

# ECONOMIC POLICY TRENDS

April 2020

## THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CRISIS AND COVID-19: CAN SHORT-TERM RENTALS HELP?

The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing self isolation are exacerbating domestic violence (DV) in Canada, at a time when many women's emergency shelters are already at capacity. Short-term rentals (STR) can help relieve some of that pressure.

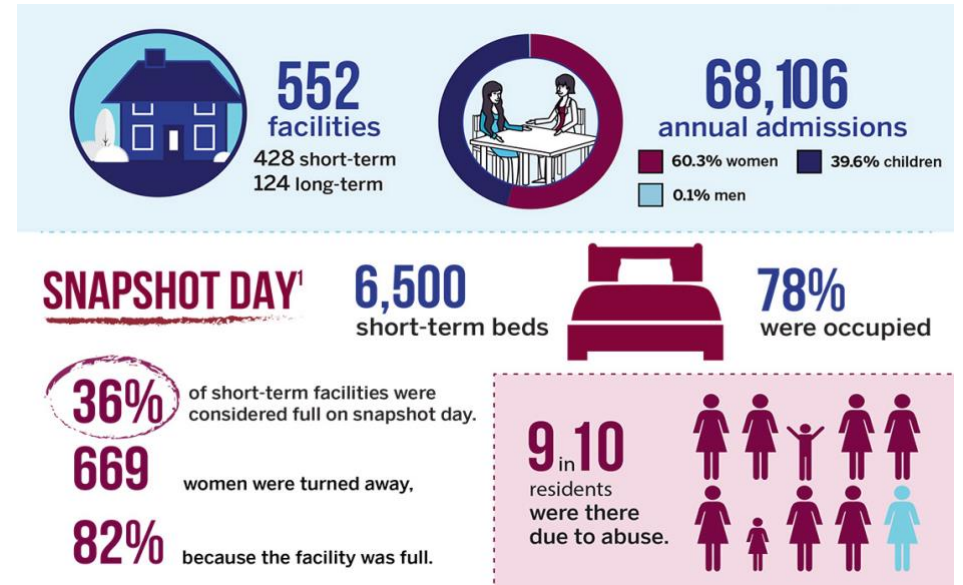
Pandemics create high levels of uncertainty and anxiety, [amplifying existing DV risk factors](#) and generating new ones. The COVID-19 pandemic is [no exception](#). The massive [increase in unemployment](#) adds to the economic insecurity and poverty-related stress many families are already facing. Current isolation measures are extending the time persons experiencing DV must spend with their abusers, reducing their opportunities to reach out for help. At the same time, the fear of virus exposure may discourage those in need to seek supports. Another critical factor for DV is the [expected spike in drug and alcohol consumption](#) as a coping mechanism for stress.

The rapid escalation of the COVID-19 crisis and the uncertainty regarding its duration are particularly concerning. While DV incidents tend to rise during [holidays](#), the known duration helps those at risk of domestic abuse to plan around expected outbursts of violence. By contrast, there is still [no indication](#) of how long the COVID-19 crisis and self isolation will last.

As Canada started to implement self isolation measures in March, emergency shelters braced themselves for a [surge in DV](#), given the experiences of other countries. China's Hubei province has seen [incidents of DV triple](#) during lockdown. In the United Kingdom, the number of domestic abuse killings has [more than doubled](#) compared to previous years. Faced with an increase of DV incidents of more than 30%, France is developing plans to house people escaping DV [in hotels](#).

Canada has more than 550 residential facilities for victims of abuse (RFVA), however many of these were running at capacity and turning people away before the COVID-19 lockdown.

## Residential Facilities for Victims of Abuse in Canada, 2017/2018



Source: [Statistics Canada](#)

As seen above, 36% of RFVAs were full and unable to admit new people on a snapshot day in April 2018, and more than 900 people were [turned away](#). Since then, the number of women and dependent children unable to find refuge in these emergency shelters has continued to increase, both in [Canada](#) and [Alberta](#).

STRs could play a role in mitigating the current DV shelter crisis. Like the hotel industry, the STR market has been delivered a [considerable blow](#) by the pandemic: vacancies have soared and many properties are sitting unoccupied. Unlike hotels, however, STRs have several attributes that make them better suited to the unique needs of those fleeing domestic abuse.

The explosive growth of STRs is due in part to their home-away-from-home qualities, which most hotels struggle to provide. In addition, STRs are numerous and widely dispersed. Compared to the [6500 beds in short-term and 1314 units in](#)

[long-term RFVAs](#), there were [more than 100,000 STRs](#) in Canada in 2016-2017, the majority of which were entire homes or apartments. Since then, the STR sector [has continued to grow](#). In Alberta, approximately 12,000 units were listed with Airbnb at the end of 2019. Though many STRs are located in big cities, a significant number operate in rural areas, which are typically [underserved by the support system](#) as well as the traditional accommodation industry.

A legitimate concern in using STRs to house DV survivors is whether they will be able to meet key security criteria. Due to their decentralized nature, STRs cannot replicate the security standards of dedicated shelters. That said, their sheer number makes them difficult to locate, and STR platforms like Airbnb are designed to ensure that the precise location of listed properties remains unknown. These features, while imperfect, can provide a significant degree of security to victims of abuse in need of shelter.

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**In these uncertain times, providing safe spaces for persons fleeing domestic violence must be a priority. As more shelters reach capacity, empty STR units could meet growing need in this area and help avert a crisis. However, the effectiveness of this approach rests on the involvement and partnership of four key groups: women's shelters and NGOs; government; STR platforms; and police forces.**

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### 1. Women's shelters and non-governmental organizations

Given their expertise and community trust, shelter staff and the social sector must play a central role in the development and implementation of this solution. This could involve establishing screening criteria for STR units and hosts, triaging cases to ensure that individuals with the most critical needs get priority access to women's shelters, and providing ongoing counselling and guidance to persons housed through the program. This approach would align with the [ongoing transition](#) at women's emergency shelters in Calgary from a first-come-first-served approach to prioritizing shelter space based on danger assessment scores, as well as with efforts to separate wraparound supports from shelters.

### 2. Governments at all levels

The federal government has announced [\\$40 million in support](#) for persons experiencing homelessness and women fleeing violence, and some of this could be used to support the use of STR units as safe housing. Provinces must also step in with funding. In addition, enhancements to [emergency supports for those escaping abuse](#) are vital. Financial security is often a barrier for individuals fleeing DV, the majority of whom are women, and is an even greater one now: though the pandemic has sent economic shockwaves across society, women have been [disproportionately impacted](#).

### 3. STR platforms

Online STR platforms must be involved in setting up this program, given their role as intermediary between hosts and guests. In particular, Airbnb—the largest platform in Canada—could build on its existing [Open Homes](#) initiative which helps people find temporary housing during critical times, or its [Frontline stays](#) program through which hosts offer COVID-19 responders places to stay. Additionally, STR platforms could help by waiving their host and guest fees. In partnership with DV professionals, platforms should also be involved in screening and educating hosts involved in this program.

### 4. Police forces

Police forces have an important part to play in maintaining close communication with both shelter organizations and DV survivors, and in offering responsive protections for survivors housed outside established shelters.

While not a solution for every case, STRs can play a role in addressing the current spike in DV. We have the rare opportunity to match excess demand in one sector with excess supply in another. Besides the staggering [economic cost of domestic violence](#), as a society we owe it to our most vulnerable members to provide support and protection during perhaps the biggest crisis Canada has faced in decades.