

ANTH 3110

COVID-19 and Housing in Toronto

Ethnographic Report

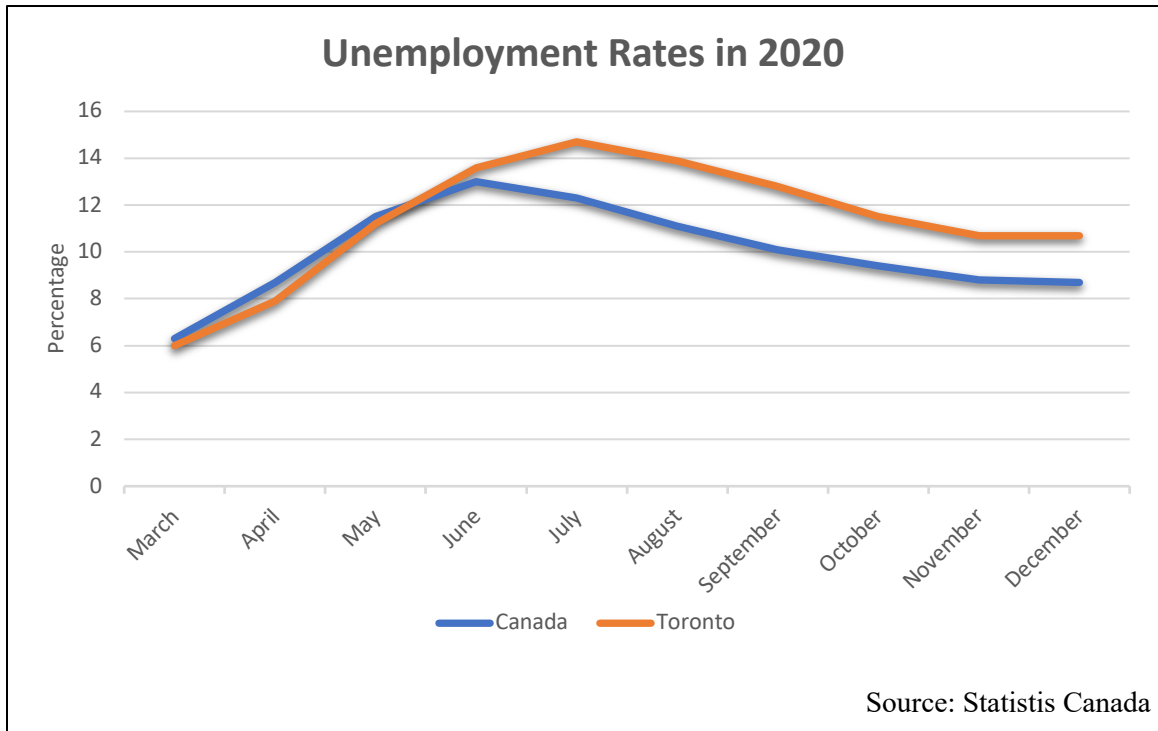
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Research question

This research project will be focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted Toronto residents' ability to maintain adequate housing. My focus is on renters in the city of Toronto and my main research question is looking at how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their sense of security. I will be seeking to explore the strategies they've used to deal with their challenges individually and collectively. My research also looks for patterns on the demographics that have been affected the most and in what ways in order to draw relations between socioeconomic status and health in times of public crisis. This study aims to closely examine the impacts that the pandemic has had particularly on racial minorities and low-income renters in the Toronto area, with the goal of supporting appropriate and equitable policy changes to housing rights.

Context

When the World Health Organization declared the corona virus outbreak a pandemic in early 2020, a stay-home order was issued by the Canadian government asking people to remain inside and limit contact with others except for essential purposes. A lockdown was mandated compelling offices, stores, restaurants, salons, and charities to close their physical doors and have employees work remotely if possible. As the virus spread, restrictions were tightened. What was announced as a two-week lockdown persisted forcing many businesses to scale back or shut down. As a result, the unemployment rate across the nation skyrocketed, with the city of Toronto being severely impacted and left with one of the highest unemployment rates in the country.



Even before the pandemic, many believe that the city of Toronto already had a housing crisis. With the restrictions placed on businesses and impact on employment, many people are unable to maintain their home payments. There are over 1.5 million renter households in Toronto (BC Non-Profit Housing Association, 2016). In the winter of 2020, 7000 Ontario households were given eviction notices in what the Beaches-East York MP Rima Berns-McGown called an eviction crisis (Raza, 2020). This has led to an emergence of community solidarity, including tenant union groups and public rallies (Raza, 2020). With many struggling for employment, I sought to explore how these individuals and families in the East York region were coping. Immigrants make up almost half of Toronto's population with 83% of them being from a racialized group (Fleischer, 2019). I hypothesized that these evictions would impact this group the most considering all the other challenges they face as migrants to a new country.

Methodology

This study relied on a survey, qualitative in-depth interviews and participant observation to obtain the necessary field data. Because of social distancing safety regulations, the ethnographic research was done solely online. The survey was created by Google Forms due to its user-friendly platform and ease of sharing. It contained optional demographic questions such as ethnicity, household income, immigration, and gender. The next section focused on employment status, industry sector and questions related to rent payment capabilities and evictions. The last section focused on corona-related health concerns, mental health, coping strategies and community relations. The surveys were posted on two Facebook groups, namely 'People's Defence Toronto' and 'Keep Your Rent' weekly from January 11, 2021 to February 15, 2021. I also asked organizers of these groups for their assistance in distributing the survey link. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was included for all participant's review. The surveys were conducted first and in tandem with the online observations in order to analyse the results and inform interview questions. Because this research was conducted online, building rapport with the participants was a challenge. I aimed to make my online postings personable and welcoming as well as make an aesthetically-pleasing, easy to use survey platform. My postings introduced who I was, the purpose of my research, assured participants that information would be kept anonymous and thanked them in advance for their time.

Participant observation was planned to be conducted online through, trial hearings, in-person rallies and social media posts. I connected with an organizer from 'People's Defense' to conduct observations during an eviction hearing. I tried to attend the hearings several times through Zoom but was never allowed into the meeting room. I learned that the reason for this was that there were a large volume of people unifying to join the virtual hearings in an attempt to

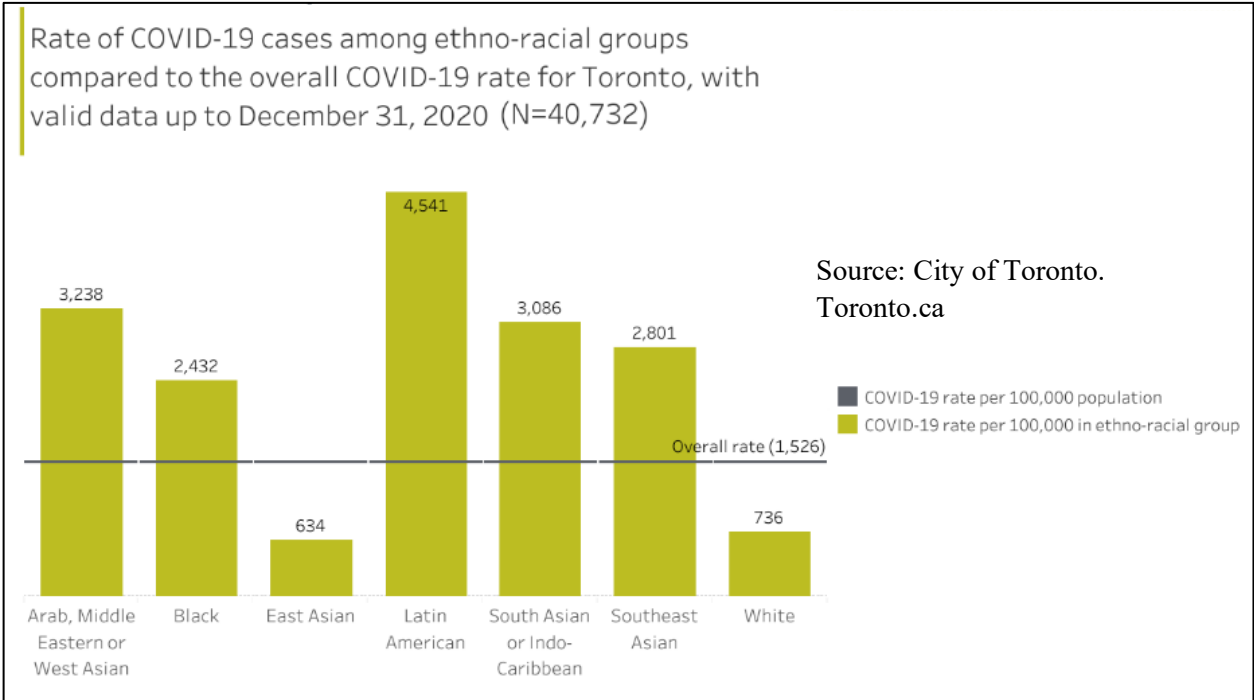
disrupt them and show support for the renters under trial. I knew when I started this research that attending an in-person protest would be unlikely and unfortunately, it was not possible for me as I was under quarantine when the event occurred. Participant-observation was therefore done through social media posts on Facebook and Twitter. I had originally also planned to use Reddit as I thought it would be an outlet that would provide anonymity. However, it did not prove to be a useful source of information. Looking at the demographic information collected via the survey and other media platforms, I believe this is because average Reddit users do not fit the same demographics.

The in-depth interviews were conducted throughout the month of February 2021 on zoom and over the phone. Two of the informants were tenants facing eviction warnings and one was an organizer from People's Defense Toronto. The tenants did not consent to being recorded or appearing on video, therefore both 60-minute interviews were conducted over the phone. I was able to use some information from my survey to shape the discussions I had with the informants and I used interview methods such as probing to attain as much information as possible.

Findings & Discussion

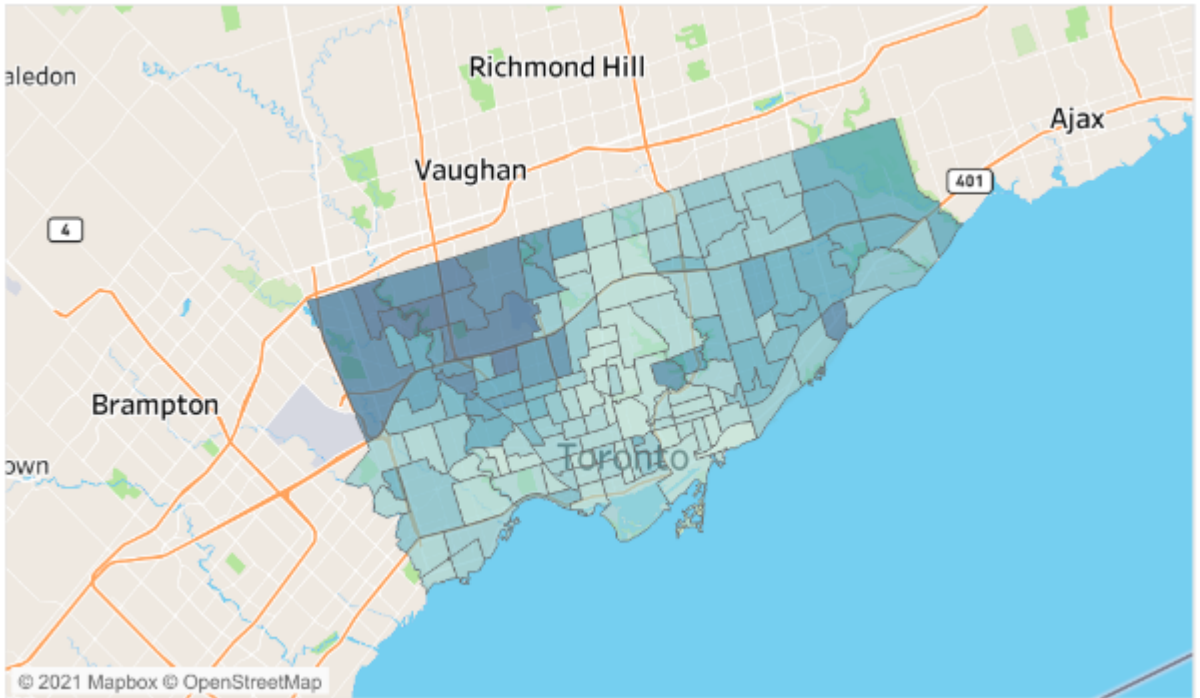
The online survey received 12 responses. I believe that it would have received more traction had it been offered in another form, such as face-to-face interaction, on paper or offered in alternative languages. From the sample group, everyone who filled out the survey identified as being a person of colour with the majority (41 percent) being of South Asian or Indo-Caribbean ethnic background. Most reported a household income of between \$30,000 - \$40,000 with 8.3 percent reporting less than \$20,000. The most prominent industry that the respondents reported to have worked in were service (66 percent) and manufacturing (25 percent). 83 percent reported that they or someone in their household had lost their jobs or cut

back work hours due to the pandemic. 75 percent reported that they or someone in their household was infected with corona virus, had symptoms, or had to quarantine. These findings compared with those of the City of Toronto reports (below) which show that racialized peoples have higher rates of corona virus cases.



All respondents reported receiving an eviction notice from their landlords. They all reported feeling scared and/or hopeless and experiencing a decreased sense of security. When asked the open-ended question regarding coping strategies, some of the answers were that they turn to their religion or God, families and neighbours. However, the most repeated response was that they joined a tenant union and/or connected with others in a similar situation. One respondent said that they felt less scared knowing that others in their building were going through the same catastrophe and felt less isolated with others by them.

COVID-19 Neighbourhood Cases and Rates



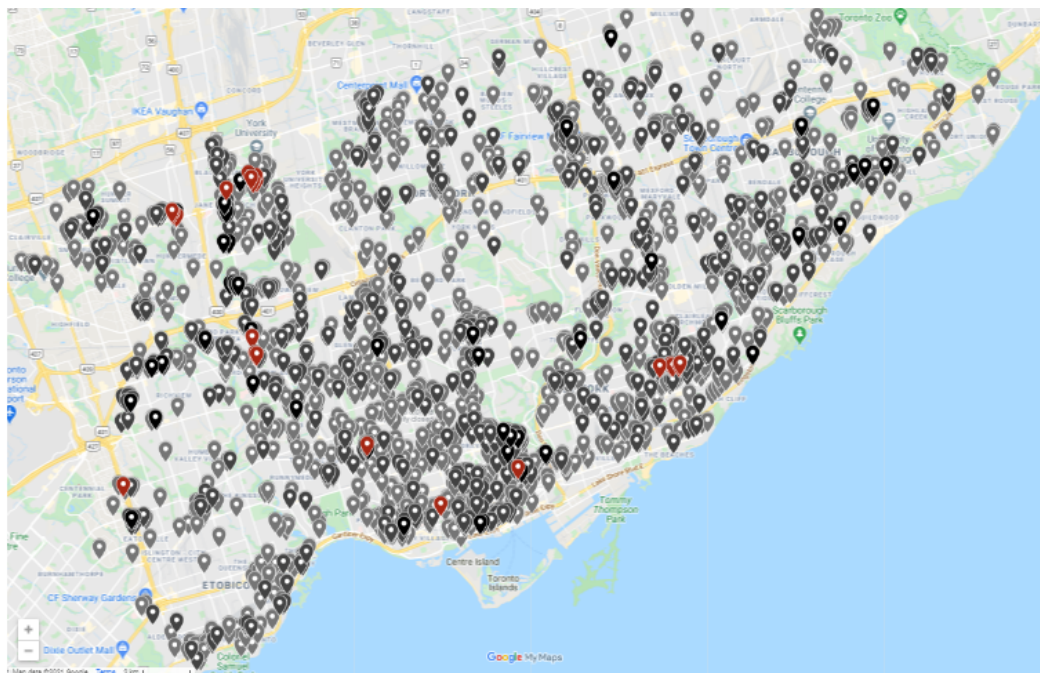
1,029

9,141

Source: City of Toronto.
Toronto.ca

Map of Landlord Tenant Board Eviction Hearings Scheduled for Toronto Tenants:

Nov 5, 2020 – Jan 31, 2021



1 hearing

2-5 hearings

6-10 hearings

11+ hearings

Source: Evictions Ontario

Because the interviews were conducted online and over the phone anonymously, building rapport with the participants was a unique experience. Tenants preferred phone calls to maintain a level of anonymity and comfort. In the in-depth semi-structured interviews, I gained more insight on how this issue had affected people's lives personally and acquired a better sense of their mental and emotional conditions. One interviewee I spoke to described their parents' situation on their behalf as they did not speak English comfortably enough. They said that their parents had immigrated from Bangladesh several years ago and were working before the COVID-19 lockdowns were implemented. One of them worked at an ethnic fabric store and the other taught Quran lessons at the local mosque. Both of their places of employment had been forced to close and they were laid off. They conveyed that their parents, who were also older in age, were afraid and felt at a loss on how to deal with their situation. They were handed a warning and tried to speak to the landlord, but it was difficult to negotiate with the language barrier. They sought solace in prayer and had a community member tell them about People's Defense, where they were able to connect with others and get access to resources they needed in their language.

Another tenant I spoke with told me that they were a single parent of one and the sole income for their household. They had lived in that apartment since before their child was born and it was a sentimental home to both of them. Their child grew up playing with the neighbourhood kids and attended school nearby. They worked for years in the restaurant industry as a server, and when their hours were scaled back, they found it extremely difficult to make ends meet. Because they had immigrated here as a refugee, they had no other family to turn to in the case that they were removed from their home. They expressed sadness that they had fled their disease and instability in their country for their child's safety only to come here and end up in a

similar situation. The tenant expressed deep fear not only for themselves, but for their child. They told me it was their job to protect their child and now that their home is being threatened, they won't know where to go or how to keep their child safe.

From my interview with an organizer of People's Defense, I gathered that many of the tenants referred to them were unaware of their rights and came to them very afraid and in despair. The organizer relied feelings of panic, desperation, and fear from the tenants that they had communicated with. Many of them were scared that they wouldn't be able to pay their debts back in time and would be left choosing between overcrowded shelters or the cold streets of the city.

At times, I felt connected to the participants because I shared a lot in common with them. I, myself had grown up in a rented apartment in the East York area. My mother, a single mother and an immigrant, was the sole income provider for our household of three. It was the same neighbourhood I grew up in, the same streets I played in as a child. I still remember running to the local convenient store with change to buy candy and wondered if the owners were still there, or if it was even still open. I felt myself aligning with Camilla Gibb's (2005) experiences with self-reflection and positionality. In speaking with these participants, I couldn't help but feel a sense of connection and guilt over my privilege. As Gibb's did, I too struggled to manage these feelings knowing that I could've very well been in their positions had the course of my life not changed.

In conducting this research, I am reminded of Monique Skidmore's deduction on engaged ethnography as she studied in a catastrophic climate (2012). My fieldwork was also based in a help-seeking environment where people were at the intersection of needing aid and resisting against structural oppression. I set out to humanize the issue of housing amidst the current

pandemic in order to inform policy changes to improve housing rights in the Toronto area, and Canada. My informants were brave enough to speak with me and share their experiences at a highly sensitive and fearful time in their lives. It is my responsibility to convey their voices and stand alongside them against the forces of repression that they face.

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