

# Regent Park: A symbol of Toronto's housing crisis

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Toronto is in the grip of an acute housing crisis, marked by extortionate rents and an unprecedented growth in the waiting lists for affordable public housing. Entire working class and low-income neighbourhoods are being sold off to line the pockets of giant development corporations, even as social housing is being starved of funds. No community is more emblematic of this crisis than Regent Park.

The community, which spans several city blocks to the direct east of the downtown core, was conceived of in the late 1940s as a "transitional" social housing project. Rows of sturdy apartments took the place of the blighted slums that had previously housed poor, mainly European workers and their families. Construction was completed in 1960, but far from fulfilling its mandate of improving the social mobility of its residents, Regent Park has become synonymous in the popular consciousness with systematized poverty and violent crime.

Regent Park is owned and managed by the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC), the second-largest residential landlord in North America. TCHC houses almost 164,000 mostly low-income residents, or 6 percent of the city's entire population. The majority of tenants fall under the rent-geared-to-income (RGI) bracket and are only required to pay one third of their incomes in rent. A great many of them are single parents, new immigrants, people with disabilities and retirees.

By and large, the social ills that plague Regent Park are the result of decades of political reaction and neglect. Responsibility for social housing has been repeatedly devolved to lower levels of government. Until the mid-1990s, social housing was funded by the federal government, but under the Liberal government of Jean Chretien, it was offloaded to the provinces. The Ontario Conservatives under Mike Harris then implemented the *Social Housing Reform Act* of 2000, which passed the burden onto the municipalities without making any additional funding available—and this under conditions where there was a C\$1 billion repair backlog just in Toronto.

The precipitous decline in workers' wages since the late 1970s, combined with the proliferation of part-time, low-wage jobs, has condemned legions of workers to lifelong poverty and a reliance on social housing. Horrid conditions in many housing units—including pest (cockroach, bedbug and rat) infestations, malfunctioning utilities, and collapsed structures—are often left untreated for years due to deep funding cuts.

The municipal government justifies these cuts by pointing to the city's fiscal woes. What it refuses to acknowledge, however, are the generous commercial property tax breaks, grants, and subsidies it has lavished upon big development corporations, thereby greatly eroding city revenues. The term of "progressive" former mayor David Miller, who was backed by the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), was marked by a series of grossly undervalued commercial land assessments, allowing developers to purchase swathes of the city for a pittance and reap unprecedented profits.

Rob Ford, the city's current right-wing mayor, begrudgingly raised

commercial property taxes by a paltry 0.67 percent in this year's municipal budget to provide some political cover for sweeping cuts in public and social services.

Last November, Ford led a push at city hall to sell off 55 of the 619 single-family homes owned by TCHC. It is expected that 68 additional homes will be sold over the next two years. These homes are being portrayed in the corporate media as a fiscal burden, notwithstanding the fact that they generate C\$1.5 million per year in profits.

By December 2012, the waiting list for public housing had reached a staggering 87,486 households—a 69 percent increase since the start of the recession in 2008. Average waiting times are estimated at between 10 and 18 years. The City Council has responded to these alarming numbers by cutting funding for new affordable housing by 50 percent, from C\$49 million to C\$24 million.

The average monthly rent for a two-bedroom apartment is C\$1,149, while the average annual income of those on the waiting list, at C\$16,155, is barely enough to cover basic necessities.

The political establishment's contempt for social housing tenants finds its natural equivalent in the policies of the TCHC bureaucracy. Last month, TCHC president Eugene Jones green-lit C\$150,000 in repairs to a west-end building because residents informed the police of a crime suspect. A snitch line implemented in 2011 encourages tenants to help curb "waste and fraud" by blowing the whistle on unscrupulous neighbours and TCHC employees. These callous schemes place tenants in grave danger of criminal retaliation and force them to compete against each other for basic repairs that by all rights should be guaranteed. Currently, there is a C\$751 million backlog in repairs to TCHC housing stock.

Perhaps the most underhanded scheme is the "Regent Park Revitalization," a development windfall for the Daniels Corporation masquerading as a boon for social housing. The project began in 2005 and is expected to finish in 2020. It involves the replacement of 2,083 original RGI units, the construction of 700 new "affordable" rental units at or below market rates, and the building and sale of 3,000 market-rate units—all with the purported aim of creating an economically viable and safe "mixed-income" community.

What is absent in the widespread media praise for the project is the fact that no new RGI units are to be constructed to house the city's poorest residents—no matter that public housing waiting lists are at record length.

Even the central premise of the artificially blended mixed-income community—that poor residents will benefit from the moral and financial eminence of their more affluent new neighbours—reeks of cynicism and condescension. Moreover, testimony from disaffected tenants and the TCHC's own figures provide a much less dazzling picture.

The "revitalization" of Regent Park has been divided into five phases, the first of which is completed and the second well under way. According to data on the TCHC website, 416 of 820 of Phase One and Two households have been moved into new units since 2005. However, fewer

than half of these have been moved back into Regent Park itself. The others have been shuffled into Regent Park “footprints,” which are new units located outside of the community.

The other half of the displaced households have been scattered across the city for up to eight years, in some cases being lodged in Scarborough, which is almost an hour away by public transit. Although every original Regent Park resident has been guaranteed the “right to return” to one of the new buildings, no independent studies have been conducted to verify the efficacy of this option.

The impact on the area’s social cohesiveness has been colossal. Although Regent Park residents have long protested against the disrepair of their neighbourhoods, they have also built tightly knit communities and support systems that now lie shattered. Tenants report bouts of depression from losing their familiar surroundings. Resources like food banks that they once had access to are now often out of reach.

Phase Three of development is slated for spring 2014. An informational meeting for area residents, attended by reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*, was held by the TCHC in late August. With the room packed to the rafters with concerned residents, representatives of the TCHC glossed over the more contentious issues to highlight largely trivial and well-known information. Heated questions were raised by tenants about why no new RGI units were being constructed, whether the “right to return” was genuine, and if the new social housing units were substandard compared to the market-rate units. Not one of these questions was addressed, which led to loud jeers from the audience.

A campaign is afoot to disorient and divide Regent Park residents. Sham meetings, such as the one held in August, provide a veneer of transparency to a plainly anti-democratic process. Legal papers corresponding to new housing arrangements are needlessly complex, and tenants are regularly given conflicting information and advice. The minority of original residents who have been successfully resettled are maintained as a reserve army of model tenants to pose for the fawning corporate press.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of Regent Park residents and anti-poverty advocates about their experiences with the so-called revitalization.

Melanie is a recently laid-off medical receptionist and a single mother of a young child whose building has been slated for demolition in 2014. She aired her doubts about the benefits of the development project and responded to the influx of affluent new residents into the neighbourhood.

“They’ve moved people as far as Scarborough. They give you options. If you want to move into the new building, they move you out temporarily. I’m told that the hope is that a lot of people who make that temporary move won’t want to pick up again. So it’s one way to push people out.

“This building is really old. My wall exploded about two months after I moved in. We had a heavy rain, and a plumbing pipe was so old and corroded that it just popped. I came home from work and the floor had bubbled up and parts of the wall had fallen out. They [the TCHC] are not fast in doing anything. When mould began to grow in the apartment, I was really upset.... Later on, when other issues came up, they just told me that they weren’t going to do any more repairs at all because the building was going to be demolished in a year or two anyway. The people who are making tons of money just continue on their merry way, and we have mould problems.

“I think the housing crisis is terrible. People have to have a place to live, and Toronto was supposed to be a great city that helped lower-income people, or new immigrants, or people with mental health issues. I feel like the more you take away from that—what are those people going to do? I know there’s a lot of people like me, who can move, but lots of people cannot.

“The discrimination coming from well-off [market-value] residents

doesn’t surprise me. I think those people just don’t want to see it. They don’t want to feel like they’re surrounded by poor people. Just because you have more than the next guy, doesn’t mean you’re necessarily a better person. They’re just concerned with their pocket books.”

Violet, a single mother and community worker in Regent Park, was moved to a new building in the “footprint.” She spoke about the harrowing experience of being uprooted, and the conditions in her new unit where she must remain for the next two years before being resettled.

“We were told that we could move back, but according to some communication from TCHC, we weren’t allowed. We were told that ‘You guys got a brand new building and you people aren’t moving back.’ That didn’t sit well with me.”

“There are still people in the building who want to know when we are moving, and they’re very upset with their units. The units are very nice, they’re brand new, but the windows open probably three inches. I have a six-year old son and my neighbour has chronic cancer, so she smokes marijuana in her house. I’m totally sympathetic to her cause, but at the same time, ventilation is shared. My son is suffering, and he’s asthmatic. We have no balconies. So it’s really difficult.

“Several people have died. I think there have been two or three who were re-housed and are in nursing homes now, and two other elderly people have passed away in the process of being re-housed. I think it’s the being uprooted. I personally know a grandmother whose daughter suffers from addiction issues. She required a three-bedroom, which is completely on the west end, out of her safety network. Now she has to stand in a line to access a food bank. She and I had a conversation about how degrading that was.”

Louise is a retired worker and was almost evicted from the apartment where she had been temporarily settled. She was threatened by the TCHC with eviction on trumped-up charges after raising concerns about a neighbour with a criminal history. She fought the charges, which were promptly dropped for lack of evidence, and was quickly ushered into an apartment of her choice.

“Maurice Brenner, the self-appointed director of human rights at the TCHC, totally railroaded me through the Landlord and Tenant Board. I was told, ‘If you want to save yourself, don’t get a lawyer, we’ll just sign an agreement.’ In other words, I would have signed my life away if I didn’t get a lawyer. And it was all to kick me out for raising a stink and blowing the whistle.

“When people say vote, what do we vote for? We’ve got nothing to work with. The NDP is supposed to be the lesser of the three evils, but they’re just as bad as the Liberals and Conservatives. David Miller sold out Regent Park, and he’s NDP! I’ll say this about the new TCHC CEO, too. Rob Ford hired him, and all he does is make appearances.

“I say I’m a victim of the gentrification of Regent Park, not a revitalization.”

John Clarke, an organizer with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, has been active in grassroots efforts to resist the current development project. He commented on the motive forces of the revitalization process.

“The area covered by Regent Park has been part of a poor, working class community since the 1840s. Today, it’s the focus of a profit-driven process of upscale urban redevelopment. The existence of the largest public housing project in Canada in the middle of this area was a barrier that had to be overcome and the ‘mixed neighbourhood’ venture they undertook was their solution to the problem. A condo community for professional middle class homebuyers has been created with the low-income residents reduced to a persecuted and marginalized minority that they intend to drive out over time.

“Sadly, they were able to hoodwink poor residents of the area and proceed with the redevelopment by pointing to the undeniable disrepair of the old project. People hoped for something better and were, accordingly, misled. The fight will be to hold together the low-income population in

the new Regent Park and to use the reality that has been created there as the basis for resisting such 'solutions' in the future.”



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