



# From Crisis to Consensus

A survey of 60 housing  
groups from across  
Canada

## Researchers

Malcolm McClintock, Dru Oja Jay, Stefan  
Christoff, Lumina Kitaura, Clément Lechat,  
Nasreen Begum, Olivia Champagne

## Translated by

Clément Lechat



Solidarity Economy Incubation  
for Zero Emissions



# Introduction

Social demands, expressed ultimately through public policy, played a decisive role in ensuring widespread access to affordable housing in 20th-century Canada. More recently, government policy driven by the power of investment capital has played a [tragic role](#) in the disappearance of affordable options and skyrocketing rents.

The major investments in social housing and cooperatives of the 1960s and 1970s were driven in large part by organizers who demanded an overhaul of how we understand housing. Since 1990 their gains have been eroded as governments “let the market decide.”

The goal of this report is to share a picture of organizing for truly affordable housing. First and foremost, this picture is for the groups themselves, but we also think their allies, supporters and potential funders will find it useful.

In a moment of great danger and also great possibility, the intention of SEIZE with this report is to lift up and create connections between organizers across urban and regional landscapes.

And while there is considerable divergence, we can observe clear points of broad consensus. We hope this report will help create pathways toward stronger links of solidarity, coordination and mutual learning between diverse groups separated by thousands of kilometers.

## Methodology

SEIZE created a survey to gather information about the broader struggle for housing justice and how it can move ahead. Over 120 housing groups across Canada who advocate for action on housing from the perspective of tenants and unhoused people were invited to participate. 59 groups responded, based in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Nova Scotia.

The survey began by asking for suggestions of additional groups, to ensure the list was as comprehensive as possible. We also reached out to contacts in every province, asking for suggestions. Many of the groups identified did not respond. Some were clearly inactive, while others did not have time, interest or capacity.

We asked these housing groups about the policies they advocate for, what organizing tactics they endorse or oppose, what kinds of collaborations they want to participate in, and what would meaningfully help their work as well as the movement at large.

This data has provided a clear contrast in the needs of on-the-ground organizers vying for housing against the government’s funding and policy priorities. The report that follows is a synthesis of how we got here and what we must do to address the rising crisis.

# Grounds for a united front

Geographically, the groups that responded were mainly based in Quebec (31), Ontario (13) and British Columbia (7), perhaps reflecting the acute housing crisis in the latter two provinces, and the availability of funding for community organizations in Quebec's case. Saskatchewan had two groups respond, and one group responded from each of Alberta, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Nova Scotia.

These groups collectively represent over 28,000 members and account for annual budgets of over \$9 million. Notably, around \$6 million of that was in Quebec. Twenty-three groups reported their annual budget is less than \$25,000, half of whom said they spend less than \$2,000 annually. Many have been around for a while, with half of the groups founded before 2000, 11 of which have existed for over 40 years.

## Some of the key findings include:

- A consensus of the groups favours publicly-funded social housing
- A strong majority support direct action to protect or improve access to housing, including 80% support of rent control policies
- A near-consensus supports financing non-profit housing and cooperatives
- The only policy measure that received strong opposition was government incentives for private rental housing

*"Commodification of housing has been around for a long time, but it's taken on a relevance that's previously unimaginable today. You have housing under the domination of developers, speculators—an absolutely parasitic and irrational way of dealing with housing needs.*

*It's completely spun out of control. All of the political levels, municipal, provincial and federal, are entirely dominated by that agenda. It's reached the point in Toronto where the 'left'—so-called—on city council has no perspective of challenging that agenda whatsoever, but only softening the blow to dubious degrees."*

- John Clarke



**Listen to full interviews with  
respondents on  
Free City Radio**

[solidarityeconomy.ca/housing-2024](https://solidarityeconomy.ca/housing-2024)



# Indigenous frontlines of the housing crisis

Indigenous communities have been the first to experience Canada's housing crisis, and have experienced it most profoundly.

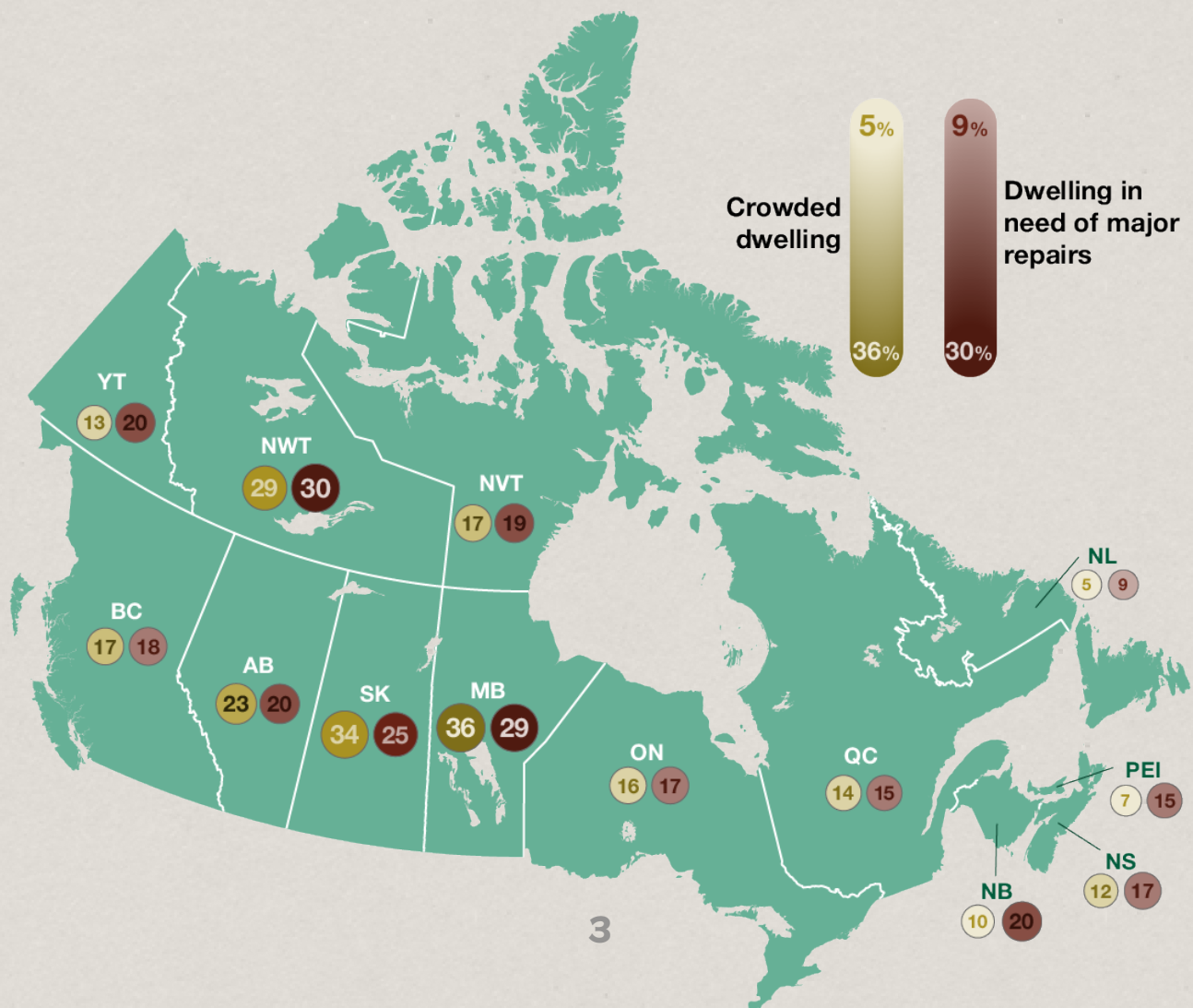
Extractive industries have formed the basis of Canada's economy in both real and aspirational terms (for example, Stephen Harper's dreams of an "[energy superpower](#)"). But the people whose lands those industries extract from, as a whole, have not benefited. Quite the opposite.

According to the [2021 census](#), one in six Indigenous people live in crowded, unsuitable housing; three times more likely than non-Indigenous Canadians. Much on-reserve housing is in dire conditions, in need of profound

repairs or replacement.

One group this modest survey did not attempt to directly address was the 600+ First Nations, Métis and Inuit governments that undoubtedly engage in housing advocacy of one kind or another. Nonetheless, any assessment of Canada's housing movement—if it does not reckon with the disproportionate housing crisis in Indigenous communities—remains incomplete.

These efforts are not starting from scratch. Of the groups surveyed, 20 reported that they currently collaborate with Indigenous organizations.



# The origins of the current housing crisis

Canada’s housing crisis is driven by two key forces: the lobbying power of large-scale private investors who see housing as a commodity and a voting bloc of homeowners who view their homes as investment assets and prefer to see housing prices rise indefinitely.

While the home ownership rate in Canada has fallen, it remains over 65% overall. And homeowners are much more likely to vote—17% more likely [in 2011](#). The result is that historically, any party with aspirations of winning a majority had to [cater to homeowners](#).

In 1993, the federal government canceled [all new spending](#) on housing projects. That same year, the first Real Estate Investment Trust (REIT) [was formed](#). Liberal Finance Minister Paul Martin cut the housing budget [even more severely](#) for the years to come, as housing became an object of speculative capital investment, with profits eclipsing human needs.

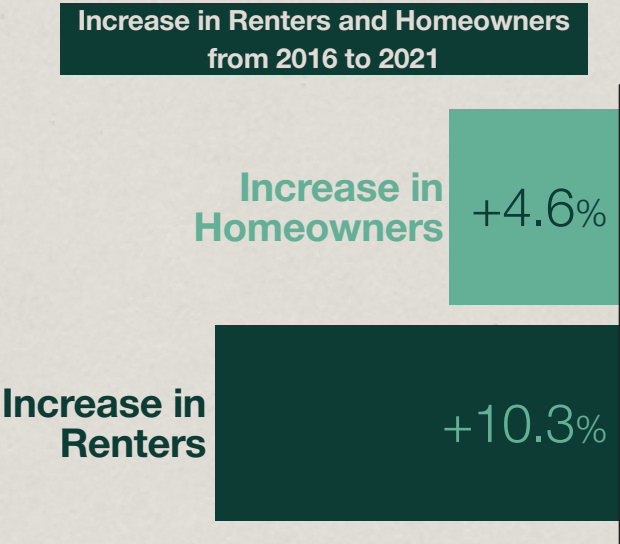
The home-owning majority is pulled by increasing sale prices and pushed by—among other factors—a collapse in pensions, which means people rely on real estate assets to anchor their [retirement](#). Together with the political power of investment capital, they have put a check on electoral pathways to addressing the crisis. No party seeking a majority can do much more than tinker around the edges of the housing crisis.

However, the situation is changing rapidly.

Renters are climbing as a proportion of the population—33% in Canada and in Montreal, as high as 63%. The number of renters is growing [twice as fast](#) as homeowners.

According to [one recent set of calculations](#), renters have been a majority of eligible voters in British Columbia and Ontario for some time—though getting them to vote may still be more difficult. It is no surprise, then, that some of the most active of the newer housing groups we surveyed are in those two provinces.

Cities with the Highest Percent of Renters (2021)	
City	% Renters
Montréal, QC	63.4%
Vancouver, BC	54.5%
Sherbrooke, QC	50.4%
Québec, QC	48.6%
Toronto, ON	47.9%
Longueuil, QC	47.6%
Trois-Rivières, QC	45.4%
Kingston, ON	44.0%
Halifax, NS	42.5%
London, ON	41.7%



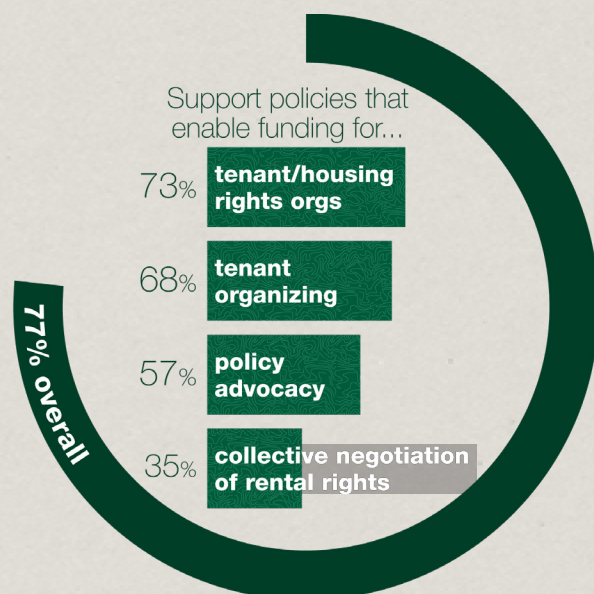


# Defending tenants creates political space

Mass demonstrations, popular educational events, media work, direct action and organizing tenants unions are a large part of the range of tactics that the surveyed organizations use in their campaigns.

The groups were supportive of a range of actions, even when they didn't participate in them themselves. These included artistic interventions, casework supporting individual tenants, squatting and rent strikes. Those last two were among the more controversial, with a bit under half the groups indicating they wouldn't participate. Street protest and direct action, however, were the subject of a near-consensus of support in principle.

Away from the frontlines of tenants under attack, some of the groups surveyed seek to build non profit housing themselves. UTILE, which has leveraged institutional resources to build non-profit student housing, cited a pressing need "to accelerate the construction of sustainable affordable non-profit housing stock."



## Tenant's Rights in Action

Recent years have seen organized tenants fighting steep rent increases and evictions with rent strikes and other direct action. In 2017, over 300 tenants [in Parkdale](#) withheld their rent for 3 months, forcing the landlord to back off of a massive rent increase. 2023 saw a new wave of rent strikes in Toronto, with hundreds of tenants in Thorncliffe Park and York South-Weston, organized into unions, withholding their rent.

A Rent Strike Vancouver campaign sprang to life during early-pandemic lockdowns, part of a wave of refusals by people across the country to bear the cost of the pandemic. More recently, the Vancouver Tenants Union has signed up thousands of members, engaging in numerous skirmishes with landlords in defense of tenants.

Rent strikes are the most dramatic expression of tenants exercising their power, but far from the only tactic in their playbook. Tenant unions prevent evictions by shaming landlords with banner drops or staging bet-you-can't-arrest-us-all slumber parties.

ACORN has been campaigning for reforms in various cities and provinces while defending tenants, with some notable success. Gains include an [anti-eviction bylaw](#) in Hamilton, among [other measures](#).

Quebec housing groups took on a right wing government bent on taking away hard-won tenant rights. Weekly marches in Montreal and mobilizations across the province were ultimately unable to stop [Bill 31](#), which effectively removed tenants' ability to transfer leases. On the other hand, [a bill](#) banning evictions until 2027 (albeit with important exceptions), was drafted by a left-leaning opposition party, Quebec Solidaire.



It was adopted unanimously by the provincial assembly, likely in large part due to movement pressure.

Electoral politics are a strategic dividing line, and many groups have chosen to deemphasize the approach, going so far as to reject pressure campaigns.

“We believe the best strategy is not government lobbying or pressure-campaigns but direct action targeting specific landlords of buildings where tenants are organizing,” a member of Montreal’s SLAM-MATU wrote in response to the survey. That is where the group believes it can “win gains that are most meaningful to tenants.”

Others are reluctant to get involved in electoral politics because it diminishes their organizing power.

“We’ve been rebuilding after spending a lot of energy organizing and lobbying at the municipal level to very little effect,” a member of the Vancouver Tenants Union wrote in a survey response. “Many of our members would say the lesson learned was about not giving our power away and instead focusing on building up our own strength and capacity as a tenants union.”

Regardless of how they feel about electoral politics, housing organizers have been successful in shifting the conversation around the housing crisis and opening up new possibilities.





# Divergences and convergences

In reviewing the survey results, we didn't just look for consensus. There were some differences, but the relatively small degree of those differences affirms the broader consensus. Due to the distribution of groups, statistically significant interprovincial differences can only be identified in British Columbia (BC), Quebec, and Ontario. Groups surveyed in Quebec, for example, stood out from the crowd as being the most likely to lead project development for affordable housing.

Among all groups, squatting was the least-used tactic, with 60% either not participating or opposed, followed by rent strikes, with 55% not participating or opposed. In Ontario there was the least opposition to squatting as a tactic with only 23% of the groups surveyed, whereas in Quebec and Ontario the opposition for squatting increased to 48% and 43% respectively. More than half of the groups surveyed in Quebec oppose or don't participate in rent strikes, meanwhile in BC all of the groups surveyed support or lead rent strikes.

In Ontario, there was the most support for funding tenant organizing, with 67% in favor, compared to 29% in BC and 37% in Quebec. Ironically, only 11% of groups in Ontario and 3% in Quebec desired the development of more tenant unions, suggesting a desire for funding to be directed towards existing groups.

Organizations in Ontario and BC were significantly more likely to go door-to-door, with 83% and 71% respectively engaging in that form of canvassing. It's a notable divergence from Quebec, where only 21% of the groups reported leading door-to-door canvassing.

Perhaps due to a lack of other groups to rely on, there was a notable higher demand for a policy bank resources from groups in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Prince Edward Island.

Despite minor interprovincial differences, there is a clear consensus across Canada towards increasing government funding for public housing and support for rent control. None of the groups surveyed opposed lease transfers or infrastructure taxes as policy measures. Infrastructure tax refers to increased taxes on property value when public amenities like bike lanes, parks, and public transit hubs lead to increased property values.

## Organizational maturity differences

The range of founding dates for these groups spans from 1969 to 2024, forming an inverse bell curve: fewer groups around today were started in the 1990s. Despite the gap around the time of deep federal cuts, there were minimal inter-generational divergences. The most notable divergence appears to be around future directions for the housing movement. Specifically, 44% of groups founded before 1989 want to see more protests and mass mobilizations, compared to only 13% of groups founded after 2020. Additionally, only 28% of groups founded before 1989 want increased funding for tenant organizing, whereas 56% of groups founded after 2020 support this. Groups founded before 1989 are the least likely to support a political candidate to champion their demands, with only 29% in favor, while 67% of groups founded after 2020 support this approach.

The likelihood of housing groups collaborating with labor unions is inversely correlated with the age of the organization. Only 9% of groups founded before 1989 collaborate with labor unions, compared to 18% of groups founded after 2020. This remains a huge opportunity for meaningfully gaining power and momentum for the housing movement at large.



# Housing groups demand radical departure from status quo

Canada's major political parties, including the NDP, remain hamstrung by their perception of voters and the dominance of the idea of housing-as-commodity. Housing groups with ties to those directly affected by the current crisis, however, take a much different position.

*"Public funding should be used first to guarantee the right to housing by investing it in social housing,"*

**Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain**, (FRAPRU, From Cities to Villages for the Right to Housing in English)

*"To achieve housing as a human right for all, we should support de-commodified housing such as cooperatives, land trusts, public/ social housing, and other models that support affordable & dignified homes in our communities."*

**The Vancouver Tenants Union**

These sentiments appear to be widely shared by other respondents. Public investment in housing was supported by nearly every respondent. Most demanded rent control as a stop-gap measure, but whether stated in broad terms or through focused local responses, demands for social housing and decommodification were nearly universal.

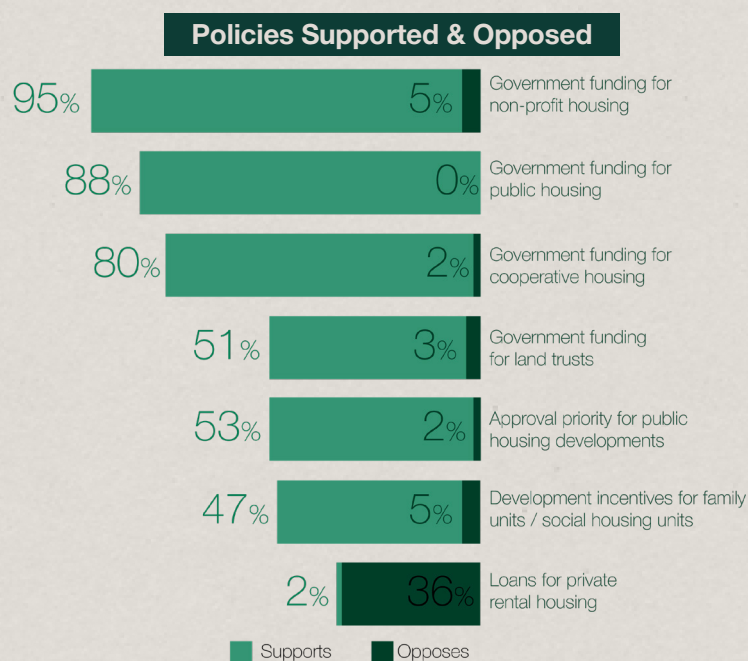
The implications of this near-consensus among housing groups with grassroots connections are significant. However, with rare exceptions, it's difficult to find a partner among municipal, provincial and federal political actors for large-scale investment in social housing outside of the market.

*"Affordable" housing is a term that doesn't have much meaning. Its definition changes from policy to policy and is mostly used by real-estate speculators to sell their business model. Social housing (including non-profit housing) is the only truly, in the long term, affordable housing model."*

**Comité Logement Rosemont**

*"We believe housing is a right, not a privilege. It cannot be treated as a commodity to be governed by market forces."*

**PEI Fight for Affordable Housing**





# As feds fall off the radar, Poilievre is poised for power

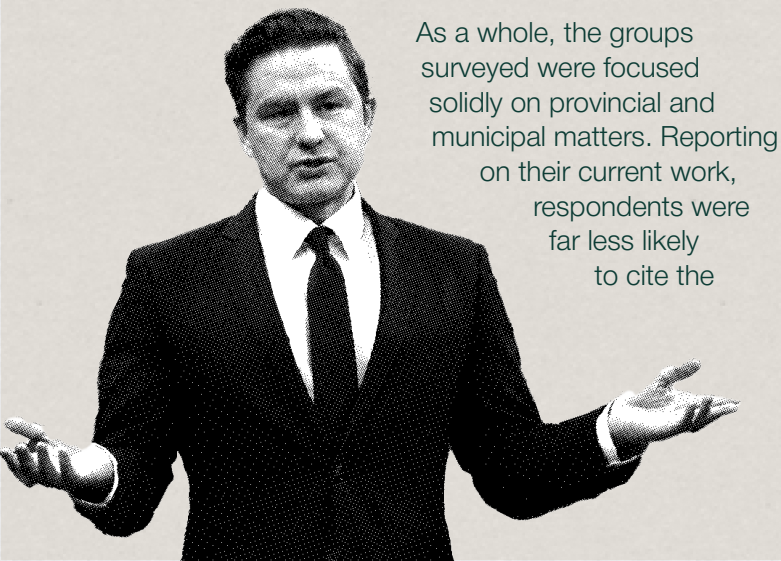
Tragically, the primary political beneficiary of the housing crisis has been Pierre Poilievre.

Like the NDP and the Liberals, Poilievre has not committed to a major intervention in the housing market, but has differentiated himself by channeling widespread anger with a combative tone.

In Poilievre's telling, the main villains are city planners and bureaucrats who are stopping developers from providing cheaper housing. Like the Liberals (and to some extent the NDP), Poilievre believes that empowering developers will lead them to bring prices down—against their own interests.

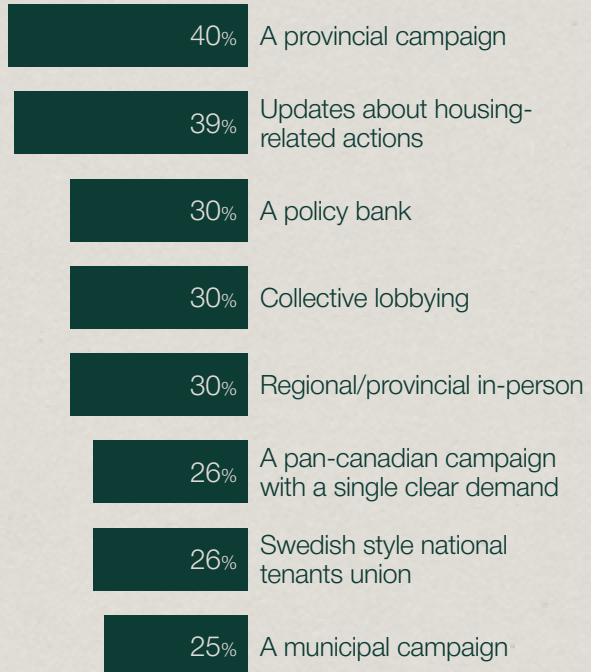
Poilievre has seized the moment by convincingly parroting the anger that many feel as their paychecks are eaten by ever-rising rents and mortgage payments stray ever farther from what they can afford. [A third](#) of millennials and Gen Z think Poilievre is the most convincing federal leader on housing affordability. Poilievre has opened a gap with his competition; the second most convincing leader, with 24%, was none of them."

As of this writing, polls suggest his victory is all but inevitable. One projection has the Conservatives winning a 220-seat supermajority, with Liberals reduced to around 60 seats in opposition.



As a whole, the groups surveyed were focused solidly on provincial and municipal matters. Reporting on their current work, respondents were far less likely to cite the

## Useful inter-housing-group collaborations



federal government as a primary object of their advocacy work—just 15%, with municipalities and provinces evenly splitting the remainder.

A slight lean away from federal intervention also showed up in aspirations for collaboration with other groups. "A provincial campaign" was the top choice (42%) with "a pan-Canadian campaign..." in sixth place with 27%.

Poilievre's success in reframing the struggle for housing as a struggle against government intervention has been shockingly successful. This narrative victory could become a political one, resulting in a setback to housing groups collectively precisely at the time when their demands are most likely to resonate.

The federal government has greater powers of taxation, the ability to impose pan-Canadian standards, and an outsized historic role in



creating affordable housing on a large scale. The fact that it is not a primary concern of many responding groups can be at least partially attributed to the Liberal legacy of deep cuts to funding for housing, as well as the difficulty in imagining significant policy change at that level.

Despite populist rhetoric, [Poilievre is tying himself closely](#) to corporate interests, including real estate investors. If Pierre Poilievre takes power, he may follow [in the footsteps](#) of previous faux-populists and engage in aggressive privatization and cuts.

Has Poilievre's message reached peak appeal,

or could it gain more momentum in the leadup to the election? Housing organizers will increasingly come into contact with the Conservatives' blame bureaucrats and push privatization model.

Ottawa's Horizon cites an important strategic question: "how to change the narrative when it comes to the supply argument—Conservatives and neoliberals keep parroting the same rhetoric that it is simply by building more supply... will make rents go down."

"It is up to us to point to the real issue: the profit motive."

## What a movement wants, what a movement needs

Despite shifting conditions, the movement to truly address the housing crisis faces fierce headwinds. Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs), to cite one example, are throwing their weight around to the point of [stopping obvious, minimal policy measures](#) in their tracks and forcing an 180-degree reversal from members of Parliament. On the heels of their early success, REITs are now [pouring money](#) into campaigns for further deregulation.

At the same time, 45% of groups cited an annual budget of \$25,000 or less. Many tenant organizing and advocacy groups have no funding at all, and rely on volunteer organizers and donations. It comes as no surprise, then, that funding came out on top when we asked groups what would help their work the most—more than double the next-highest reply.

Foundations have not been completely missing from the scene. ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) received a substantial grant from the McConnell Foundation shortly before the publishing

of this report. Some foundations in Ontario had previously supported their work as well. Currently there is not a clear mechanism to support the work of smaller or less-established tenant organizations across the country.

The labour movement are traditional supporters of tenant's movements. Among those surveyed, links with labour organizers are widespread: 44% of the groups said they are collaborating with trade unions. Given the tiny size of some housing groups, there is room for these ties of solidarity to grow.

Elsewhere in the survey, a third of respondents expressed interest in [a Swedish-style tenant union](#)—an institution that negotiates on behalf of all tenants and attracts a mass membership thanks to its negotiating power. It is a clear example of how far well-resourced tenant organizing, allied to a strong labour movement, can go. While that kind of unified negotiating power is nearly unheard of in Canada, there is much to build on.



# Homing in on collaboration

The survey demonstrated that a very diverse set of groups were remarkably aligned in policy positions, tactics and vision. However, these same groups diverge sharply in perspective from other actors seeking to influence housing policy. Panels, opinion columns, and politicians are unlikely to overlap with what most housing organizers see as clear solutions.

Despite the clear desire for more funding and resources, housing groups and tenant unions gain their power from grassroots engagement with their constituents. To leverage and multiply this power, collaboration is key. There is a significant opportunity for the housing movement and its constituent groups to collaborate and build power collectively through campaigns. Notably, housing groups working at the federal level indicated that supporting municipal (86%) and provincial campaigns (100%) would be useful collaborations. Meanwhile, groups working at the provincial level are interested in collaborating on a provincial campaign (87%) but are less interested in municipal collaborations (47%). Conversely, groups working at the municipal level are very interested in collaborating on a provincial campaign (88%). This indicates that the surveyed housing groups are highly supportive of collaborating on campaigns with clear, direct demands to achieve material gains in addressing the housing crisis.

As the housing crisis deepens, the surveyed groups displayed high levels of support for

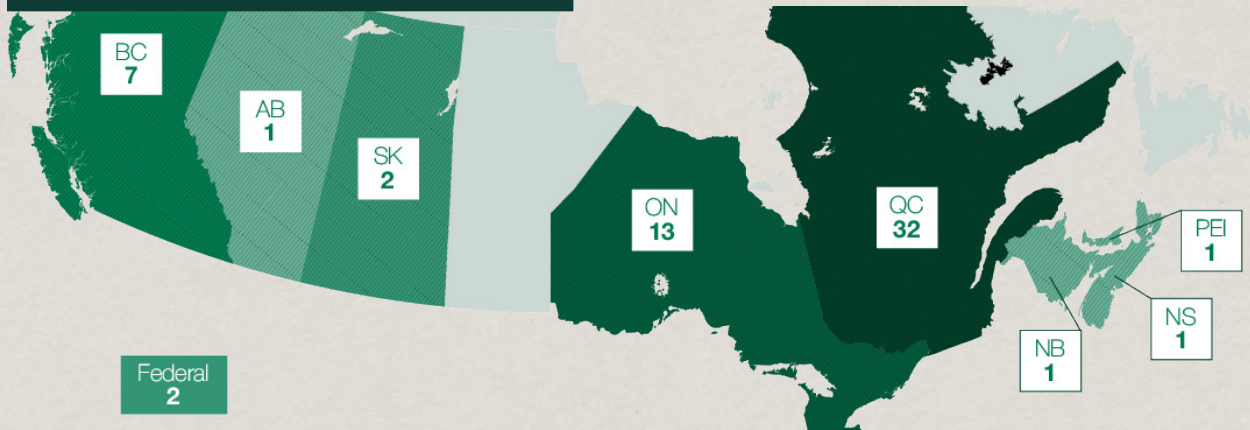
media intervention (85%), education (76%), direct action (65%), and building collective capacity (64%). Additionally, the groups showed near-unanimous support for rent control policies and a clear consensus on government funding for some form of non-profit, cooperative, or public housing. This approach aims to remove housing from the speculative real estate market to the greatest extent possible. Importantly, in the short term, these groups broadly expressed interest in collaborating and connecting with other housing groups through campaigns, shared educational materials, or national/provincial convergences.

Housing is a crucial component of our social fabric and quality of life, but stable and low-cost housing also feeds our ability to participate in democratic economic structures and social movements. As the contradictions that drive the housing crisis show no signs of going away, the stakes for collaboration and coordination among housing groups grow by the day.

As the housing crisis deepens, the groups surveyed displayed near-unanimous support for mass demonstrations, more funding for tenant organizations, and removing housing from the market to the greatest extent possible. Perhaps most importantly in the near term, these groups broadly expressed an interest in collaboration and connection with other housing groups, whether through campaigns, shared materials, or convergences.



# Groups Surveyed



## Alberta

Alberta ACORN

## British Columbia

BC ACORN  
Nelson Tenants Union  
New Westminster Tenants Union  
Together Against Poverty Society  
Vancouver Tenants Union  
Victoria Tenants Union  
West Broadway Tenants Committee

## Alberta

Alberta ACORN

## New Brunswick

NB ACORN

## Nova Scotia

NS ACORN

## Ontario

230 Fightback  
FMTA  
Horizon Ottawa  
Katarokwi Union of Tenants  
London ACORN  
No Demovictions  
Ottawa ACORN  
Peel ACORN  
Shelter Housing Justice Network  
Southwestern Ontario ACORN (London + Waterloo Region)  
Stepping Stone

## Prince Edward Island

PEI Fight For Affordable Housing

## Quebec

ACHAT  
Action location Drummond  
Action-Logement de l'Est  
Association des locataires de Sherbrooke  
Association des Locataires du Centre du Québec  
Association québécoise de défense des droits des personnes retraitées et préretraitées  
brique par brique  
Bureau d'animation et information logement  
cmetis  
Comité autonome accessibilité logement - Côte de Gaspé  
Comité logement d'aide de Québec ouest  
Comité logement de la Petite Patrie  
Comité Logement Montréal-Nord  
Comité logement Rosemont  
Comité logement Ville-Marie  
Comité populaire Saint-Jean-Baptiste  
Confédération québécoise des coopératives d'habitation  
Ex aequo  
Fédération des locataires d'HLM  
FHCQ-Fédération de l'habitation coopérative du Québec  
Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain  
Infologis Mauricie

## L'UTILE

LOGE M'ENTRAIDE  
Organisation d'Education et d'Information Logement de Côte des Neiges  
POPIR-Comité logement  
Prenons la ville  
Radical Resthomes  
Regroupement des comités logement et associations de locataires du Québec (RCLALQ)  
Réverbérations d'une crise  
Solidarité logement Rivière-du-Loup  
The Montreal Autonomous Tenants' Union  
Waterloo Region ACORN

## Saskatchewan

Rally Around Homelessness  
Renters of Saskatoon and Area - ROSA

## National

ACORN Canada  
Canadian Network of Community Land Trusts

## Don't see your group?

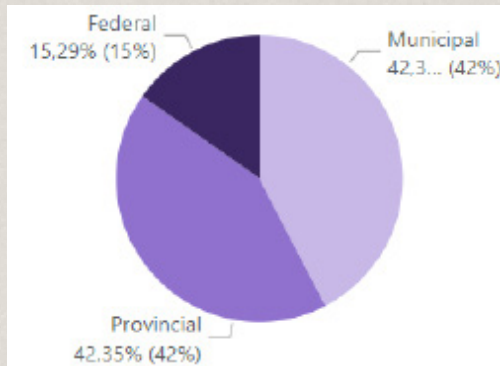
Participate in the survey



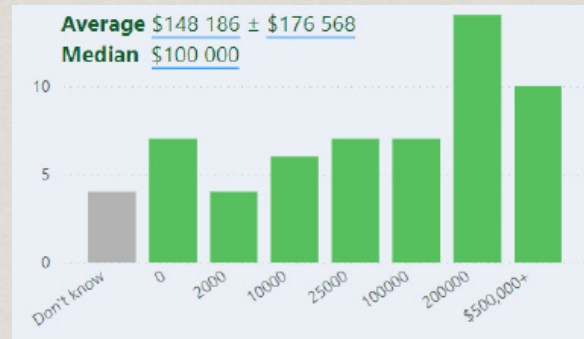
[solidarityeconomy.ca/housing-2024-survey](https://solidarityeconomy.ca/housing-2024-survey)



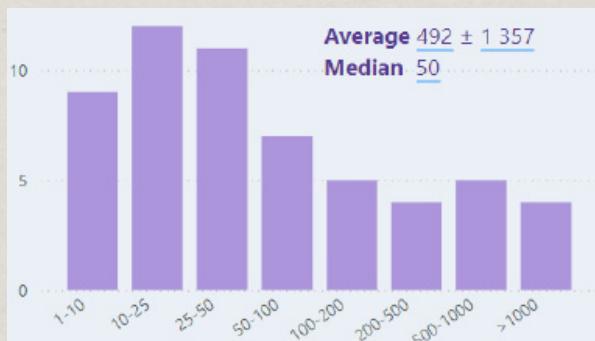
**When you engage in advocacy/policy demands, what level of government is the main target?**



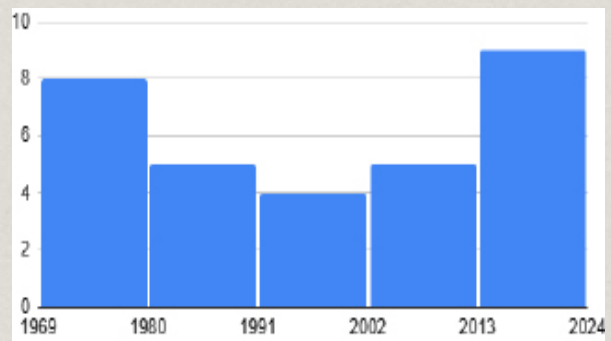
**What is the group's annual budget?**



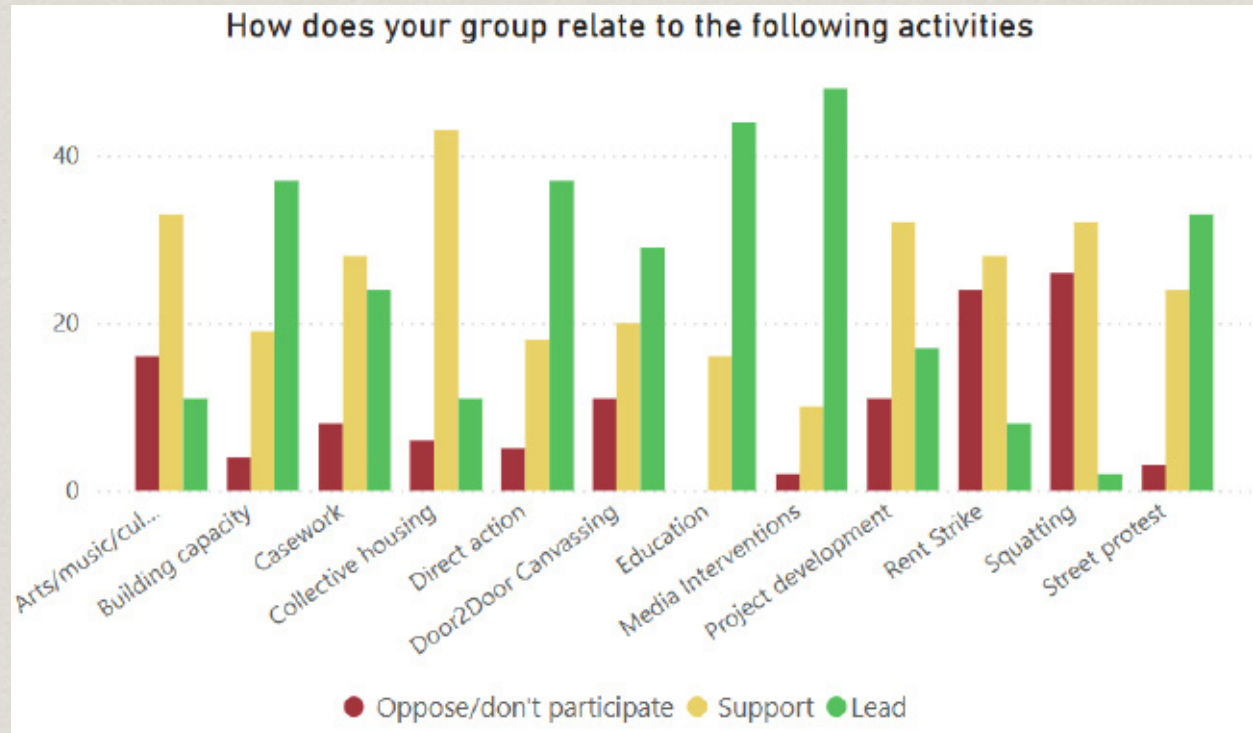
**How many members are in the group?**



**What year was the group founded?**

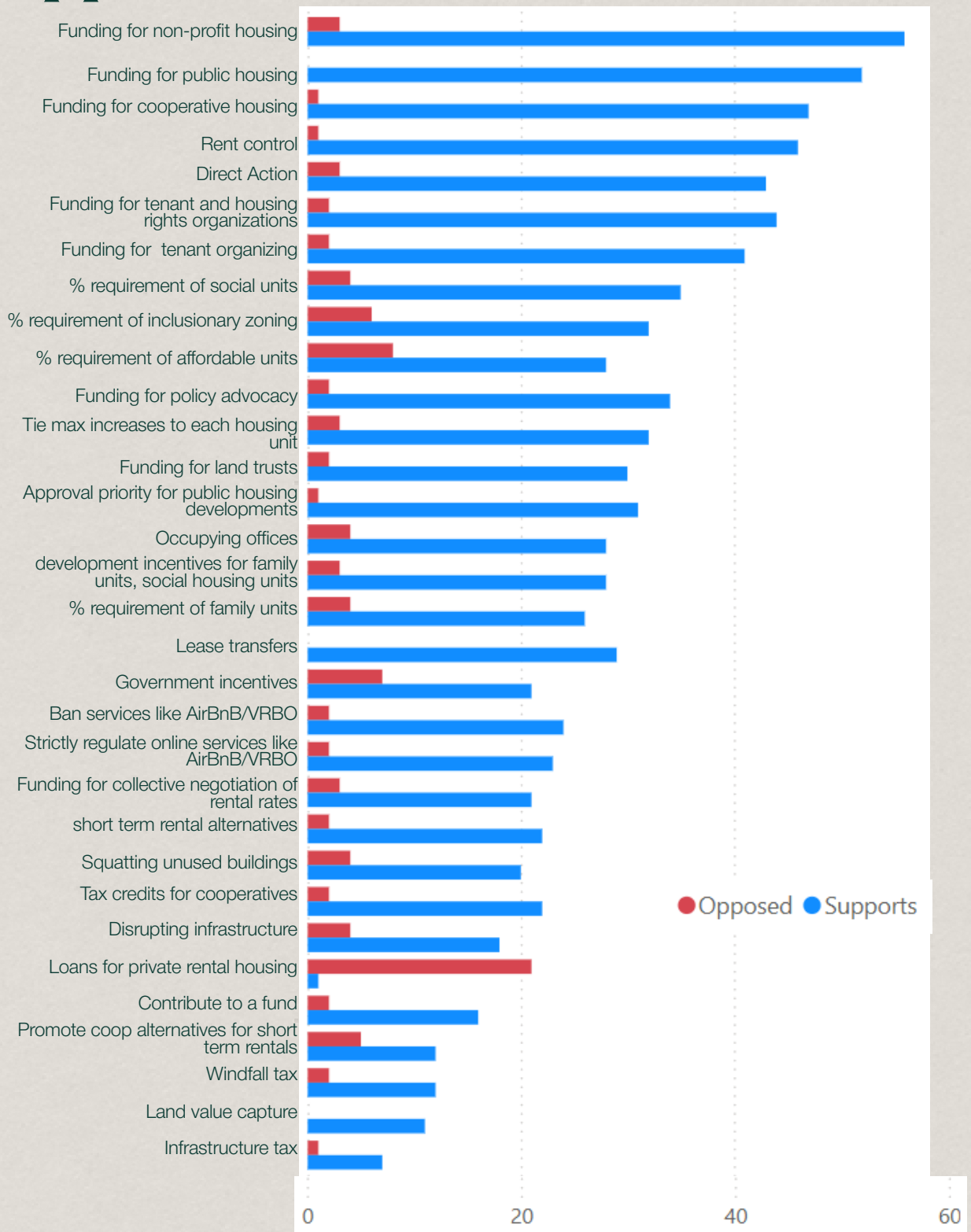


**How does your group relate to the following activities**



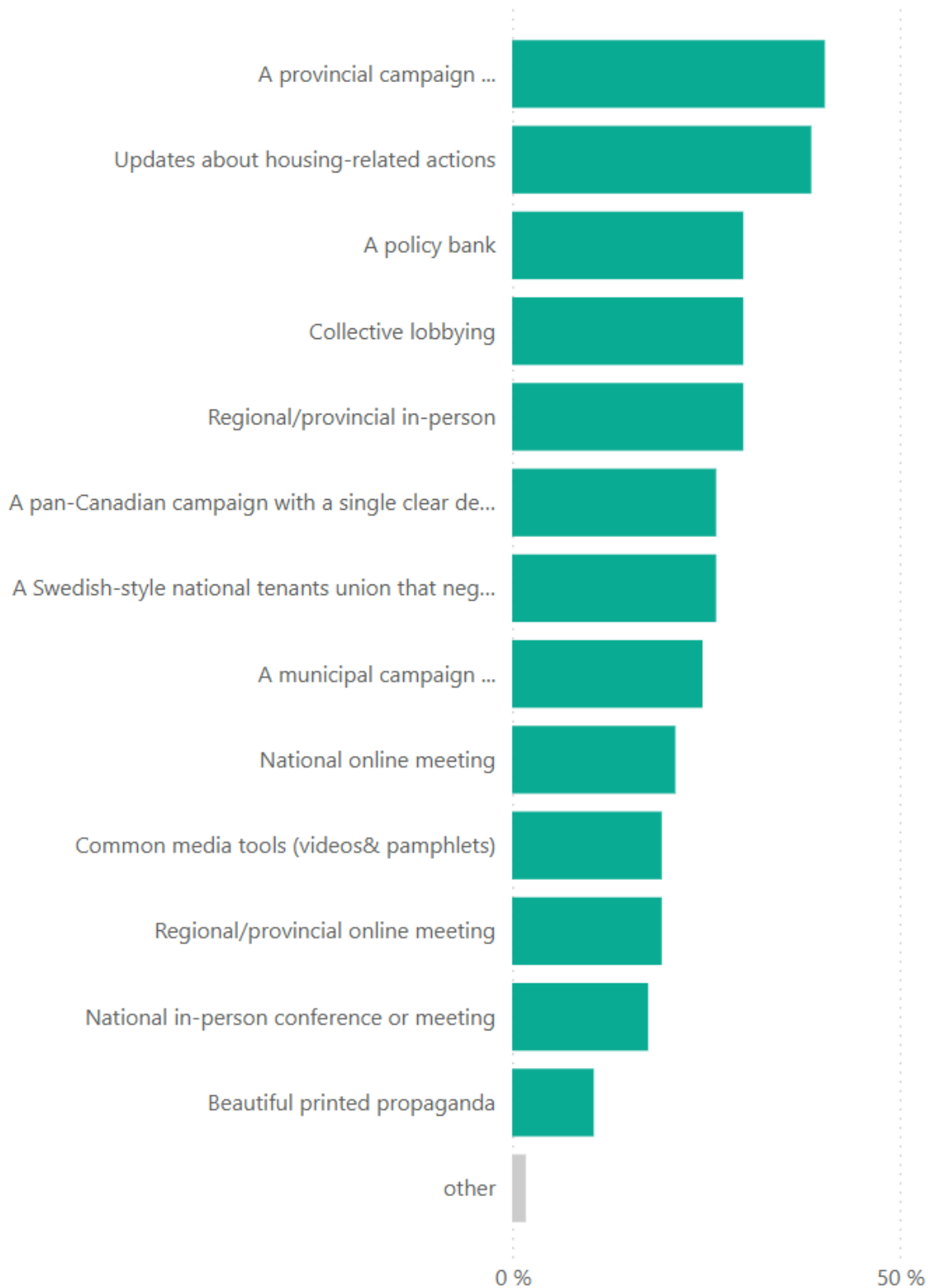


# Policies Supported / Opposed to

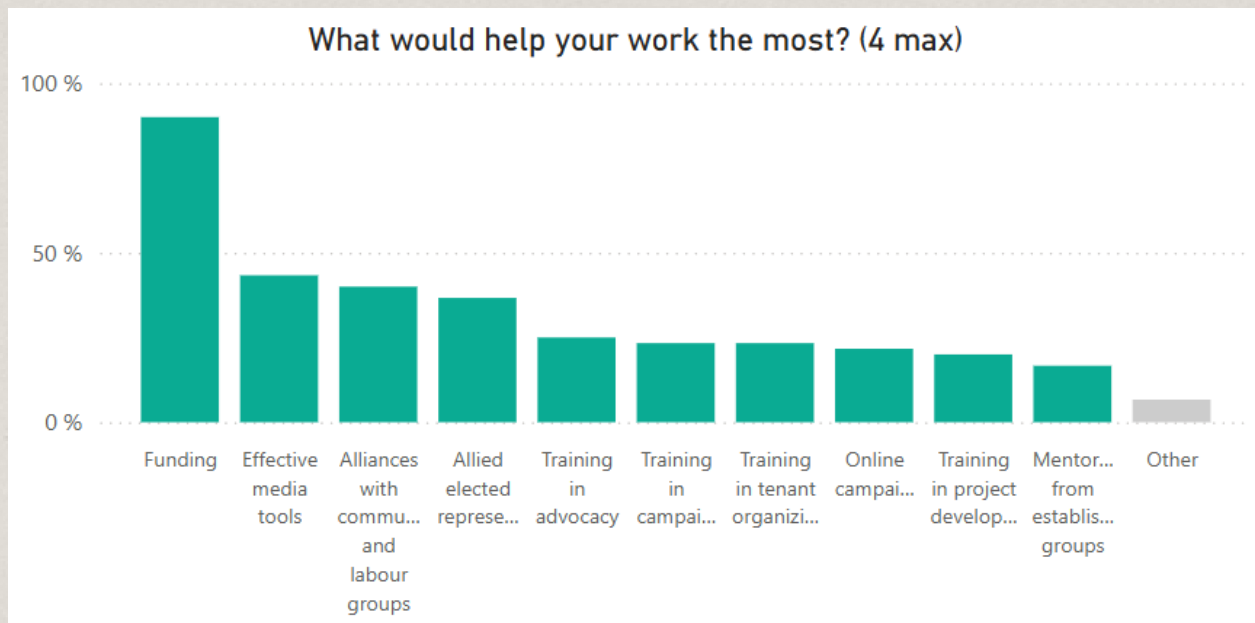
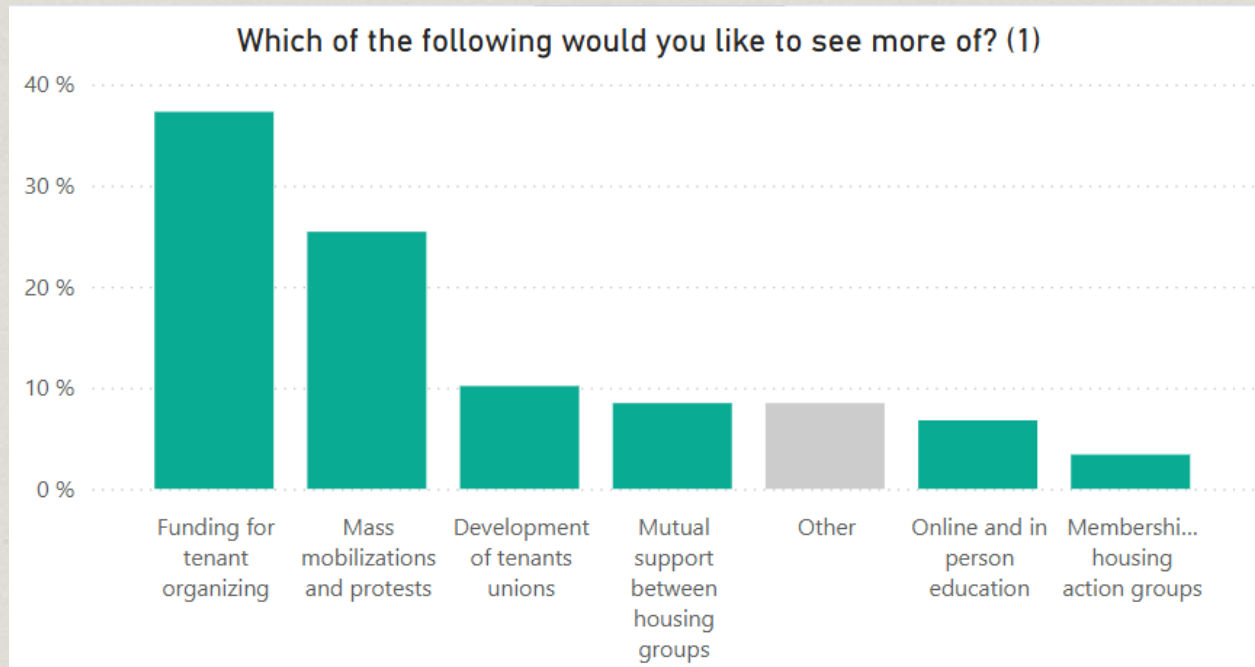




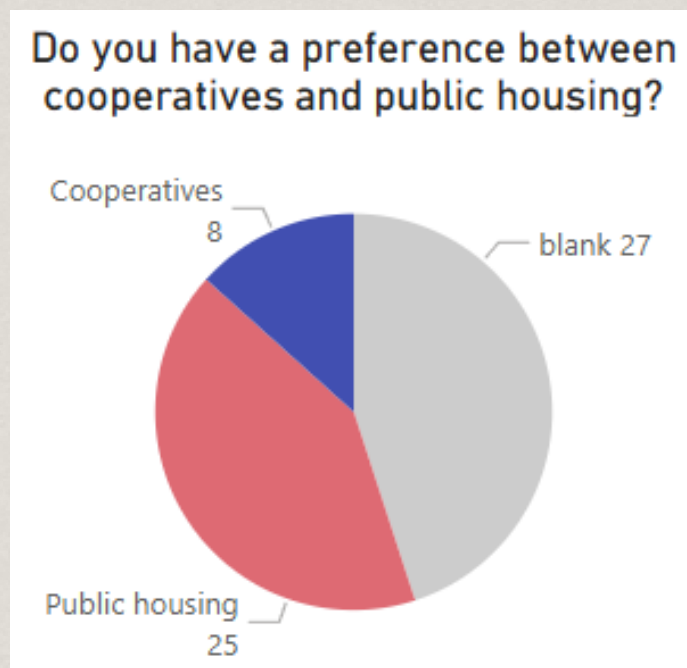
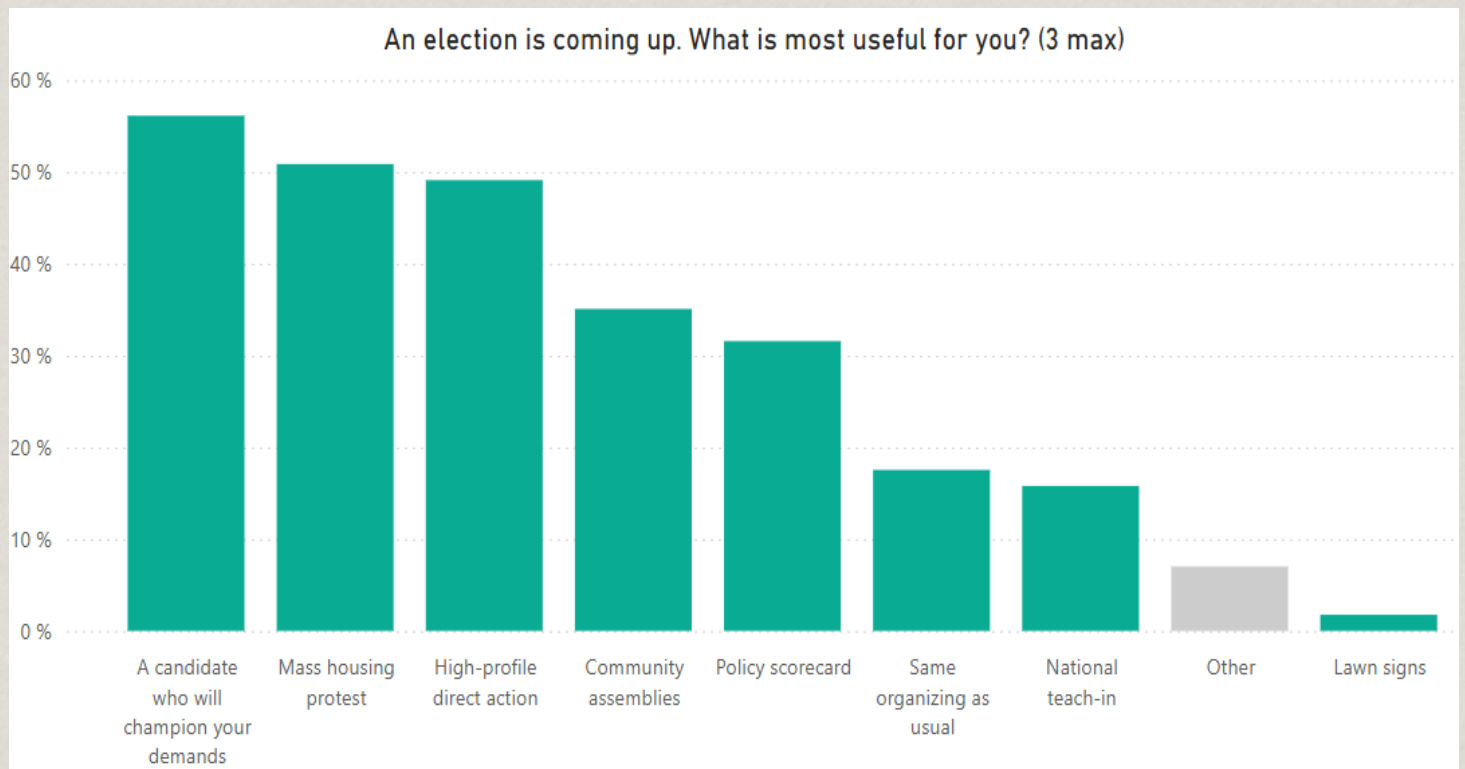
### What kinds of collaboration with other housing groups would be most useful to you? (3 max)















Solidarity Economy Incubation  
for Zero Emissions