

Outlook

Shame, Guilt, and Remorse: The Policy Drivers

Andrejs Skaburskis

Queen's University

Some of us have been doing analysis in the housing policy realm for a long time, and I am sure that much of our work has been rewarding and useful, but how often has it formed the basis for policy? What drives policy? I can address this question only in the Canadian context and will present three short anecdotes showing that the key driver is shame or its related emotions—guilt and remorse.

I can vaguely remember Montreal in the 1960s when people could take the train from historic downtown Victoria Station to Ottawa or Toronto. The ride started on tracks that ran above the worst slums in the city. At one point in the 1960s, a high fence was built along both sides of the tracks to form a canyon of billboards that blocked the view of the slums. We were spared the image of deprivation during the 1967 World's Fair and the Olympic Games. Montreal policy makers felt the need to spare us the images of slums and poverty. Why the Potemkin facade? Albert Low, the Montreal Zen teacher, asked in an e-mail exchange dated October 26, 2007, "Have you ever noticed how you cringe inside when you pass a panhandler?" We were spared the cringing, the obstacle to the view we wanted to project by hosting the global events. We were ashamed.

Here is a more recent example. Rent control was the main issue in the fiercely contested provincial election in Ontario in the fall of 1975. The Conservative Party was dead set against rent controls for all the reasons offered by economists. The party won the election, formed a minority government, and, despite its vowed opposition, enacted rent controls that December (Nash and Skaburskis 1998). Of course, many factors were in play, but a

very important one was the public feeling raised by front-page newspaper pictures showing grandparents on the sidewalk with their furniture after an economic eviction by a “gouging landlord.” Guilt is at the root of policy, and discomfort brought on by guilt moves the public to ask elected representatives for change.

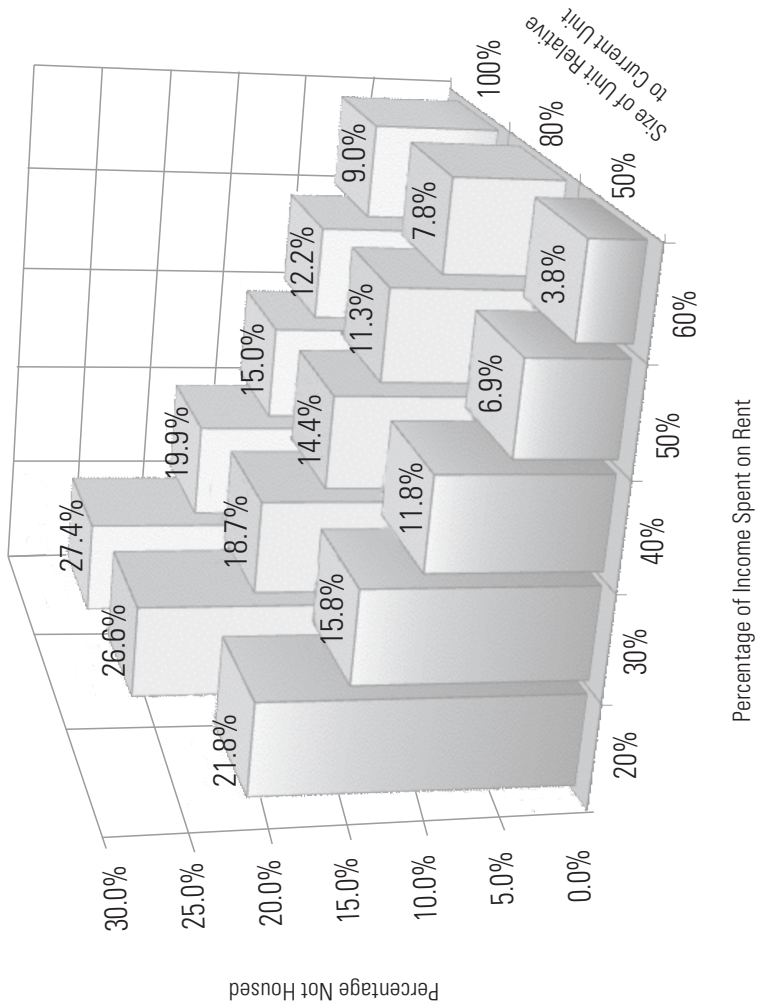
Let us skip to the 1990s. I recall the opening sentence of the speech made by the president of Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC, which is the Canadian equivalent of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development): “Canada is out of the social housing business,” he appeared to boast. Funding for new social housing stopped in 1993, and the new supply dried up two years later. I did not hear the speech; I only read it, but I could imagine the pride that imbued this statement. Today, Canada is reputed to have the most market-oriented housing sector in the G8 countries. No shame here. And some of us Canadians are still wishing for the more compassionate and innovative U.S. policies that have survived the Bush regime.¹ After reading the speech, I went to Ottawa to talk with a CMHC department director, who told me that our housing policies were not sustainable. I was surprised at the use of the politically correct imagery of the environmentalists to rationalize a regressive policy change. Sustainability is good—no guilt here.

I am just an analyst and could vent my displeasure only by doing a simulation with my talented student Diana Mok to show how many future renters in Toronto would be without housing in the year 2021 if no subsidies were available (Skaburskis and Mok 2000). We assumed that the 1991 price schedule would hold, that every in-migrating household that could afford to pay economic rents would generate new supply, and that the projected population increase would hold true. The size of the population without housing would depend on the proportion of income the in-migrating households would spend on rent and on the size of the new dwellings they would occupy. Figure 1 shows the results as a function of the two variables and presents a statistical image of a looming problem. Could that situation be politically sustainable, we asked? But I am sure that the analysts at CMHC knew all this back in the early 1990s. So, what changed?

The death of two homeless people in 2000 played a pivotal role in bringing the federal government back to housing: One death was within sight of

¹I am particularly impressed by the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) demonstration program. Its development appears to be based on careful thinking about housing need, the process of developing social and economic opportunity, the importance of social and cultural capital, and their spatial components. Regardless of its success, the implementation of such a sophisticated program shows the insightfulness and courage of the policy makers involved.

Figure 1. Toronto Renter Households Not Housed in 2021, Assuming That Rents Stay Fixed, That No New Social Housing Is Constructed, and That Household Growth Is As Projected



Source: Skaburskis and Mok (2000).

the Toronto city hall, the other within sight of the Prime Minister's residence in Ottawa. People connected these deaths with their locations, and that connection mattered a great deal. There have been many homeless deaths during Canadian winters,² but these two were linked by their location to government and, therefore, to us. Newspaper reports always referred to the sight lines, which brought the deaths home.

Shame underlies housing policy. It nurtures the indignation that gives birth to the public's demand for change. George Galster, in a conversation on August 20, 2007, suggested that guilt also motivates policy. There are subtle differences between guilt, shame (being ashamed), and remorse. I see guilt evoked by the sense of having been responsible, by knowing that I should have helped or spared others their pain. I can try to rationalize guilt away by building fences and letting someone else bear the burden. The same goes for being ashamed. Why be ashamed? I did not cause the distress; I am not diminished in the eyes of others by the plight of the homeless. I try to avoid this humiliation, but then I do not want outsiders to see our slums while I bask in the glow of our global events. Shame is subtle and arises as we recognize the failure in our attempt to deny our commonality with the people in distress. Remorse may come later and can be swamped by anger and then quieted by attempts to correct the situation.

Today, a problem is emerging in many of Canada's growing cities. Most inner cities have been gentrifying over the past three or four decades (Meligrana and Skaburskis 2005; Skaburskis 2006; Skaburskis and Moos 2008), and the supply of low-priced housing stock has been eroding. The loss of low-rent housing is one problem. but the displacement of renters may not be the most serious aspect. More serious is the fact that the restructuring of the city is generating no images depicting the losses. For the most part, we do not know where the people who have been displaced are going. We see no new slums to be shielded by billboards or frail people to be protected by rent control or homeless people to be housed in shelters. Gentrification is generating no images of hardship to make us ashamed. We have no guilt or remorse or shame, and we have no policy to deal with the undesirable side effects of gentrification.

²The 500th homeless death in Toronto was recorded by Johnson and Brewin on November 14, 2006.

In conclusion, I do policy analysis because I enjoy it, but my mind still values utility. If emotion, not reason, is the main policy driver, it follows that policy analysis is most pregnant, most useful, when it evokes shame, guilt, or remorse.

Author

Andrejs Skaburskis is a professor in the School of Urban and Regional Planning at Queen's University, Kingston Ontario, Canada.

This article is based on the keynote speech given on October 15, 2007, at the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association conference in Vancouver, British Columbia.

References

Johnson, Colin, and Josh Brewin. 2006. Toronto Marks 500th Homeless Death. *Toronto Star*, November 14. World Wide Web page <http://mostlywater.org/toronto_marks_500th_homeless_death>.

Meligrana, John, and Andrejs Skaburskis. 2005. Extent, Location, and Profiles of Continuing Gentrification in Canadian Metropolitan Areas, 1981–2001. *Urban Studies* 42(9):1569–92.

Nash, Catherine J., and Andrejs Skaburskis. 1998. Toronto's Changing Rent Control Policy. In *Rent Controls: Regulation and the Rental Housing Market*, eds. W. Dennis Keating, Michael Teitz, and Andrejs Skaburskis, 169–92. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, Center for Urban Policy Research.

Skaburskis, Andrejs. 2006. Filtering, City Change, and the Supply of Low-Priced Housing in Canada. *Urban Studies* 43(3):533–58.

Skaburskis, Andrejs, and Diane Mok. 2000. The Impact of Withdrawing Subsidies for New Rental Housing in Ontario. *Journal of Housing Studies* 15(2):213–38.

Skaburskis, Andrejs, and Markus Moos. 2008. The Redistribution of Residential Property Values in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver: Examining Neoclassical and Marxist Views on Changing Investment Patterns. *Environment and Planning A* 40:905–27.

