnessing (re)development pressures?

## Findings

Through a thematic analysis of our research, we organized our findings into three major themes to address our research questions.

### 1. Day-to-day lived experiences

We found that a basic standard of living is not being upheld by property management in the inner suburban buildings we explored. Required maintenance is neglected, unsanitary conditions are pervasive, and physical safety is disregarded. According to our respondents, management avoids taking responsibility for these issues through convoluted reporting processes and poor, or non-existent communication. In extreme cases, residents who have spoken up have been subjected to harassment. Participants noted that this harassment is often a response to attempts to seek support from enforcement services, which more often than not are also unwilling or unable to provide impactful aid. These experiences have created an unacceptable environment which causes displacement, as many of those who can leave, do.

### 2. Spatial and non-spatial displacement

Many low-income tenants are subjected to a number of different forms of spatial and non-spatial displacement, due in part to difficult living conditions within their dwellings. Physically, tenants feel forced to leave because of the state of the building, unable to continue to live in

unacceptable conditions. As the inner suburbs represent some of the most affordable parts of urban regions such as Waterloo, being displaced often results in tenants being pushed out of the region entirely. The rising cost of living has also meant that many tenants have been forcibly evicted, which has allowed property management firms and landlords to dramatically increase rents for new tenants moving in. According to remaining residents, this has resulted in social displacement, which fuels feelings of ‘unhoming,’ voicelessness, and loneliness, all of which echo findings from research conducted elsewhere. This means that while many low-income tenants remain within their apartments, the buildings and communities they live in no longer cater to them.

### 3. Differences between core and inner suburb

Finally, this research finds that, unsurprisingly, many of the issues experienced by lower income tenants in the inner suburbs—lack of maintenance, safety, harassment, and displacement—have also been reported in the urban core (Diwan et al., 2021). Physical changes occurring in the core through demolitions, renovations and new investment may suggest that gentrification and displacement are concentrated in core neighbourhoods. However, the lived experiences of inner suburban residents illustrate that, for many low-income tenants, experiences of spatial and non-spatial displacement are also present as well.

## Recommendations

As our findings overlap significantly with research performed previously within central, core urban neighbourhoods within Kitchener-Waterloo, many of our recommendations apply to all neighbourhoods that are experiencing the effects of neglectful property management, gentrification, or displacement:

- Prioritize the needs of low-income residents living in inner suburban communities through the integration of their experiences and their voices into policy and decision-making processes.
- Build partnerships between social and enforcement services and inner suburban neighbourhoods, and ensure that adequate funding is available to maintain partnerships.
- Implement collaboration protocols between tenant support services and enforcement services. This approach ensures that tenants and their needs are centralized, with services working proactively under third-party agreements to adequately represent their clients, ensure timely follow up on landlord obligations and address problems in a holistic way.
- Enforce provincial rules around the renovation of rental properties that require landlords to provide three months’ rent and tenants with the right of first refusal of their units after renovation at the same rental prices as pre-renovation.

- Improve provincial legislation and bylaws to move from complaint-based enforcement to proactive enforcement and hold property management and landlords accountable through consistent monitoring, inspections, and fines for noncompliance with property standards and respect of human rights as it pertains to housing.
- Focus future research on ethnocultural, newcomer and Black, Indigenous and racialized communities in the region, who face additional barriers to housing and lack access to clear information and supports.

These recommendations, many of which can be implemented at the municipal or regional level, come alongside a number of broader interventions at the provincial and federal level, including: strengthening rent control for vacant units; increased funding for affordable projects, changing taxation rules around real estate investment trusts (REITs), and policy work centred around lived experience and elevating marginalized voices.

# 1. Introduction

The objectives of this research are to understand the current living conditions for low-income tenants who reside in apartment buildings in the inner suburbs of the city of Kitchener, how these experiences contribute to physical and social displacement in comparison to core areas, and the role that property managers and landlords play in shaping these experiences. These goals are guided by three interconnected research questions:

- What are the lived experiences of displacement in inner suburban communities?
- What are forms and patterns of displacement taking place in the inner suburb?
- To what extent do these forms and experiences differ from what is happening within gentrifying neighbourhoods in the urban core?

*Displacement in Kitchener's Inner Suburbs* is a continuation of the collaboration between the University of Waterloo's School of Planning and the Social Development Centre Waterloo Region (SDCWR). It builds on our previous projects, *Life Stories of Displacement* and *Mapping of Displacement in Kitchener-Waterloo: Report*. This research found many forms of displacement occurring within the region's gentrifying urban core (see also Doucet, 2021a).

In this report, we are focused on the experiences of spatial and non-spatial forms of displacement of low-income residents that are taking place in neighbourhoods that are not seeing the same gentrification pressures. The need for displacement research with a focus on areas outside the downtown core was first expressed during the development of Kitchener's Affordable Housing Strategy. Importantly, this strategy also emphasizes the need to centre lived experiences of marginalized communities within the formation of the city's housing policy. It was further motivated by the SDCWR's continued work with tenants in these communities, who expressed frustration with their living conditions largely due to the action or inaction of landlords or management companies. Challenges faced by tenants living in poor quality buildings include a lack of maintenance from absentee and corporate landlords; harassment from these landlords or property managers if tenants expressed concern about the condition of their rental units or the apartment building; and discrimination against/evictions of long-standing tenants for the purpose of renting units at a much higher cost (Desmond & Wilmers, 2019). Tenants are simultaneously experiencing deteriorating living conditions, a lower quality of life, and the impact of

gentrification, which is steadily driving up the cost of living and displacing these tenants both physically out of their homes and socially from within their communities (Jackson, 2019).

At the same time, much of our attention towards displacement focuses on core urban areas that become desirable middle-class neighbourhoods (Lees, 2012). Our research argues that this process is also taking place in traditionally marginalized locations at the social and spatial peripheries of cities; these are communities further away from the downtown core, where gentrification and displacement do not immediately lead to the production of hip and trendy neighbourhoods. Such areas are not quite ‘urban’ and not quite ‘suburban,’ and are often left out of important conversations of neighbourhood change.

These issues are exacerbated by income insecurity in Kitchener, which places extreme pressure on individuals who are unable to afford daily expenses and increasing rent. While gentrification in the many core neighbourhoods within the Region of Waterloo and the rapid increase in housing cost caused by the pandemic are adding further pressure to housing challenges, housing unaffordability is not new. According to the 2016 census, 28% of households in Kitchener spent in excess of 30% of their income on housing. This percentage is likely increasing as housing costs continue to soar (Williams, 2021). In the last ten years, average rents in Kitchener have increased 41%, bringing the current average rent for a one-bedroom apartment to approximately \$1,400 per month. This is well above what most individuals on Social Assistance, Ontario Works (OW), or an annual household income of under \$25,000, can afford (Turcotte, 2021). This is also an issue for seniors, who make up a significant proportion of inner suburban residents. As of the 2016 census, approximately 14% of the population of Waterloo Region are seniors, with 13.5% of them reporting a low income status.

The rising cost of rent is a primary concern for individuals living in both core and inner suburban communities (CBC News, 2021), contributing to feelings of unhoming and voicelessness for tenants while giving power to property management, who are financially motivated to push lower income tenants out (Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, & Lees, 2020). With many individuals living beyond their means to stay in the Region (CBC News, 2021), the severity of the situation is summarized by one of our respondents, Carol<sup>1</sup>, a long-term resident of

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<sup>1</sup> To ensure the anonymity of our respondents, they have been given pseudonyms.

Kitchener who has experienced displacement due to discrimination, evictions, and lack of safety. In an interview, she explained to us that:

*Housing itself. It's bad enough the younger people that are on OW have to choose if they want to eat or if they get their bus pass. At the end of the month, too, you look at your money in your hand and you're like, 'Am I eating this month or am I getting a bus pass to go to work or school?' And nine times out of ten, it's a bus pass so you can get out of your house.*

With many low-income inner suburban residents at their emotional and financial breaking points, our research intends to shed important light on marginalized spaces and communities that are rarely front and centre in planning and policy debates. Specifically, this report can be used to impact policy and enforcement in the City of Kitchener and other local and/or regional municipalities, to ultimately improve and uphold a standard of living in these communities while mitigating displacement to preserve existing affordable units. The experiences presented and analyzed within this report are also useful for other jurisdictions across Ontario and beyond, and while our main recommendations are aimed at the municipal and regional levels of government, there are important insights for the provincial and federal governments as well.

## 2. Research Framework

Research on the impact of gentrification and subsequent displacement largely focuses on core urban areas, which fit more traditional definitions of gentrification. As a result, inner suburban communities have often been excluded from this discussion. However, with the continued displacement of lower income individuals in ‘desirable neighbourhoods,’ research needs to be more inclusive of surrounding communities that are simultaneously experiencing the impact of gentrification, and targeted by real estate investment trusts (REITs) and other property management firms that have adopted similar practices. REITs first emerged in the United States in the 1960s and in Canada in 1993. They are publicly traded companies that own ‘income producing real estate,’ and are increasingly accumulating Canada’s multifamily rental properties (August, 2020). REITs enjoy preferential tax treatment in Canada; they qualify for a full tax exemption if they distribute more than 90% of their income back to their investors (Barnea, 2022). However their business model incentivizes maximizing profit for their investors that is derived from real estate. As a result, they contribute to the financialization of housing; REITs have been accused of both overt and covert money-making tactics that further the precarity of living conditions in core and inner suburban communities (see August and Walks, 2018).

REITs play an important role in stimulating gentrification and displacement in inner suburban neighbourhoods. As Martine August explains (August & Walks, 2018; August, 2020), while REITs target higher income core areas, by purchasing well maintained, financially reliable buildings, they also target ‘marginalized locations,’ which offer lower cost and under-maintained buildings. On the one hand, REITs are accused of neglecting buildings and residents, contributing to poor living conditions and social marginalization. On the other hand, they capitalize on displacing original residents, renovating units, and participating in the social upgrading of incoming residents. These tactics, however, are not new or specific to REITs (Desmond & Wilmers, 2019). Through our interviews, we heard many stories involving smaller property management firms and private landlords who are also engaging in similar practices in order to reposition their properties towards more affluent tenants, even within the inner suburbs.

Definitions of gentrification and our understanding of its effects have continuously evolved to reflect the complex nature of urban environments. While past explanations of the driving forces of gentrification have focused on either the social upgrading of residents (Ley, 2003), the cultural capital of the neighbourhood (Bridge, 2006), or the concentration of reinvested capital (Smith, 1979), gentrification is now understood as a multifaceted social process. It affects individuals through changing housing affordability, as well as the community at large through an associated shift in retail and services (Gibbons et al., 2018; Hackworth, 2002; Lees et al., 2008). Importantly, gentrification is no longer seen as something that happens solely within owner-occupied housing: it has become firmly entrenched within the private-rental sector. Put simply, gentrification can be understood as the transformation of space to align with the needs of higher income individuals (Hackworth, 2002).

This report builds on the work completed by Diwan et al. (2021) in *Mapping Displacement in Kitchener-Waterloo: Report*, as part of a collaboration between the SDCWR and the University of Waterloo and focuses on highlighting gentrification's connection with displacement, specifically as it presents itself physically and socially. This is part of a SSHRC-funded Partnership Development Grant to study gentrification and displacement in Waterloo Region, led by Brian Doucet. Physical or spatial displacement can be understood as the forced or coerced outmigration of residents from a community, often as a direct result of the larger changes occurring in their neighbourhoods (Marcuse, 1985; Kearns & Mason, 2013). Social or non-spatial forms of displacement are more difficult to measure (Marcuse, 1985; Slater, 2006; 2009), but encompass feelings of unhoming (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2019) and voicelessness as residents remain physically in place but socially isolated and alienated as their community changes around them (Atkinson, 2015). While not the focus of this research, studies have also begun to explore cultural and spiritual forms of displacement that occur when ethnic or cultural communities are gentrified, and original residents, their culture, belief systems, and practices are marginalized (Hyra, 2015). Kitchener's core and inner suburban neighbourhoods are home to many cultural and ethnic communities. Across Canada, poverty is increasingly concentrating within inner suburban neighbourhoods that have neither the newness of contemporary suburbs, nor the cache of older, inner city neighbourhoods (Grant et al. 2020). Our work seeks to position this form of displacement as an important focus for future research.

Research has begun to focus more critically on the lived experiences of displacement under gentrification, unravelling the complicated relationship between placemaking, community, and gentrification. However, this research has disproportionately focused on urban cores, largely ignoring inner suburban communities that are increasingly facing the impact of changing affordability (Cook & Denton, 2015). While declining neighbourhoods within the inner suburbs have not been a primary focus of gentrification literature, they have drawn important attention from research on urban poverty, neighbourhood change, and social equity. David Hulchanski's *The Three Cities Within Toronto* report (2010) reconsiders the way in which the city is structured, categorizing Toronto into three sub-cities based on income class. This work illustrates that core, urban areas (City #1) primarily feature above-average household incomes and that these income levels are growing via-a-vie the city average. City #2 consists of areas that where average incomes remain stable and neighbourhoods within City #3 have seen decreases in average household income compared to the city average. While this work initially started in Toronto, Hulchanski's research team has examined cities across Canada to look at income inequality and neighbourhood change since the 1970s (see also Grant et al., 2020).

City #1 is primarily found within older, gentrified neighbourhoods within an urban core, or affluent suburban neighbourhoods, such as the central spine of North York in Toronto. City #3 is primarily found within the inner suburbs constructed in the decades after World War II. In Toronto, this includes most of Scarborough, northern Etobicoke and many neighbourhoods in North York, as well as pockets in the former municipalities of York and East York. City #3 houses a strong concentration of poverty, containing thirteen priority neighbourhoods as identified by the United Way of Greater Ontario and the City of Toronto, and can be understood as the inner suburb (Hulchanski, 2010, p. 21). City #2 is generally found in between the increasingly affluent and poorer parts of the city.

Cowen and Parlette (2011) build on this work through their exploration of inner suburbs of Toronto and the dramatic transformation from postwar construction to its current underserved state. Originally constructed for automobile-reliant, middle-class, white families, historical changes to the social fabric of city living and the ongoing unaffordability of core areas has had a substantial impact on inner suburban neighbourhoods. Toronto's inner suburban communities are now home to lower income classes, often from marginalized groups, and lack adequate access to social services or transportation (see Rankin and McLean, 2015). Many of these communities

reside in ageing apartment buildings dotted around the inner suburbs. Deteriorating conditions have meant that poverty in Toronto has become concentrated in the inner suburbs more generally, and in many of these apartment complexes specifically (United Way Toronto, 2011). These trends can also be seen across Canada (Grant et al., 2020), leading scholars to argue that inner suburbs are caught in a “policy blindspot” (Puentes, 2006, p.53) as the rapid influx of lower income residents has put immense strain on their already inadequate systems and aging infrastructure (Leigh & Lee, 2005).

Similar work has proposed the idea of *in-between cities*, positioning these spaces outside of what is traditionally considered urban, but not viewed as suburban either (CBC News, 2016; Young & Keil, 2010; Sieverts, 2002). These areas often have some level of self-containment, but share similar issues with other built forms. They are simultaneously vulnerable to the urban form’s propensity for congestion, discrimination, and poverty, and suffer from suburban infrastructure (including roads, transportation, sewers, etc.) that is not conducive to expansion or urbanization (Sieverts, 2007). However, Young and Keil stress the significance of the growth of these spaces, and the importance of targeted planning interventions, arguing that they are ‘some of the most dynamic growth areas’ (p. 88). This has motivated an exploration into the potential for renewal in these areas, arguing that they warrant new and innovative planning approaches that extend beyond lessons learned from urban cores (CBC News, 2016; Young & Keil, 2010).

With this in mind, we also define the inner suburb as an ‘in-between space’ occurring at the neighbourhood level. These communities mirror some characteristics of urban cores (which we position as the centralized neighbourhoods in and around Uptown Waterloo and Downtown Kitchener), with many residents living in apartment buildings and relying on accessible transportation options beyond vehicular travel. In the Waterloo Region, these communities are home to many low-income individuals, which has only furthered the marginalization of this space. At the same time, however, these characteristics also make inner suburban communities targets for gentrification. As we stress, gentrification in the inner suburbs may not result in a rapid turnover, but it is contributing to the transformation of these spaces and the displacement of long-standing community members.

This research finds that inner suburban communities in Kitchener are experiencing the impact of gentrification alongside physical and social forms of displacement. There are many factors influencing this, including the financialization of rental housing (Fuller, 2021), which

emphasizes maximizing the profits that can be extracted from multi-family rental properties (August, 2020). For almost a decade these communities have faced covert tactics of eviction, together with cost-saving practices associated with the financialization of housing. Living conditions have deteriorated through the long-standing implementation of unsafe and unsanitary practices, yet the cost of living has gone up dramatically, pushing many original residents out. Our participants, who have watched this change occur, have made clear that property management is actively trying to save money by avoiding necessary preventative repairs, and at the same time, making surface-level renovations of vacated units to attract higher income residents.

The analysis of our findings is organized into three main themes, drawing attention to overarching issues and illustrated by direct quotations from our interviews:

(1) Lived experiences, which focus on how neglected living conditions, safety concerns, a lack of proper communication between management, and outright harassment have contributed to decreased quality of life and displacement;

(2) Access to housing as a human right and lack of effective enforcement, which explores how inaction from regional, municipal and provincial governments and enforcement services has led to feelings of voicelessness;

(3) Displacement, which explores both the physical and social manifestations of the loss of place happening in these inner suburban communities, and what is driving this change. It also points to the necessity of further research focused on the experience of displacement for ethnocultural communities.

To conclude, this research spotlights the similarities and differences between core and inner suburb, and provides directions for lasting and meaningful change identified through ongoing research and as proposed by community partners.

# Kitchener's Inner Suburbs

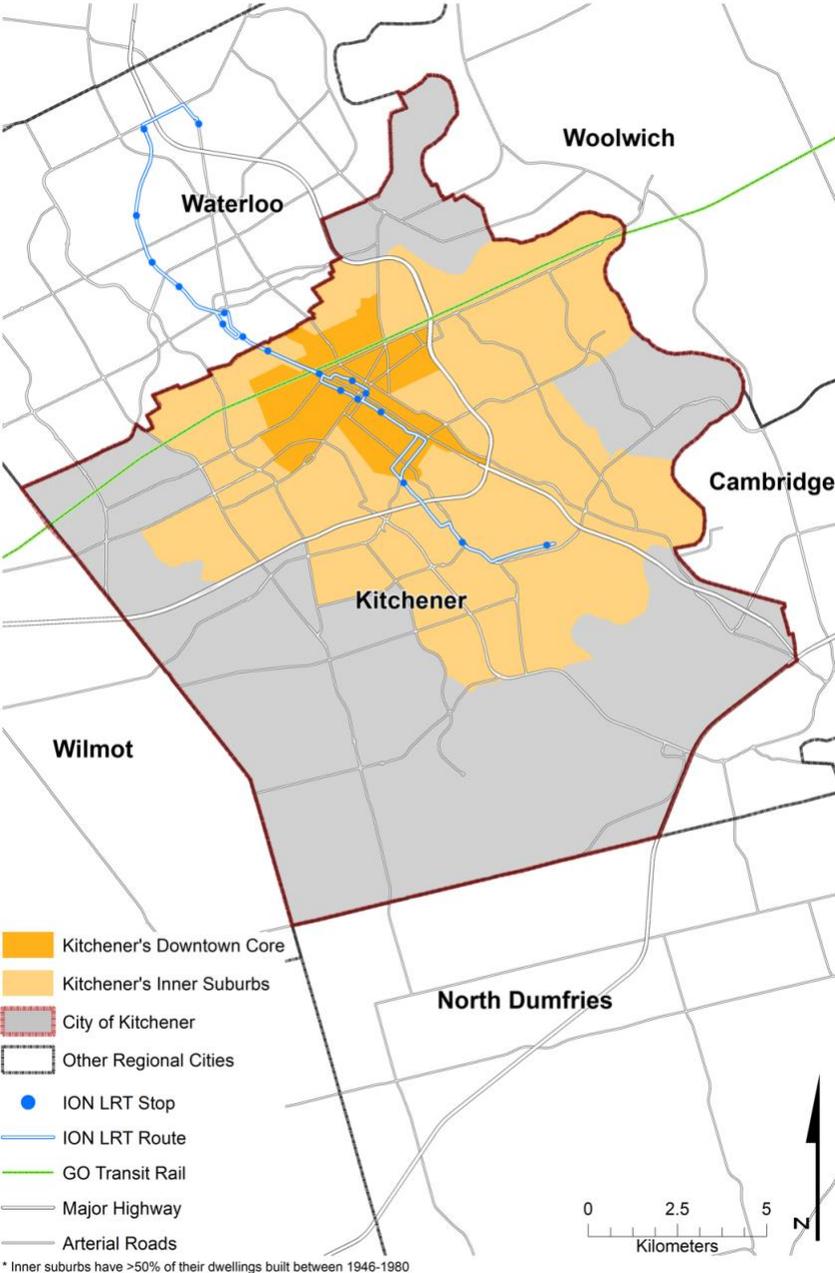


Figure 1. Map of Kitchener's inner suburban boundary

### 3. Methodology

This project uses several different sources of information to shed light on patterns and experiences of inner suburban displacement that all centre the lived experiences of marginalized residents within our analysis. These include recent interviews with inner suburban residents, community connectors and the Eviction Prevention WR team, as well as field notes from both the SDCWR's work with the Traynor-Vanier community, conducted between 2013 and 2017, and ongoing work conducted by the SDCWR on the topics of gentrification and displacement. Harnessing qualitative methodologies, we conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews between January and March 2021, with ten participants comprising community connectors (see below), residents living in inner suburban neighbourhoods and the Eviction Prevention WR team. Due to the limited person-to-person engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the exhaustion of many tenants who were/are facing harassment and housing insecurity, we used an outreach model developed through the SDCWR's work with 'community connectors' as key informants.

**Community connectors** have been defined as "member(s) of the community who enables the flow of information, resources and relationships across cultural, social and organisational boundaries" (Wallace, Farmer & McCosker, 2019, p.367). Originating in health sciences, they have become the subject of interdisciplinary research, which argues that they play an influential role in connecting with and supporting marginalized or hard to reach populations (Diwan et al., 2021, Doucet, 2021a; Giebel et al., 2020) to different degrees of formality. Similarly, we defined community connectors as individuals who are privy to the experiences of tenants in their buildings, often participating in tenant advocacy efforts, and are able to speak to the overarching resident experience. They are key informants who act as a bridge between tenants and advocacy groups such as SDCWR. Specifically, they have been engaged and outspoken on issues of affordable housing or tenants' rights. They were not only supporting the recruitment process, they were validating tenant stories and providing a broader knowledge base. As a result, their knowledge extends beyond their own personal experiences and they are privy to the experiences and insights of others within their communities. Through engaging with community connectors we were able to interview fewer residents and avoid unnecessary re-traumatization. The twelve interviews also include follow-up interviews with community connectors to document the ongoing issues in these buildings. Importantly, community

connectors shared both their own knowledge and experiences, as well as those of individuals within their own communities. They are therefore a hybrid of resident and key expert interviews, providing knowledge and insights that are rarely highlighted.

**Eviction Prevention WR** is a newly established team by the SDCWR and funded through the United Way Waterloo Region Communities. It is dedicated to providing peer support to tenants across the region. The need for a peer-outreach support team was identified through the SDCWR's ongoing work and engagement with tenants in Waterloo Region and through their 2021 report, *Mapping Displacement in Kitchener-Waterloo*. This team consists of two peer-outreach workers, who identify as members of the BIPOC and 2SLGBTQ+ communities and whose outreach work functions to amplify tenant voices and experiences and assist tenants as they navigate addressing ongoing housing issues. Through their expertise, the Eviction Prevention WR team is able to focus on tenant issues that individuals from marginalized groups face in their buildings, primarily Black, Indigenous, racialized, 2SLGBTQ+, newcomers and persons with disabilities (see Social Development Centre Waterloo Region, 2022).

Importantly, while this sample is relatively small in comparison to research projects that use interviews with middle-class homeowners, our sample presents detailed knowledge from members of a hard-to-reach population. Through these interviews we were able to gather a number of rich and extensive accounts of the experiences of a marginalized population that are far less likely to respond to blanket calls for participation or municipally-led open houses. Through the trust that the SDCWR has built over the years with these communities, and specifically with community connectors, we are able to share these experiences and contribute a level of detail from this population that is generally lacking in planning and policy reports. Importantly, this type of knowledge and information would be difficult to obtain by other means.

This report also analyzes field notes from the SDCWR's partnership with the Kitchener Waterloo (KW) Tenant Group in the Traynor-Vanier community from 2013 to 2017. This case study compiled by the Social Development staff documented displacement and evictions in conjunction with the unit-by-unit renovations/gentrification in the four buildings under the pressure of construction of the LRT and potential rent increases. These notes were followed up in 2021 with an update from a community connector provided via e-mail.

In addition, this report explores and extends the large body of work that the SDCWR and the University of Waterloo have compiled together in order to compare and contrast experiences of core and inner suburban communities, illustrating how different iterations of gentrification are still having very similar effects (Diwan et al., 2021; Turman et al., 2021; Doucet, 2019). While inner suburban gentrification may not result in the same rapid turnover of people and businesses, many of the lived experiences are the same.

Interviews were professionally transcribed and subsequently processed through *Dedoose*, a qualitative data analysis software, alongside the Traynor-Vanier field notes. Using a coding system formulated from August's (2020) exploration of REITs in Canada and from past work on displacement in core urban areas, both the interviews and field notes were thematically coded.

While the number of participants was small, as we noted above, the weight of the knowledge they each held as residents was insurmountable. These voices also came from communities that are largely absent from mainstream planning, policy and political conversations, even about their own neighbourhoods. Participants ranged from ages 39 to 61 years, with intersecting identities including race, gender, abilities, and income. They brought a wealth of knowledge from years of personal experience with displacement in Kitchener-Waterloo and from listening to tenant issues through their relationships with other residents in their buildings. The experiences they describe are not singular issues but collective experiences.

- Jane (four interviews), one of two community connectors, has lived in Kitchener her whole life. She and her family have faced displacement from multiple residences. For the past five years she has lived in a four-storey building owned by a corporate rental company. She has faced ongoing tension with management and has worked alongside other tenants to create change. However, lack of support from the Region, city, and property management has led Jane and other residents to give up fighting for rights in this building. In 2021, Jane moved out.
- Carol, our second community connector, has extensive advocacy experience in her community. She has had clashes with management staff and has witnessed the transformation of her building and surrounding neighbourhood. She lives in a complex of four mid-rise buildings owned by an independent property management firm. Her

experiences of displacement living downtown, in supportive housing, and in Kitchener's inner suburbs informs a range of tenant issues that occur in different areas and housing in the city.

- Matt resides in the same building as Jane and has lived there for twenty years. He is currently experiencing income insecurity and is concerned that if he is evicted, he will be displaced out of the city due to growing unaffordability.
- Sam was renovicted from her apartment in a two-building complex owned by a corporate management firm. She has a right of first refusal, but moving back in seems uncertain, as rumours suggest the bachelor apartments may be converted to two-bedroom units, which would raise her already unaffordable rent. Since the interview, these buildings were purchased by a REIT.
- Angela is a retiree currently living in a four-storey apartment in Cambridge (ownership unknown) that also showcases the same issues experienced by other residents, such as safety issues, income insecurity, and lack of maintenance. While not located in KW, this participant frequents KW often for People Action Group meetings and has previously lived in Kitchener.
- Nicole has lived in a four-storey apartment building in Kitchener for ten years, owned by a family. Being a long-time resident in this building hasn't brought loyalty. Additionally, her Anishinaabe identity has resulted in an amplification of recurring verbal abuse from her landlord.
- Jocelyn lives in a small bachelor apartment in a building with only ten units. After she had lived in the building for ten years, the owners sold the apartments to a family-owned property management corporation which has purchased many apartments in the area, including student housing.

- Jamie's experience is similar to others in this study, as her apartment faces ongoing degradation from a lack of maintenance and a lack of emphasis on safety has left her feeling unsafe in her own home.
- The Eviction Prevention WR team are another form of key informant, who are knowledgeable about a range of tenant experiences. The team consists of two outreach workers who provide direct peer support for anyone in the Waterloo Region. This support includes listening and collecting tenant stories, providing information and referrals, mediation for landlord-tenant conflict and assisting tenants during Landlord/Tenant Board Hearings. Similar to community connectors these individuals are privy to tenant experiences, have personal experiences with landlords and property management across the region and can attest to the dire conditions that our research has uncovered.

The Traynor-Vanier field notes explore a cluster of four buildings in the neighbourhood. These properties have changed hands several times over the past decade and are currently owned by a large Canadian REIT.

Research ethics protocols for the recruitment of participants, interview process, and data collection were approved by the University of Waterloo Ethics Board. Interview lengths ranged from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours. Importantly, this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which required the majority of the interviews to occur over the phone, rather than face-to-face. One-on-one telephone interviews were recorded using the OpenPhone app. We received consent from all participants prior to recording the interviews. Pseudonyms were assigned, as interviewees opted for anonymity.

## 4. Lived Experience of Inner Suburban Communities

Across Canada, a growing share of poverty is concentrated in inner suburban neighbourhoods, specifically in apartment buildings constructed in the 1960s and 70s (Grant et al., 2020; Paradis et al., 2014). Research studies have identified a number of overt and covert tactics that landlords and property managers use to evict sitting tenants, upgrade properties and maximize profits (August, 2020; August and Walks, 2018). These neighbourhoods have been called the 'forgotten densities' of cities, where substandard, poorly-maintained and inadequate housing intersect with a lack of transportation options, predatory businesses and over-policing (Pitter, 2020). Our research in Kitchener's inner suburbs echoes these studies from across the country; in-depth interviews with residents, community connectors, and the Eviction Prevention team provide detailed and important insights into the lived experiences in these types of buildings. This knowledge is rarely central to planning and policy debates.

The residents who can afford to leave often do, and residents who cannot leave are trapped in dysfunctional circumstances to advocate for themselves, seeking support from community services and navigating complicated relationships with management and other tenants. As buildings and relationships continue to deteriorate, these conditions can contribute to social and physical displacement, forcing residents into an 'enough is enough' mentality. While many of the poor practices highlighted by our participants in this section are motivated by the desire of management to reduce costs, we also argue that they contribute to the larger system of displacement. Through these tactics residents are pushed to their physical and emotional limits, and are left feeling unhomed, unsafe, and without a voice in their own communities. As we will explore in the following section on displacement, residents have witnessed management actively taking advantage of tenants moving out to make repairs and charge significantly higher rents. There is a great deal of motivation for management to purposely reduce the quality of life in their buildings, pressuring tenants to move so that they may capitalize on higher income tenants looking to live in the area.

### Lack of Maintenance

Interviewees agreed that a major issue impacting the quality of life in inner suburban buildings was the lack of, or poor quality of, maintenance. As August (2020) identified, property

management can go to great lengths to save money. As is the case in many Canadian cities, we heard repeated stories of the following issues within rental buildings in Kitchener's inner suburbs:

- prolonged infestations of bedbugs, cockroaches, and mice;
- lack of heating and air conditioning;
- persistent mold or old window frames;
- broken appliances;
- plumbing and cleanliness issues;
- desperately needed upgrading of overall amenities such as stairs and stairwells, front and back doors, fire doors or fire extinguishers, ventilation and carpeting, garages or laundry rooms, etc.

When and if these issues are addressed, property management often chooses what, to tenants, appears as 'band aid' solutions that lead to the problems recurring. While this can create frustration for residents around smaller maintenance issues, prolonged exposure to unsanitary conditions or infestations can be detrimental to residents' physical health and mental well-being.

Maintenance issues were well documented in our research, particularly in the four apartment buildings in Traynor-Vanier. Since the SDCWR was involved in the community (2013 - 2017), insect and extermination issues were ongoing. Exterminations would take months to be organized after complaints were raised by residents. When exterminators were finally called in, treatment occurred in individual units and not the whole buildings. As the buildings were almost entirely infested at the time of the SDCWR's involvement, inadequate treatment has meant that infestations were recurring, forcing tenants to engage in their own preventative measures. This experience has been repeated multiple times over the years, even as the buildings changed ownership. As of 2021, some eight years later, residents reported that they are still relying on their own efforts to keep infestations at bay.

While no one would willingly live with an infestation, it can take a heavy emotional toll on residents who have existing mental health concerns. Jane, a community connector who, as noted above lives in a small apartment building, could also attest to this issue. She explained the mental toll on a fellow resident caused by the unresolved infestation in her building:

*Cockroaches are a problem, especially on the one side of the building. And one of my neighbours, who is a senior and who is a clean freak, is having problems, and she's beside herself. And the super[intendents] aren't really doing much of anything to deal with the situation.*

For many, infestation is both stressful and financially draining. Residents who are forced to take their own extermination or preventative measures express how much of a financial burden it can be. As Nicole, a resident of a low-rise, privately owned building in an inner suburban neighbourhood, explained:

*And by the time I'm done paying my rent, my hydro and everything, I only have like \$300 left of my money and I can't really keep affording to be keeping cockroaches at bay.*

For low-income individuals, undertaking a maintenance issue like an infestation that should be addressed by management can have a huge impact. In the short term, it can mean the difference between having a clean home or purchasing groceries, and in the long term it can result in displacement from their units as they cannot keep up with the cost of living, rent, and the ongoing financial burden of pest control.

Participants also spoke of maintenance issues becoming health hazards. Even though infestations can present significant health risks, especially when they are left untreated for years, other more urgent issues were noted that could be deadly for vulnerable populations.

For instance, Sam, who previously lived in one of two buildings owned by a small property management firm, noted that they had kept the heating on during a heat wave in May, a common issue brought to light by interviewees. Without central air conditioning in the building, she feared for senior residents who did not have portable or window air conditioning units in their homes. Sam felt responsible for her fellow tenants, a shared characteristic among participants and invited senior residents from her building to her apartment to cool off by her air conditioner. When she approached the landlord, she was told that turning the heat off was not an option:

*They said they're going on, in the middle of the heat [wave]. The first time I started complaining they said, 'Well, the law says that you have to have it on until I think the 25th of May.' And I said, 'Well, not during a heat wave you don't.'*

The senior residents were fortunate to have access to Sam's home, but for obvious reasons, including the inconvenience to residents and the responsibility of management to maintain a certain quality of life in their buildings, these conditions were unacceptable. This inattentiveness to seasonal maintenance was also experienced in the winter months, with little to no attention paid to plowing sidewalks or parking lots, leaving residents to face icy entranceways and difficulty getting in and out of the property. As Jane explained:

*And in the winter, it was horrible. Because the streets weren't—the sidewalks weren't being cleared properly, and we were having to climb over a snowbank just to get onto the street. I complain regularly.*

In the Traynor-Vanier community, multiple residents across the four buildings faced entire winters without functioning heat, relying on the use of portable heaters or the heat generated from their ovens. This issue was exacerbated by cracks in walls and ceilings as well as outdated windows. On top of this, hot water access was sporadic and unreliable. The combination of these issues impacted tenants' physical and mental health, and presented a financial burden.

Residential health has also been disregarded throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, as residents noted a plethora of unsafe practices surrounding maintenance or a lack thereof. As Jane further explained her experience:

*It's like I live in a slum. The floors are disgusting. Nothing gets cleaned regularly. I mean, we're a prime breeding ground for COVID. And I can't get anybody to listen.*

While participants have made clear that these buildings lack routine cleaning, the nature of the pandemic has made common areas, like laundry rooms, dangerous for at-risk individuals. As COVID-19 lockdowns have forced everyone to spend prolonged periods in their homes, it is

concerning that management is accused of not taken preventative measures to keep residents safe.

Beyond the lack of cleanliness, residents also noted maintenance workers not following COVID-19 protocols:

*So we're under renovation during a lockdown. And none of the renovators were wearing masks.*

Without any enforcement of safety protocols, residents are left feeling unsafe entering or exiting their units.

While renovations are traditionally seen as positive in older buildings in need of upgrading, participants cited a number of negative experiences associated with renovations. In addition to unsafe practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, Jane also explained that damage during the renovation of empty units resulted in the closure of their laundry room and the disabling of their fire system for an entire week.

*So then we also had an issue with the renovators. The renovators renovated two units (they're doing about five at one time); two of the units caused leaks below. So one into an apartment, but the other one into the laundry room, which closed down our laundry room, but also set off our fire systems. So we didn't have fire systems for a week.*

Due to the pandemic, tenants were also unsure how to submit maintenance requests. While a common issue for many inner suburban residents prior to the pandemic (which we will explore further shortly), this confusion led some tenants to undertake their own repairs. Jocelyn, an individual living in a small apartment building explained her desperation.

*I do have a problem with a leak in my ceiling, and I watched a YouTube [video] and fixed my own ceiling because I don't know how to put in a request right now; it's not possible for anybody to come fix my house. So I think there's a little bit of sometimes just like things are much slower, it's much more difficult to deal with and I have less options altogether.*

Many residents are not equipped with the knowledge or tools to make a larger repair to their unit, such as fixing a leaky pipe, which could be impacting other units. However, they are left with no other option when management is unreachable, and unwilling to lay out clear COVID-19 protocols.

Overall, every participant shared several instances of their management company failing to meet basic maintenance needs. This has a detrimental impact on the quality of life for residents, poses an unnecessary financial burden, and, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, is risking lives. These experiences, moreover, highlight the ways in which inner suburban communities are exhibiting displacement differently than their core counterparts. With less pressure from rapid gentrification, slow and tactical approaches are pushing tenants out.

### **Safety Issues**

Beyond the health concerns associated with infestation, uncontrolled temperatures, and poor COVID-19 protocols, inner suburban residents have raised serious concerns about physical safety in their buildings and surrounding neighbourhood. These issues stem from, or are exacerbated by, poor building management. Participants reported no proactive security or intervention, which has allowed criminal activity to occur within their buildings. Many of the properties lack a functioning surveillance system and proper lighting in high crime areas (like garages and hallways), and have broken locks on external building doors. Residents told us about a variety of crimes occurring in and around their buildings, which ranged from petty theft and keying of cars, to extreme cases of physical assault.

In one case documented by the SDCWR in the Traynor-Vanier community, a tenant contacted building management regarding physical assault and the theft of their vehicle in the underground parking garage. After seeking medical treatment for a fractured rib, the individual received an empty apology from management, which noted that cameras might be in the budget for the following year and that they would remind residents not to let strangers in. Change is positioned as a ‘future potential,’ but blame is turned to residents themselves for potentially letting strangers into the building. To make matters worse, the victim of the crime was a member of a tenant association, whose members had faced continued harassment for their advocacy from

residents, criminal individuals who frequented the building, and property management. This speaks to an overarching issue that further marginalizes tenant organizations.

The evasion of responsibility by property management was echoed in Jane's building through a number of issues surrounding safety and the maintenance of safety features. As she explains:

*And then the fact that nobody is responding, you know? I did once get a response and it was, 'Well, we can't control who you people let in the building.' So that's kind of where that is.*

With continued inaction from property management, tenants have noticed that homeless individuals have begun entering the buildings and sleeping in common areas. Jane expressed her feelings on this issue:

*It's caused me some stress. We also have some security issues that I've been trying to get them to deal with, and nobody is responding. I know for a fact people are yanking open our door if they don't need a key. And we've been finding people in the laundry room late at night who are looking for a place to sleep.*

To make matters worse, Jane and other tenants in her building have had to prevent break-ins on several occasions, putting themselves in danger.

*And because I live right beside the door, I hear it every time it happens. So why should I have to go out there and put myself in jeopardy? The only reason we chased him down is because we were in the hallway when it happened, right? And there's only so many ways you can go in the building.*

Just as maintenance interventions have been minimal and have had short-term success, very few changes have been made to address ongoing safety issues in many of these inner suburban buildings.

This has resulted in damage to property and stolen goods, as Angela, an individual living in a building with unknown ownership, explained:

*Well, we just now got a security door. For three years we didn't have a security door, so we had a problem with, unfortunately, the homeless sleeping in the basement. I have an e-bike and it's been dismantled and the charger stolen, at least five chargers over the last five years which are over \$100 for me to replace.*

While changes like an added security door are a strong start, they come after years of damage and distress for residents who have been left feeling unsafe in their own homes. Similarly to maintenance concerns, interviewees spoke of the necessity of a 'do it yourself' attitude as management's unwillingness to make changes leaves residents in a precarious position: accept unsafe conditions, move out, or seek out support elsewhere.

### **Lack of Communication**

The abundance of maintenance and safety issues experienced by tenants are further exacerbated by property managements' inability to provide clear and consistent communication with residents. Interviewees noted confusing reporting processes, management providing misinformation regarding services, and in extreme cases a lack of communication entirely.

Tenants expressed uncertainty around submitting maintenance requests, paying rent, or reporting crime. While tenants recall speaking with management about a particular issue, little follow-up is provided. Management might seem receptive at the time of the verbal exchange, but when tenants followed up, management would claim that a formal written submission was necessary for any work to be done. Clear and reliable steps for processing work orders are missing in most cases. To further complicate this, many inner suburban buildings have high property management turnover, resulting in changes to staff and processes each time a new management corporation takes ownership. Jane explains her experience:

*I've been waiting for a fix in my bathroom shower wall since January. And they don't respond to any of my e-mails about it. But the old landlords did the same thing. So I can't just hold them solely responsible. It was on the list for the old landlords to do and they*

*were supposed to do it last fall, like August, September, October. Because the sale was supposed to take effect in October. Then it didn't. They came through in November, asked us to sign a sheet signing off on the unit. It said everything was in good repair, and I said no. So I still have this hole in the bathroom shower wall. So the owner actually went in and pushed on the wall and made it worse. He said I'm going to put it on the list, he says.*

From the perspective of the tenants we interviewed, property management appears to take advantage of the constant changing of hands within corporate and financial subsidiaries, often resulting in poor communication with tenants. As Jane explains further, this leaves residents frustrated:

*Part of the other issue is we've been going through huge changes with the property management, and so nothing is getting done. Nothing is getting accomplished. No responses are happening. So even when I was e-mailing and calling, nobody was responding to me from the building.*

New management appears just as averse to making necessary repairs as previous ownership, as tenants noticed them taking advantage of the shift to avoid tenants and their growing maintenance, health, and safety needs.

Constant ownership changes also mean that residents are unable to build relationships with management and staff on site. This is attributed to the rapid turnover of staff, low pay, heavy workload, and absence of professional training or communication policies, resulting in miscommunication or no communication. As Jocelyn explains her experience with a *family-owned* property management firm:

*I've never met the person and I've not met the superintendent; they've never introduced themselves. We just get a flurry of notices taped to our doors. So the atmosphere has definitely changed, compared to the old ownership group.*

From the perspective of tenants, interpersonal relationships do not appear to be prioritized, which is especially difficult for tenants who had a positive relationship with previous management (more common for buildings that were owned by a family or smaller management company). They note stark changes in the way new management companies engage with residents. Jane fondly described the previous owners:

*They [past owners] were lovely. They worked with everybody. We have a few people with mental health issues in the building and our superintendent happened to be a very caring fellow. He would pay attention to what was happening, or he would hear stories from others in the building saying, you know, I saw so and so. We had one guy that was completely having a breakdown at one point, and we were able to get a personal emergency check by the police and he was able to get the family involved.*

Participants also noted that a change in property management often meant the removal of a live-in superintendent, altering the way they filed maintenance requests and the overall accessibility of staff. Jocelyn's building, which was sold from a private owner to a larger property management firm explained the lack of clarity associated with the transition of ownership.

*So I haven't really put in a maintenance request because it takes a long time for the people to get here. Again, before, my super was down the hall. I could just go, 'Hey, can you come down the hall and fix this?' But now I have to put in a request, I have to wait for them to get back to me, and things can change week to week.*

Further issues are created when management implements new maintenance and rent payment systems requiring tenants to submit everything electronically. Some residents are not computer literate, or do not have internet or computer access. In the Traynor-Vanier community, many residents expressed frustration when the online system was introduced by property management at the time, leading the community to organize a computer literacy support network in their common room. Organized by the tenants themselves and the SDCWR, this service was not large enough to aid the entire building.

A growing source of conflict is superintendents/landlords not providing 24-hour notices before entering units to complete work. While there are some valid reasons for a landlord to enter one's apartment (i.e., for emergency repairs or fire), participants explained that staff would frequently enter their units illegally, without permission (Legal Line, 2021). Sam, living in an apartment in a two-building complex at the time explained her experience:

*There was a repair that needed to be done to the door of the refrigerator. And I got five-minute notice that somebody was coming out to change the refrigerator. They showed up with a refrigerator that was an absolute piece of junk, it was rusted, and I refused to let them do it because all it needed was the door to be hung correctly. And they're going, 'Oh well, we got told that it was shot and they needed another one.' And I said, 'Oh, so you want to replace a fairly new refrigerator with an old piece of rusted out junk? No, you're not.' And I have five minutes to do this. I said, 'This isn't going to fly. You have to give me 24 hours' notice.'*

Sam went on to share that this was not an isolated experience:

*Actually, more than one time somebody has been in my apartment. And I had no notice whatsoever. There was not any emergency that had happened that they would have had to come in without notice, and so that was another communication that they needed to be very clear that they were entering my apartment and it better be 24 hours, it cannot be 23. I would not put up with it.*

Participants spoke of management staff often providing confusing or incorrect information to residents, especially surrounding maintenance timelines. Purposeful or not, this has created issues for residents who make preparations for workers to enter their units, only to have no one show up. On the other side, residents have workers show up unexpectedly and face reprimands from management for not being prepared.

An example of this misinformation was experienced in Traynor-Vanier. Residents would receive a pest treatment date, would prepare their units (i.e., clear out shelves, drawers, etc.), and even make arrangements for pets and themselves to be away, only to have no one show up. On

the other hand, when pest control staff showed up unannounced, residents would not be prepared, and would face harassment and fines from management. As multiple buildings in the Traynor-Vanier community were facing rampant infestation, many residents expressed confusion and anger to management and the SDCWR who were active in the community at the time, regarding the poorly organized pest control work. Rather than addressing the residents directly, or presenting and outlining a clear plan, staff would instead rely on tenant association members to interpret and relay information, thus downloading management and tenant relations responsibilities to unpaid volunteers.

Confusing information surrounding pest treatment has been a trend for inner suburban buildings, and has created stress and anxiety for residents who are expected to make preparations with minimal notice. As Jane explained:

*I think that's what they're [property management] doing. I think they're bombarding us, there is a form of harassment. Particularly not giving proper notice time, not clearly communicating. So, around the bedbug issues, I was getting notices that said, bedbug inspection/treatment. So they wouldn't tell me which I was having. I was just expected to be prepared. And I got three or four of those notices. And two of them I said I wasn't going to be available. Yeah. So I bitched enough at the super that when I got this last notice it actually said, bedbug inspection. But that took months. I mean, it's been a year that I've been dealing with this issue. Full year.*

This situation again draws attention to the question of intent. Is this an issue of poor management practices, or is this a tactical approach to harass residents into moving out? We draw attention once again to the covert approaches that property management appears to take to save money or to motivate residents to leave.

### **Landlord Harassment**

The final aspect of lived experience participants highlighted is outright harassment from property management and, to a lesser extent, other residents. Rooted in the aforementioned issues, landlord harassment is an ongoing concern for residents. The 'source' of the harassment, however, varies dramatically. In some cases this harassment stems from discrimination, as

participants discussed racism and prejudice from staff towards residents. Similarly, participants noted that staff often target senior residents, holding them to a standard that is not required of younger residents.

Harassment is also used as a control tactic. Tenants and community connectors shared multiple accounts in which they were threatened or intimidated by their landlord or property manager. While poor personal relationships with staff were common, these experiences left residents feeling unsafe in their homes and under psychological and emotional duress. Through harassment and intimidation, residents expressed having to take on an ‘it could be worse’ outlook in which they were forced to believe that any attempt to bring about change could result in either their eviction or a worsening of the conflicts and their overall well-being.

The treatment the tenant association received is a powerful example. In Traynor-Vanier, members faced ongoing harassment from building staff. In drawing attention to poor practices, members faced harassment from building staff who did not want them participating in stakeholder meetings, and from other residents who were made to feel that the association’s efforts would only create backlash for everyone. Tenants noted that management had asked renters outright to ‘tell’ on others if they attempted to engage in advocacy.

Participants also discussed staff treating maintenance as a privilege, not a right, harassing tenants who vocalized concern about the quality of service. Jane recounted an incident her neighbour described:

*One day she [referring to another resident] saw a cleaner in the hallway and she asked the cleaner to make sure he got the tape off the window. Because there was all this tape on the window. Because she’s a neat freak. And the property manager heard her from down the hallway and came out in the hallway and promptly yelled at her, saying, ‘You don’t tell my son what to do. You’re just a tenant here, and if you don’t keep your mouth shut—I’m going to make sure you get evicted, or you’re going to be gone.’*

While harassment has caused some to feel unsafe voicing their concern, others have taken more confrontational or controversial strategies such as refusing to pay rent. From Jane’s perspective, a basic standard of living is not being upheld by her property management and until that standard is met they will not continue to pay.

*So, harassment—we could go for improper noticing, giving of notice. I just guess I'm feeling defeated even before it happens. That was where I was at. And to be honest, I don't care anymore. I've stopped paying rent. Why should I pay rent to live in a construction zone? And if they don't want to have a conversation with me about the noise and health regulations and stuff, because I've e-mailed them, and said, 'Look, this is not okay.' So what are they going to do? Evict me? Go for it. That's where I'm at now. They've made my life hell for over a year. And now, I'm just done. I'll save my money, I'll get an apartment where I'm moving.*

While some would argue that evicting Jane would be justified, we would argue that this could be considered a form of displacement as slow violence against Jane, alongside terrible living conditions pushed her to the absolute breaking point. While she acknowledges that eviction is very probable as a result of her actions, she is taking a stand against the injustice that she faced. However, the Eviction Prevention WR team stresses the importance of paying rent even in situations like Jane's. As they explain:

*Many people mistakenly believe that when their landlords aren't doing maintenance that they should withhold the rent. No! Always pay your rent. Because when you don't that's ammunition for them to get you out.*

Participants also discussed seniors being targeted by harassment strategies due to their age and income. Jane speaks of the emotional impact this has had on seniors in her building. While some have called this building home for upwards of twenty years, and would want to stay, the current environment is motivating them to consider leaving. However, unaffordability in the region has made this difficult.

*If you've got the resources to do that, great. A lot of people don't. We have two seniors that are looking and they're just floored at how much rent is. Because they've been here a long time. So they're paying about \$1,000 for a two-bedroom. And if they want to get*

*another two-bedroom and they're looking at \$1,600 to \$1,800. Yeah. Expensive. So they're floored, like, they don't even know what to do.*

Jane also recalls a senior tenant being yelled at by the superintendent of the building for a leak in the sink; the situation then escalated. This wasn't the first time Jane had seen this senior tenant being harassed by the landlord. On another occasion, a spat with the superintendent led to the superintendent recording her, claiming she needed a wellness check:

*The property manager above the super actually videotaped this seventy-three-year-old woman, put her on camera on her phone, making comments about how they should 'do a wellness check to make sure she's okay, and maybe they need to call the police.' I mean, what's that? You know, all because [she] was angry, the woman was angry and she was voicing that to the manager.*

On still another occasion, the same senior tenant was threatened with eviction when her cat was spotted in the hallway.

*They realized that she was leaving her door open and sometimes her cat went into the hall. So they actually came to her door and told her if she doesn't learn to keep her door closed, she will receive an eviction notice.*

A different senior tenant in the same building faced a similar threat:

*He does take the cat out in the hall, but he walks through the hallways with his cat. He's got health issues. He doesn't leave the building very often. So they sent him a notice telling him that he has to keep the door closed, and if they find pee on the floor upstairs anymore, he will be getting an eviction notice. They will start the process. And this is all over not having a conversation with him. So that's been the big change for us. We're not used to not being able to have a conversation.*

Without communication training for staff and mediation in place, this individual has been unable to speak with management about his situation, and instead has to live in fear that the next notice will be an eviction. However, it seems that evictions may be inevitable.

*I'm hearing from people that the big thing that everybody is talking about is the rent increase. All the landlords are applying for the [over] above. A lot of us just got rent increases in the new year. So we are expecting for the next one that they're going to put in for an above average increase. Because they've renovated a couple units. Because they can only renovate them as they become empty, if they're allowed to do it. And they've done five units. So I don't know if that justifies them getting it. I mean, there's a few of us that are willing to go and fight it at LTB. Because, I mean, if anything, our living situation has not improved at all. If anything, it's decreased just from the stress of dealing with the nastiness that comes from the other side.*

Unfortunately, many tenants do not have the capacity to take their fight to the Landlord and Tenant Board (LTB). Some tenants are unable to access the online hearings that were introduced during the pandemic, some lack capacity to keep documentation and prepare for the hearings or do not understand the role of the duty counsel, and others cannot access legal services for support. Peer psychological support does not exist for low-income tenants going through the complex process at the Landlord and Tenant Board.

The Eviction Prevention WR team described how this issue is further complicated by the level of harassment occurring. Tenants are expressing real concerns that their situations are beyond a tenant-landlord disagreement and have evolved into criminal harassment.

*I've heard the term criminal harassment coming from tenants. And I've heard it from one police officer in particular, but there's other things outside of criminal harassment in a criminal context that perhaps maybe landlords should be held to.... maybe a public mischief, perhaps? Because these tenants are stuck between systems.*

Stuck between two systems, tenants are often failed by both.

## **5. Access to Housing as a Human Right, and Lack of Effective Enforcement**

As living conditions continue to deteriorate in our participants' buildings, tenants are forced to reach out to enforcement services (police, bylaw, or fire services, among others) in the hopes that they will intervene and hold property management accountable. For the most part this has had nominal impact and has only resulted in more frustration and burnout for tenants. Participants noted that services were unable to help for a variety of reasons, the most common being red tape surrounding an issue and hesitancy to hold management responsible.

In the case of Traynor-Vanier and through the support of the SDCWR, the community was able to form a tenant association. They worked to create a partnership with enforcement agencies, and were working together intensely for two years creating protocols, relying on the information shared by the tenants and the SDCWR. While multiple meetings between stakeholders occurred during the SDCWR's involvement in the community, bringing together representatives from police, fire, bylaw enforcement, and management, participation was sporadic and agreed-upon changes were not properly supported. When management shifted in 2015, what started as a more responsive and seemingly more open-to-change property management quickly became unresponsive. Despite management's inaction, some milestone achievements were met, such as the clean-up of buildings' entrances and some decaying infrastructure, the implementation of social activities like neighbourhood picnics, a children's soccer league, and computer literacy lessons. Like many interventions in core and inner suburban communities, however, these successes were short-lived, and overshadowed by larger unaddressed issues. Without stronger financial support, capital investments, and a commitment to change of protocols and communication, the tenant association and the SDCWR could only do so much.

Similar to the experience with property management, tenants and the Eviction Prevention WR team noted that communication issues and unclear processes have been huge barriers for intervention. In most situations, residents are required to reach out to enforcement services directly to report issues. For example, bylaw enforcement requires residents to report issues to them directly, but only after they have been reported to property management and residents have

given them the appropriate time to respond (with the exception of ‘emergencies’). Further, there are some subjective opinions on what is considered a ‘priority:’ tenants explained that bylaw enforcement did not consider addressing bedbugs as urgent. At one point, tenants uncovered that management had signed forms with bylaw indicating the completion of extermination in the entrance and hallways. Tenants and the pest control company were able to prove that this was not the case. However, management did not face any repercussions for filing this false claim.

Tenants also reported reaching out to community and social services for aid, only to experience little to no response; no agency has a mandate to support tenants in long-term problem resolution with property managements and landlords. As for the municipal enforcement services, the lack of timely intervention and consistent follow-through on initial inspections, (with the exception of fire safety) made Traynor-Vanier residents hesitant to seek support.

This was also experienced by tenants who reached out for aid or action in relation to criminal activities, only for no action to be taken. A representative from the tenant association reached out via email to a police officer who had been in attendance at stakeholder meetings to explain the extent of their experiences in the building. In another instance the tenants had submitted written witness statements supported by SDCWR. The correspondence highlighted the ongoing drug issues in the community, noting the recent death of a resident from a drug overdose. They also detailed the burden of attempting to create change and how little support residents have received, admitting that living in this community has been terrifying. No follow-up was given, however, and no intervention was made.

This sentiment was shared by residents in other inner suburban buildings. Jane summarized their frustration:

*But to me that’s one of the big changes. I used to think that the City, at least bylaws, are there to help me. I don’t feel that way any longer, especially when it comes to property standards, because I don’t have any power, because I don’t have any money. If I owned this property, I would have some power at the City.*

Without the privilege of property ownership, and the failure of enforcement services to require property management to make necessary changes, tenants are left feeling powerless. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Jane explained their interaction with the regional government,

as they expressed concerns about a number of issues within their building, including individuals working in the building not wearing masks and renovations that they believed to be below code.

*... and when I contacted the region, they said, 'We gather the law, but if they have an exemption [to wearing a mask], we can't force them.' Well, first off, if they have an exemption, they shouldn't be doing renovation work.*

The overarching experience of resident self-advocacy has been one of exhaustion and burnout, leaving residents unsupported and left to cope alone. Similar to their experiences with their property management, small periodical changes have occurred, but any lasting fundamental change has not. As we will discuss through our recommendations, there are opportunities for bylaw enforcement to more proactively support the experiences of tenants in order to ensure that their rights are upheld. Speaking to the larger issue of affordability in inner suburban neighbourhoods, Jane explained their frustration towards the city, who she feels is not prioritizing the needs of individuals living in these neighbourhoods.

*I just think that the City is ignoring a big problem when it comes to these older buildings, and I don't know if there's anything we can do about it. The affordable housing thing didn't cover any of that, so it's not really covered in any of that. I've tried to have conversations all the way up the ladder in Property Standards, and I'm not getting anywhere.*

What feels like an inactive approach taken by enforcement services and municipal and regional governments has left tenants feeling voiceless as conditions continue to deteriorate. A lack of response from services has been a strong motivator for residents to stop reporting issues, but it is important to acknowledge that other barriers exist in the current complaint-based enforcement systems. In Traynor-Vanier, residents cited a lack of knowledge on how and who to report to, and fear that they could face backlash from other residents if, for example, they called the police to report a crime. As in many similar buildings, apartments are rented to foreign students, low-income individuals on social assistance or living with disabilities, immigrants and refugees, racialized and single-parent families—undoubtedly the most marginalized who face

many barriers and lack the capacity to access their rights. While these are all concerns that the Eviction Prevention WR team are attempting to address, they stressed the ongoing need for more education, enforcement, access to legal counsel and system reform to get to the root of these issues.

### **Physical Displacement**

The combination of inadequate living conditions and unacceptable interactions with management and enforcement services have pressured some individuals who have means to move out. While these individuals may ‘decide’ to move, as we have illustrated, they are pushed to this decision through a number of tactics undertaken by management corporations. Specifically, many of the conditions we outlined in the previous section push residents to breaking points, where they feel like they have no choice but to leave. These actions result in physical and social displacement, forcing residents out of their homes, and severing connections with the places and people they grew attached to; often leaving family and friends in abandoned neighbourhoods (Atkinson, 2004).

In some cases residents feel that they are forced to leave due to the lack of maintenance, harassment, and the decrease in the quality of services provided by property management. As highlighted in the previous section, property management has failed to maintain an acceptable standard of living, putting immense stress on residents and in turn facilitating displacement. This has been further exacerbated by inaction from enforcement services, leading to feelings of hopelessness and despair. The Eviction Prevention WR team referred to this as a form of “forced eviction” explaining:

*I call it a forced eviction. When landlords harass people to the point where they feel so unsafe, that they feel like they have no other option but to leave.*

In other cases, residents are left with no option. This can occur through gradual rent increases above provincial guidelines, or imposing of fees and payments that individuals or families cannot afford (see Newman and Wyly, 2006). It can occur unexpectedly through evictions set off by processes like misplaced rent payments or communication breakdowns, or due to the lack of social supports for tenants who live with mental health challenges or addiction.

This can also be facilitated through processes like renovictions, in which residents are forced to leave for an extended period of time so management can renovate their units (Crosby, 2020). Under the 2006 Residential Tenancies Act, renters are granted the *right of first return* to move back to their units without a rent increase once the renovations are completed. However, as renovations can take months or years, many find residence elsewhere and are unlikely to return (Crosby, 2020). This *right of first return* is also rarely actively enforced (although in other jurisdictions in Canada, strict bylaw enforcement have meant that renovictions have almost entirely disappeared). Through this process, landlords and property management companies are able to market these units at much higher rents to new tenants.

To make matters worse, changing affordability in the Region of Waterloo means that residents who are physically displaced from inner suburban communities are often forced out of the Region entirely. There are many reasons why housing has become increasingly expensive (Doucet, 2021b), though it should be noted that new supply coming online is rarely affordable to those on low-incomes, and the housing stock that is, is increasingly subject to renovictions (Doucet, 2021a). Similar to the experience of core residents, once inner suburban residents are forced out it is nearly impossible to find a unit in a similar price range (CBC, 2021). This point was stressed by the Eviction Prevention WR team as they explained:

*And I hope that I can drive the point home that this is the financialization of housing, and it is damaging and it's all for profit. When the landlords kick you out or make you feel so unsafe that you have to leave they can drive up the cost of rent to that particular unit, and to find housing anymore- again that is safe and accessible and affordable in this region, is near impossible.*

While property management is motivating physical displacement, displacement is first encouraged through gentrification occurring in surrounding neighbourhoods.

Research performed in Kitchener and Waterloo's core areas by the SDCWR and Dr. Brian Doucet (Diwan et al., 2021) found that the ION Light Rail Transit (LRT) was a major source of change and disruption for communities and residents (see also Ellis-Young and Doucet, 2021; Doucet, 2021). 'Upgrading' along the line has seen a rapid evolution of gentrification in bordering communities as residential and commercial spaces have taken

advantage of the change in accessibility. The LRT also brought change to inner suburban communities as participants pointed to the introduction of the LRT and its impact on surrounding property values. As Matt stated:

*The building has just been flipped. So I think it was January or February of this past year, so about six months ago. The owners which had the building for a long time, at least a decade, 12, maybe 15 years, they flipped it over to this new ownership. And because I guess the LRT is in town and all the property values are going up, so that's really the prime motivator of why the LRT was installed, not because of transportation device, but because it's an investment vehicle.*

## **Evictions**

The primary mechanism to facilitate physical displacement in inner suburban buildings is eviction. While some evictions may be justified (such as unpaid rent, destruction of property, or creating an unsafe environment for other residents), they are also motivated by a desire to upgrade units (Chum, 2015), and can result in the disparaging of low-income, disabled, racialized, Indigenous, or non-English-speaking individuals (Mah, 2021). Across the interviews and field notes, tenants and community connectors expressed concerns surrounding the increasing number of evictions they observed, especially for those who were not able to access social or health services. While evictions or the threat of eviction occurred for a variety of reasons, our interviews found that the most common forms were (1) non-compliance evictions, which occur when tenants are unwilling or unable to meet standards set by property management; (2) non-payment evictions, which occur or are threatened when residents do not pay rent or are late paying their rent; and (3) renovictions, in which drawn out a renovations that require tenants to move out for extended periods of time result in said tenant never returning. These units are then rented out to new residents for higher cost.

### *Non-Compliance Evictions*

In the Traynor-Vanier community, as elsewhere, tenants were evicted if they refused to cooperate with infestation treatment. However, the SDCWR encountered instances where

residents suffered from mental health issues and had a tendency towards hoarding. Rather than provide support for these individuals and connect them to social and health services, management resorted to evictions. The statement heard most often is: ‘We are not social services, we have a business to run.’

While the SDCWR prepared information packages for each new property management staff during the four years on site to be shared with the tenants, they were never distributed, not even as welcome packages to incoming renters upon signing of the lease. As noted in our discussion of poor communication practices, management instead relied on tenant association members to relay confusing information to residents on important matters, further complicating the process.

### *Non-Payment Evictions*

Even in the face of the pandemic, with the moratorium on evictions and rent increases, management took advantage of delays in rent payment or misplaced payments, even from residents who had previously never missed a payment, to issue a notice of eviction. As Jane, noted:

*So my rent got paid a little late because the CERB thing was delayed a little bit because of the turnover in the year and they sent me an eviction notice but it's just that first phase one. But they do it every time now and I'm like, fine, you guys want to waste your time and energy, go right ahead. But had they communicated with their superintendent they would've known my rent was paid the week before, right.*

Similarly, in Sam's building, the new owner sent out N4 notices (notice to end tenancy due to unpaid rent) to all tenants in the building regardless of their rent status. As she explained:

*When the new owner took over the first month I never paid my rent late, my payment was on time. I got an [N4] notice and they flogged it off as it was the wrong tenant, but I had already known that every single tenant in the building got an [N4] notice.*

Despite the pandemic, data from the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) tells us that rents are still increasing. New tenants are paying significantly higher rents and landlords are incentivized to push existing renters out, and encourage higher income renters to move in (Tranjan & Aldridge, 2021). Jane spoke about this as new management was targeting legacy tenants:

*One of them being that the old owners, who were quite involved, have left. And then we got new owners that just didn't seem to care. And they brought in a property management team that was just nasty. They threatened like five or six of our tenants with eviction, before February. Like before the end of February.*

Rapport means nothing to new management, as the tenants we spoke with feel they are all treated with the same level of hostility towards rent payment.

### ***Renovictions***

As found when looking at core urban neighbourhoods within Kitchener and Waterloo (Diwan et al. 2021), some low-income tenants in the inner suburbs also face being renovicted, which is when landlords evict sitting tenants in order to renovate units and rent them out at higher rates to new tenants (Pull, 2020). Sam, and others in her building were renovicted shortly after it was sold to a new, financialized landlord. As she explains:

*When they sold the apartment that I was at, the [new] owners came in and did renovation on everyone. I think I'm the last holdout on trying to get back in because the average rent for one bedroom is close to double what I'm paying and I was struggling to pay what I was paying.*

As Sam explained further, new management began to harass tenants—refusing repairs, entering apartments without 24-hour notices, and replacing broken appliances with old ones, alongside a number of other cost-saving tactics noted in the previous section—in the hopes that residents would leave on their own. They then announced a plan for renovations to the building, including updating plumbing, electrical, and the exterior, providing an uncertain timeline of

between eight and eighteen months. This unfixed timeline makes it nearly impossible for tenants to return, an issue real estate companies are capitalizing on:

*They manage to bully people to get out. And the initial thing said that they had to update the plumbing and the electrical and they were going to redo the exterior. And then I said, 'Well, how long do I need to be out of the apartment, so I could make plans?' And they said, 'Between 8 and 18 months.' Well, even during the pandemic, because of when we were leaving, it wouldn't have taken that long to do it. And much less 18 months.*

While Sam was already struggling to afford her rent, she raised concerns about not being able to get back into the building if it was converted from bachelor apartments into two-bedroom units. This could mean higher rent than what she was paying before she moved out. While tenants are allotted the right of return, instances like this act as loopholes for property management to further deter previous residents.

*I've been told by neighbors that they're gutting the place, they're turning all of them into two bedrooms, which to me is ridiculous because I think the apartment was like 650 square feet. I don't know what they're going to make two bedrooms out of it unless you just don't have a living room.*

There is concern that tenants will start to associate renovations with renoviction, making them reluctant to seek necessary repairs in their units and leading them to advise other tenants not to take the risk.

### ***Eviction Tactics***

A number of studies clearly show how property management companies use a number of thinly veiled strategies beyond renovictions in order to attempt to push existing tenants out and attract higher income residents after they leave (Crosby, 2020; August and Walks, 2018). Our interviews resonate with these studies, and uncovered that long-term residents, who pay lower rent, are a barrier for potential financial gains—especially as both the pandemic, and the changing affordability of the Region mean that the cost of renting has gone up dramatically in

the last few years, with an approximate 20% annual increase in rental rates (Eppel, 2020). Jocelyn expressed her resentment towards her property management's attempt to push them out, poorly disguised as pandemic support. After receiving a call from an unknown number, a management representative attempted to negotiate.

*He was like, you know, 'I'm just checking in how you're doing during the pandemic,' and I'm like, 'Uh-huh.' He was like, 'Yeah, you know, we just want to help you out during the pandemic, so we're willing to give you two months' rent if you want to go find another place to help you out.' I was just so mad, I was so mad, I can't tell you how much they were trying—because the fact that they would say two months' rent, which is nothing because remember I said I pay very little rent, right? So two months' rent in this town wouldn't pay for a month's rent any other place in this town. Two months' rent is nothing because they already have my two months' rent because I paid first and last month and that they would phrase this as though they were helping me out during the pandemic. I almost puked on the phone and I'm like, my God, these are the worst people.*

While the representative expressed concern for their tenants, it became clear very quickly to Jocelyn that the motive for this call was an attempt to get them to move out through the offer of quick cash. While this may be enticing for some, as the pandemic has furthered financial insecurity, Jocelyn noted that this would simply account for the two months' rent (first and last) they had already paid, and would not be enough to cover current rental costs for a similar unit in the area. As they explained further:

*I remember just kind of being like, enraged. How they phrase—I think it was more of just because they were trying to con me of moving out of my apartment and going nowhere. There's nowhere to go in this town, first of all. But that he would phrase it like he was helping me out during the pandemic, yeah, it's so helpful for you to take almost no money and move during a pandemic, isn't that a helpful thing.*

The Eviction Prevention WR team explained that this practice is common, employed to take advantage of many individuals and families. As one team member stated:

*It's very much about dangling the carrot - dangling, a few thousand dollars in front of financially vulnerable people. I think it's preying on the financial vulnerabilities of people and it's absolutely wrong and it's disgusting and they (landlords and/or management) need to be held accountable. You have a few thousand dollars in your hand to move out but where are you going to move to? You're not going to get \$900 a month for your family in this market anymore, so then they're stuck finding a place to live.*

Less covertly, residents noted rent slowly increasing over time, putting a growing strain on tenants' financial situations. This is especially true for low-income residents who can barely afford their current units. Management attempts to leverage this financial instability by requiring rent payments in advance. As Jane explains:

*And then they ask people for post-dated cheques for January, to be included in your December rent. So we received this last Wednesday, which was the third, so everybody's already paid their rent cheques for December.*

While renovations rarely occur in rented units according to participants, property management renovates units for incoming residents, reflecting those renovations in drastically higher rents for new tenants. Even with a building continues to deteriorate, management is willing to invest money in empty units; this sits in stark contrast to their unwillingness to maintain a basic standard of service and safety for their existing tenants. Renovated or not, participants still believe new, incoming renters are being gouged, as no capital investments or substantial repairs of the aged and neglected infrastructure is being done. Jocelyn explains the units in their building:

*They are very small apartments. They're drafty; they're too hot in the summer or too cold in the winter, they're small, very, very small. There's no windows in the bedroom, the walls are paper-thin, like I hear my neighbour yawning. It's really not worth how much they're asking for these units. I've had friends say to me, you know, 'You live in this great neighbourhood.' I'm like, 'I do live in a great neighbourhood, the neighbourhood is*

*great. My apartment is not worth the cost; I would not in good conscience recommend you live in my building with the rent they're asking for it now.'*

Ultimately, the threat of eviction has become a control tactic.

Evictions are managements' strongest physical displacement tool. As changes to the core and surrounding areas continue to impact the affordability of the Region as a whole, it is likely that management will take advantage of any opportunity to evict residents and market vacated units to incoming higher income individuals.

### **Social Displacement**

Socially, individuals and entire communities are left feeling a different form of being 'pushed out.' Increased unaffordability in the urban core has impacted the inner suburbs, which is now attracting higher income residents. Those legacy tenants who are not physically displaced face marginalization, voicelessness, and unhoming as residential and commercial properties are transforming to meet the needs of incoming residents (Kearns & Mason, 2013). Stemming from gentrification occurring in surrounding core neighbourhoods and from property management's broadly adopted cost-saving tactics, this displacement leaves tenants feeling socially isolated and marginalized as the communities, neighbourhoods, and individual buildings change around them (Davidson, 2008; 2009; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). This is especially true when these experiences are paired with harassment, income insecurity, and feelings of abandonment brought on by the inaction of both property management and enforcement services. When even the services that are meant to unbiasedly provide support fail, it becomes clear to tenants that they have no voice in the communities in which they have lived for decades. This experience is further complicated for cultural communities residing in inner suburban neighbourhoods, as they have to couple larger processes of displacement with existing feelings of isolation and disregard from the greater community.

These changes can also mean that the neighbourhoods they live in no longer cater to their lifestyle, and while not physically forced out of their units yet, social displacement creates immense disassociation. Tenants expressed feelings of discrimination in their own homes, and have been left behind by friends and family who have moved on, or who were physically

displaced. The social fabric they built their lives around, and the social networks they relied on, have been dismantled. This is particularly difficult for the most vulnerable and those in poor physical and mental health.

Through the SDCWR's prolonged work with the Traynor-Vanier community, they have documented growing social displacement despite efforts from residents and social services to maintain a sense of community. Through neighbourhood BBQs and social events and the open invitation to join the tenant association, many residents worked hard to bring the neighbourhood together. However, continued issues with property management, and neglect from enforcement services took a progressive toll. Years of pushing for change only to continuously be met by roadblocks, paired with a lack of support, left residents feeling voiceless and isolated, forced to live in a space that no longer felt like their own.

An example of this is the planning around the LRT line in through Traynor Vanier. While many of the communities along the LRT line were provided with multiple crossings, especially in upper class or gentrifying core areas, the Traynor-Vanier community was excluded, cutting them off from shops they frequented nearby. The tenant association and the SDCWR advocated aggressively for a crossing, as residents, many of who did not drive, would be forced to walk completely around the LRT to reach retail shops, but it was not until months after the LRT was operational, and individuals had begun cutting holes in the fence, that the promise of a pedestrian crossing was made (Grace, 2019).

The crossing became a politicized topic in the 2018 municipal election as councillor John Gazzola responded to the advocacy work, which began five years prior (Howe, 2019) and media attention (see Hicks, 2018) by pushing for the acquisition of land to build an LRT crossing. While the municipal government promised a ground level crossing with a gated arm (Groleau, 2019), the current "temporary" (Grace, 2019) crossing still stands. Notably, the original crossings used by residents before the LRT were considered informal, but had been relied upon by the community for years. There were approximately 18 informal crossings of the hydro corridor that had been made over many decades. This provided direct access from many points within Traynor-Vanier, to the retail and employment opportunities on Fairway Road and beyond. However, as these paths were not part of official city or regional infrastructure networks, they were not incorporated into the new plans for the LRT. As the line was being constructed along the hydro corridor, fences were installed to prevent people from crossing the tracks and these

decades-long informal pathways disappeared. From the perspective of Traynor-Vanier tenants, their mobility and accessibility needs were completely disregarded when these unofficial crossing routes were removed. This experience was a huge blow to community members who were effectively displaced from surrounding areas, and the food stores and gathering spaces they had frequented

Ultimately, the LRT line became a huge source of social isolation for the community as a whole, and what felt like a constant reminder that their needs were not a priority to the city or the Region. After years of fighting for support with little success, many of the tenant association members stepped back from their roles, citing feelings of voicelessness and having been deceived. This, alongside the high turnover of tenants, left original residents with few avenues for change.

Neighbourhood change and the increased cost of living has meant that commercial businesses are also affected, changing the social fabric of inner suburban communities. Jane discussed the closures of mom and pop stores that catered to previous residents' lifestyles, and the impact that it has had:

*And then there were lots of little—like, there was a bakery, and there were other specialty stores that you could go to get things as well. And those are very few and far between now downtown. We have the greengrocer, Legacy Greens, and they try to do local stuff, but if you're on a fixed income, you can't really shop there. But it is a lovely place and it's a great concept.*

Alongside the closure of small stores that have intrinsic value for original tenants, new stores are marketed to incoming higher income residents, leaving original community members unable to afford amenities in their own neighbourhood (Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). This highlights the intensity of social displacement and the toll it can take, emotionally and psychologically. While these residents are maintaining tenancy in their neighbourhoods, they are ostracized from many key social spaces (Fullilove, 2004). Through this, their connection to what made their neighbourhood a home is severed.

Financial insecurity, paired with poor living conditions, means that buildings that were once long-term homes have now become short stops for people moving in and out of the area, contributing further to feelings of unhoming for those holding on. As Jocelyn states:

*The rent I pay, OK, but the rent when somebody new comes in I'm just like, 'no.' They're definitely gouging people in this area for sure... I do see people moving in, like younger people move in, live in this place for like a year and then move out. I've seen that quite a bit. So now at this point, it's the businesses; just like [a few] people that have lived here 20, 30 years, there's me who's lived here 10 years, everybody else has lived here like six months.*

Changes to the community as a whole shift the social fabric. Jane recalls:

*I don't see people that I used to see all the time. We seem to be losing more and more little places, like houses that were rented. Those houses are now being bought up and not being rented anymore.*

The high turnover also means that landlords are able to label potential renters as 'undesirables,' implementing discriminatory practices and turning away individuals who do not meet their criteria (despite going against the Ontario Human Rights Code) especially based on income, race, age, sexual orientation, gender expression, or citizen status. Through this, they are further facilitating the social upgrading of inner suburban communities, in turn contributing to the social displacement with which original residents are already struggling.

### **Social Displacement of Racialized Populations**

While this loss of social network is extremely detrimental to any individual, driving overall feelings of unhoming and deprivation, this issue can become even more complex when we consider the toll it can have on cultural communities.

In Traynor-Vanier this form of social displacement was experienced by ethnic refugee community. Approximately twenty-seven families who were forced to leave their home country landed as refugees in Quebec, and made their way to Traynor-Vanier. Consisting of two distinct

religious belief systems led by two separate spiritual leaders, this group of multigenerational households were attempting to settle in Ontario after facing hardship in Quebec. The differences in language, cultural and religious practices, ways of life acquired from rural areas, and hardship, including poverty and exile, presented many challenges for this group, who were again coming to a new environment and facing new habits and systems. For this community, survival meant staying together. Older generations found comfort in keeping with the old ways, while newer generations attempted to integrate into society.

On top of experiencing maintenance neglect, harassment, and hostility, this community faced additional challenges due to language barriers, and the overall lack of information provided to them by enforcement services and management. Through the SDCWR's involvement they were able to make some progress in addressing these needs. In partnership with Muslim Social Services Kitchener-Waterloo, they were able to deploy an intern who spoke the language, to build a relationship with the community and encourage them to participate in ongoing Traynor-Vanier advocacy, alongside other interpreters. This resulted in two members of the refugee community joining the tenant association to share their experiences and desire for change.

Unsurprisingly, these members cited feelings of disparagement from both their housing situation and the community at large. They validated the concerning strategies that landlords employ to fill the vacancies in low rent buildings with decaying infrastructure and avoid further repairs while collecting rents from those who have limited housing options (August, 2020). Property management had taken advantage of their situation, leaving them, like others in the building, in dire need of maintenance support and unsure how to access it. While interpreters were able to assist in mediation and conflict resolution regarding maintenance or pest control procedures between refugee families and property management staff, this led to staff ignoring requests from the residents themselves and they only responded if SDCWR or the interpreters got involved. This was further exacerbated by the lack of repair staff. Often only one individual maintenance worker was available for four buildings (approximately 240 units). This resulted in very little repair work, alongside unsubstantiated claims that the maintenance issues were caused by the residents themselves. Observing this poor treatment, other members of the community were hesitant to reach out to management, opting to make their own repairs at their own expense.

The ethnic refugee tenants also faced discrimination from other tenants, and were forced to deal with feelings of 'otherness' that promote isolation. Cultural clashes were common,

furthering discrimination from other tenants. While the refugee community may have had each other, these ongoing issues contributed to a different kind of unhoming that left some families considering leaving the area entirely. To make matters worse, as many of the tenants did not drive, the loss of walkability created by the LRT was a huge blow to their ability to get around.

Through the support of the intern and the SDCWR, important strides were made in connecting this community with social services to provide them with a stronger understanding of their rights. Members were encouraged to attend community events and even participate in the tenant association. However, it is important to acknowledge that without the support from Muslim Social Services and the intern they provided, it is unlikely that these strides would have been possible. Social displacement creates strong barriers for cultural communities as they enter into new homes in a community that is already struggling. Across Kitchener there are a number of cultural and ethnic communities facing extreme marginalization, making it difficult for groups like the SDCWR to establish trust, gain insight, or provide target support.

Tenants further discussed instances of landlords and property management actively discriminating and harassing racialized tenants in the hope that they will leave. One Indigenous woman we spoke with described her encounters with her landlord:

*So, he's been bullying me for 10 years. Wow. Anyways, life was great here. Do you know my introduction to this man? He knocked on my door, looked me right in the eye, and said, 'Why do you get low rent?'*

As she explained, she attributed this directly to her Indigenous identity, and these encounters have also led to her landlord avoiding her maintenance requests or making incomplete repairs in her apartment. In one instance, she was asked to stay in a motel for two weeks while repairs were made, and upon her return it was claimed that she was considered 'moved out' since she had been away for so long. Through our interview with the Eviction Prevention WR team, they explained that this was a common experience for racialized or newcomer residents in the Region, who already face marginalization from the system itself. Through ongoing harassment and discrimination from landlords, racialized and newcomer residents become less likely to seek help or speak up. This example, and the experiences of Traynor-Vanier's ethnic refugee community, draw attention to the need for more research on ethnocultural communities.

Social displacement presents itself in many forms, but ultimately leaves original residents feeling isolated and excluded in a space they had once considered home. Demonstrated in the countless examples noted above- landlords are actively promoting social isolation, discrimination, and voicelessness in the hope that residents will give up and leave. Social displacement takes an emotional toll, and while these residents are physically holding on, the lived experience is anything but stable.

## 6. Conclusion

There is a misconception that inner suburban communities are not affected by gentrification and displacement, which in academic and policy circles, primarily focuses on older (i.e. pre-World War II neighbourhoods) core urban areas, though some studies are looking at the inner suburbs (Markley & Sharma, 2016; Rakin & McLean, 2015). Our previous work has documented many patterns of gentrification and displacement in core urban neighbourhoods within Kitchener and Waterloo (Doucet, 2021a; Diwan et al., 2020). However, as this report has found, for low-income tenants, many forms of displacement and disruption are also taking place within the inner suburbs of Kitchener, where gentrification and upgrading are not the dominant processes of neighbourhood change. There are also many interactions with landlords and property managers that can eventually pave the way for upgrading and renovation. Spatial and non-spatial displacement is occurring in older rental properties far from the new condo towers springing up downtown and Uptown. While the new high-end restaurants, amenities and development characteristic of gentrification are not (yet) arriving in large numbers the inner suburbs, low-income residents still face a variety of displacement pressures as landlords and property managers attempt to either squeeze as much profit from their buildings as possible, or work towards repositioning these apartments to cater to more affluent tenants. The strategies and experiences we have assembled and analyzed resonate with other important research on the financialization of rental properties in Canada (August, 2020).

The continued financialization of housing has made low-income inner suburban communities attractive targets for the property and real estate industry looking for a quick financial turnaround, or an opportunity to squeeze as much money as possible from tenants (August, 2020; Fuller, 2021). Evident through our exploration of these communities in Kitchener, REITs and other property management firms are setting an unacceptable standard for rentals, providing deteriorating services and scaling back preventative maintenance, and doing so at a much higher cost to renters. They are cultivating physical and social displacement by harassing tenants and taking advantage of the current conditions in the rental housing market. While the transformation of these communities may not present itself in the same rapid increase of demolition and subsequent development that we see in core areas (Diwan et al., 2021), many of the experiences—health and safety concerns, harassment and forced evictions, and

unreasonable rents for under-maintained buildings—are occurring in both core and inner suburban areas. Further, low-income populations in Waterloo Region are facing the financial impacts of gentrification, often resulting in either an increase in rent, moving further from preferred amenities and communities, or displacement outside of the region entirely (CBC News, 2021; Doucet, 2021a).

Through our research, we uncovered that the practices the tenants are subject to in these buildings are in clear violation of the Ontario Human Rights Code. While many original residents have left, important interventions need to be made both for those who remain and incoming renters. As our interviewees stressed, homeownership, identity, or socioeconomic status should not dictate the standard of living to which you are entitled. With this in mind, we have compiled a list of key interventions for the regional and city governments to address the ongoing issues experienced by inner suburban residents.

Points of intervention:

- 1) Enforce provincial rules around the renovation of rental properties that require landlords to provide three months' rent for tenants and the right of first refusal of their units after renovation- at the same rental prices as pre-renovation. In Ontario, most sitting tenants have rent control and would require a vacant unit for property management to increase rents to market rates. This means for many long-term tenants, there is a gap between what they pay in rent and what the market rate would be for their unit, thereby creating incentives for landlords to evict sitting tenants. Renovictions offer an avenue for property management to serve tenants with no fault evictions. Through our current and previous research (see also Diwan et al., 2021) we have heard of many experiences where tenants are evicted because their unit or building is being renovated. For a number of reasons including length of renovations, changing affordability in the Region or housing security, tenants rarely return. As well, many tenants are not aware of the provincial regulations surrounding the renoviction process outlined above, or are facing pressure or harassment from landlords to leave entirely (Scarborough Mirror, 2022), echoed by the Eviction Prevention WR team. It is therefore essential that tenants are made aware of these rights.

**The Region of Waterloo and the City of Kitchener:** Local governments can play a major role in disseminating this information and information on supports accessible to tenants that encounter infractions from landlords. The Region can consider additional funding to support partner organizations who can ensure the protections are enforced for greater eviction prevention. There are examples of other cities in Canada successfully using this proactive approach to discourage renovictions. New Westminster, British Columbia amended its Business Regulations and Licensing (Rental Units) bylaw in 2019 to fine landlords who evict tenants without notice or do not provide alternative housing while their rental units are being renovated. It further fines landlords who fail to provide the right of first refusal to tenants once the renovations are completed (Boynton, 2020). Landlords can also lose their licences if they do not adhere to these rules. The law was challenged (and upheld) by the B.C. Supreme Court. Since these amendments to the city's bylaw were passed, New Westminster has seen zero renovictions, thereby ensuring tenants have the right to stay put, while also protecting an existing supply of affordable housing (Scarborough Mirror, 2022). We highly recommend that the City of Kitchener, the Region of Waterloo and other jurisdictions in Ontario follow the lead of New Westminster, B.C. and investigate how similar bylaws to protect tenants against renovictions can be implemented in Ontario.

- 2) Many inner suburban residents who are low-income are facing extreme precarity as they attempt to stay in the region. Rapidly changing affordability has meant that more individuals are living beyond their means (CBC News, 2021), and are struggling to maintain their current dwelling. As Diwan et al. (2021) stressed for core areas, in order to address the inequities embedded in housing policy, legislation, and the enforcement of property standards and human rights, residents need to be placed at the centre of decision-making throughout the policymaking process. This can be facilitated through community-led participatory planning which has seen success in other Canadian Cities (Nasca, Changfoot & Hill, 2019).

**Region of Waterloo and the City of Kitchener:** This can begin to be addressed by ensuring marginalized voices and experiences are prioritized in the creation of policy and

interventions, similar to the creation of the Lived Expertise Working Group in a partnership established between the Social Development Centre Waterloo Region and the City of Kitchener. The City of Kitchener's Affordable Housing Strategy has made important inroads in incorporating lived experiences in the formation of their housing policy and this standard should be upheld as we continue to explore other policy interventions.

- 3) Municipal enforcement agencies need to build partnerships with social, health, and community development organizations; these are necessary to ensure that tenants are receiving the support which they require and are aware of their rights and the resources available to them. During the SDCWR's four-year involvement in the Traynor-Vanier neighbourhood, property management was being monitored and tenants had hands-on support to further their advocacy. Due to the lack of funding and resources, this partnership was unable to continue; while there are still many struggles within this community, some progress was made. This includes, (1) changes to the property standards intake and follow-up procedures; (2) creation of information tools for tenants; and (3) sharing of recommendations with all the stakeholders, police services and fire prevention, including social agencies, to create a basis for further collaboration in similar cases of company-wide failures. A major limitation was a lack of funding and staffing of both inspectors and community peer workers.

**Region of Waterloo:** This can be addressed through adequate funding from the regional government and continuous improvements in agency and service collaboration through the Housing Stability System- to support a shared goal of addressing housing insecurity and homelessness (Social Planning, Policy and Program Administration, 2012). Also, expanded partnerships with other community organizations dedicated to tenant support, mediation in residential disputes, and robust eviction prevention and tenant relocation programs.

**City of Kitchener:** The city should also provide adequate funding and support for initiatives dedicated to building and maintaining partnerships that support the wellbeing of tenants. The close collaboration of the city bylaw division with services and organizations working proactively under third-party agreements allows for adequate represent for their clients, ensures timely follow up on landlord obligations and addresses problems in a holistic way.

- 4) Our interviews uncovered many situations in which tenants informed us that their rights were violated, had experienced harassment, and buildings were below code. Our interviews, and the SDCWR's time working with the Traynor-Vanier community, have illustrated that stronger enforcement and accountability is required if change is expected, that enforcement tools have to be used to the fullest, and that officers should be tasked with addressing this widespread and systematic use of illegal coercion and exploitation. Individual complaint-based systems have to be replaced with consistent proactive monitoring of landlord and property management practices in collaboration with well-resourced third-party organizations.

**City of Kitchener:** The implementation of wrap-around collaboration protocols with other enforcement services (including fire, police, property standard) that work with community partners on one building/property as a whole and allow stakeholders to work collaboratively. Thus, they are able to notify each other of issues that need to be addressed and provide proactive community support rather than reacting to individual complaints. Importantly, this alleviates pressure from residents to reach out to each individual service, which in the past has only resulted in confusion for tenants and prolonged inaction from the landlord. This can be further supported through the implementation of a consistent and transparent response process and reliable and timely follow-up from enforcement agencies.

**City of Kitchener and Region of Waterloo:** As proposed by Diwan et al., (2021), local government can build partnerships with landlords and property management firms who are committed to supporting their tenants and upholding adequate, quality and accessible housing as a human right, at the same time prompting education about good practices. The Eviction Prevention WR team also discussed *RentSafeTO: Apartment Buildings standards*, an enforcement program undertaken by the City of Toronto as a strong example for Waterloo Region. This program ensures that building owners (of at least three stories and ten units) are maintaining their buildings as per bylaw property standards. Owners of under maintained buildings are subjected to financial penalties. Through this program, an interactive map has also been implemented allowing the public to access building evaluation results (see City of Toronto,

2022). While tenants are able to report issues to the city they face similar barriers to those we interviewed in the inner suburb in that they must first report issues to their building managers directly. Programs like this also require consistent oversight to be successful.

- 5) Ethnocultural communities have long been targeted by gentrification, experiencing voicelessness and disconnect from the surrounding neighbourhood (Hyra, 2015). However, there is an immense lack of research on this topic.

**Region of Waterloo and the City of Kitchener:** Through this research we also confirmed that marginalized groups such as immigrant and refugee communities are further disparaged through the barriers that make accessing available community services difficult. The SDCWR's work in the Traynor-Vanier community illustrates the importance of funding for multilingual and interpretation services for ethnic, cultural, or spiritual groups who have an understanding of their cultural practices and can provide them with adequate support in landlord-tenant disputes, as well as broader community support. The Eviction Prevention WR team also stressed the need for a change to protocols that allows for advocates to either make reports for individuals of marginalized groups, or provide support throughout the process of attempting to hold landlords accountable.

Cultural displacement necessitates further research in the region. Efforts need to be directed towards building meaningful relationships with diverse communities. Hard to reach marginalized populations are historically the most impacted by this large-scale neighbourhood change (Lee, 2000; Timberlake & Johns-Wolfe, 2017), yet as seen in the Traynor-Vanier community and supported by experiences heard from the Eviction Prevention WR team, they continue to face barriers to voicing their needs and to having those needs met. Funding needs to be directed to the communities themselves as an important first step towards building trust and removing barriers to housing. The Racialized and Indigenous Supports for Equity (RISE) fund within the City of Kitchener and the recent creation of the Equity Diversity and Inclusion Waterloo Region are important steps to ensure self-determination of historically marginalized groups and communities when it comes to achieving their right to housing.

These suggestions come alongside a number of important interventions at the provincial and federal level to support low-income communities, protect renters, and to address the current gentrification and displacement concerns occurring in inner suburban communities (Markley & Sharma, 2016). Unsurprisingly, these are interventions that will benefit both core and inner suburban communities, whose residents, as stressed throughout this report, are facing many of the same outcomes.

**Government of Ontario:** As Diwan et al. (2021) identified, interventions should prioritize strengthening rent controls, especially for vacant units. This helps protect individual tenants from aggressive eviction tactics, and the community at large from the ongoing rapid loss of affordable units and the increasing cost of living for low-income residents.

Ontario's Affordable Housing Task Force released their report in early 2022, consisting of 55 recommendations to address the worsening housing crisis. While this report included some important recommendations to address middle-class affordability, as Doucet (2022) argues it overlooks a number of necessary interventions including: the construction of more affordable housing, the expansion of rent-control policy (see ACTO, 2021) and the inclusion of housing advocates, or individuals with lived experience in the composition of the Task Force itself. Equally important was what was not in the report; there was the omission of affordable housing and it recommended significant cuts to public engagement and democratic processes. As we have stressed for both the Region of Waterloo and the City of Kitchener, policymaking at the provincial level will be moved by constant advocacy from the municipal governments.

Residents are accumulating rent arrears at an alarming pace and support for low-income earners with rent supports is non-existent. The cost of rent is rapidly increasing in the region and there are households that simply do not qualify for existing arrears programs because their incomes are too low to guarantee follow through of potential payment plans (see George & Knight, 2022). Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have seen payment arrears at over \$20,000 per household. Typically, though, rent arrears cases are coming into eviction prevention at approximately \$5,000 per household. With little to no flexibility in repayment plans at the Landlord Tenant Board, households are required to pay their existing monthly rent coupled with a repayment amount of typically \$400 over one to two years. (George & Knight, 2022). The moment there is a default in these repayment plans, the household is evicted without further

notice or another hearing. At the same time, the Landlord and Tenant Board procedures are becoming more exclusionary due to lack of adjudicators, move to online services, obstacles for low-income tenants accessing legal supports, etc. This needs to be addressed by provincial policy that further supports low-income tenant's access supports to maintain housing.

**Federal government:** The Canadian government should also prioritize the integration of lived experience in the creation of policy and intervention, especially through funding provincial and municipal advocacy organizations. They can then provide support to tenants directly instead of funding the National Housing Council that will replicate the research already conducted, while evictions and displacements continue in the aftermath of the pandemic. Stressed by Diwan et al. (2021) they should be funding the creation of new affordable housing units, while also protecting the existing federally funded affordable housing. In January 2022 the government of Canada pledged \$118 million to continue to support their Federal Community Housing initiative, with the goal of extending the number of agreements between housing providers and the federal government to preserve existing affordable housing. This is a significant first step, but does not address the growing need for more affordable housing. Additionally, the Federal government can eliminate the preferential tax treatment provided to Real Estate Investment Trusts due to the detrimental impact that they have on the housing conditions and experiences of low-income tenants in particular.

This report draws important attention to the lived experiences of low-income individuals in inner suburban communities and the necessity for ongoing research into these marginalized spaces, which, in turn, can centre their voices in effective advocacy and policymaking. Residents confirmed ongoing harassment, physical and social displacement and overall a very similar experience to that of the Region's gentrifying urban cores. Ultimately, inner suburban residents believe that they are being failed as those who have managed to stay put continue to face unacceptable living conditions.

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