

**Off-Campus Student Experiences:
How Peterborough's Housing Crisis Affects Trent University's Off-Campus Students**

Morgan Timmermans

OPIRG Peterborough

March 22, 2023

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Research Question, Objectives and Significance.....	4
Theoretical and Methodological Framework.....	4
Ethical Considerations.....	6
Research Design.....	7
Themes, Findings, and Analysis.....	9
Housing Sacrifices.....	10
Student Well-being.....	11
Supports.....	14
Recommendations.....	15
Conclusion.....	16
Call to Action.....	18
References.....	19

Introduction

Research Problem

The number of international and domestic post-secondary students studying at Trent University has grown beyond Peterborough, Ontario's housing capacity. According to its most recent census, the city of Peterborough has a population of close to 84,000 residents (Census Profile, 2022). Specifically, Trent University has experienced a consecutive growth of undergraduate students from 2015 to 2022. During the 2015-2016 academic year, Trent University Symons campus welcomed 6,607 undergraduate students (Elson, 2022). A year following, this increased to 7,082 undergraduate students. In the academic year 2021-2022, the number of undergraduate students jumped to 9,460, an increase of 43% of undergraduates since the 2015-2016 academic year (Elson, 2022). In this 2022-2023 academic year, Trent University has 9,719 undergraduate and 753 graduate students, a grand total of 12,649 students (Trent University, 2022).

At the Peterborough campus, Trent University has 2,043 beds in its residence spaces (Trent University, 2022). With the present numbers, this leaves 10,606 students to find housing accommodations off-campus. Peterborough, Ontario, is experiencing a housing crisis, and Trent University's students are struggling. Peterborough's rental market faces severe shortages of low-income and affordable housing (Davis, 2019), leaving renters to pay the ultimate price. While Trent University has continued to be rated Ontario's best undergraduate university for the past twelve years (Trent University, 2022), its off-campus students struggle with housing challenges independently. As Trent University continues to increase enrollment every year without providing adequate and reasonable housing accommodations beyond its students' first

year of study, this research has found that students experience financial challenges, looming homelessness, and compromises.

Research Question, Objectives, and Significance

As a response to the hardships Trent University off-campus students are experiencing in Peterborough, Ontario's rental market regarding the lack of availability and affordability of housing, the proposed research project seeks to investigate the research question of how does the housing crisis in Peterborough, Ontario, impact Trent University off-campus students? This research project explores the connection between Peterborough's housing crisis and how its off-campus Trent University students experience its consequences. This project aims to raise awareness about Trent University's off-campus student experiences related to housing for an under-researched topic. Prior literature has not focused on off-campus Trent University students in Peterborough, Ontario. The existing body of literature has yet to survey off-campus Trent students from a diverse population sample. However, prior research by authors such as Pillai et al. (2021) and Sotomayor et al. (2019), will provide context about the housing crisis in Peterborough, Ontario, neo-liberal university ideologies, and other off-campus university student experiences. The research study is a community-based participatory project, utilizing a qualitative survey approach to analyze the research question.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This study has utilized a structural, phenomenological approach and intersectional theory to explore the research question. A structural approach supplied a framework to investigate the housing crisis in Peterborough, Ontario, rooted in social and economic structures, relations, neoliberal ideology and politics. This approach has also assisted with unmasking the

neo-liberalism that serves to maintain the status quo of Trent University's Peterborough campus without recognizing the impact the housing crisis has on its off-campus students.

In addition, a structural approach assisted the following goals of this study: facilitating the voices of marginalized students, reducing student stigma, reducing student discrimination, reducing student/university power imbalances, and advocating for more services and resources for Trent University off-campus students.

The phenomenological approach has assisted me to build insights into the off-campus students' lived experiences in Peterborough, Ontario's rental market. In this project, I conducted semi-structured survey interviews with Trent University off-campus students to accomplish this approach. In addition, this approach has challenged structural or normative assumptions about Peterborough, Ontario's housing crisis and Trent University off-campus students.

An intersectional analysis assisted me in recognizing "the network of connections between social categories such as race, class and gender, especially when this may result in additional disadvantage or discrimination" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2022). Having an awareness of intersectionality has provided me with the foundation to understand and analyze my unconscious biases and prejudices that I may have had toward individuals from different social locations at the start of this study to minimize my unintentional harm. An intersectional analysis has also provided me with the framework to investigate the potential biases and discrimination that Peterborough, Ontario's housing market could show towards Trent University's off-campus students. By having this understanding of intersectionality, I was able to investigate methods and practices to bring awareness to the needs of off-campus Trent University students. In addition, this kind of analysis assisted with examining the students' social

backgrounds and oppressions to understand what they believe will be appropriate interventions to meet their housing needs.

Ethical Considerations

There are numerous ethical difficulties to be considered in undertaking this study. While researchers strive to conduct investigations ethically, there is always room to create unintentional harm. Ethics is “about the principles in society regarding right versus wrong” (Calderwood & Morgenshtern, 2020, p. 120). When conducting this study, an important question was the degree of harm "that could potentially be experienced by participants because of participation in the study" (Calderwood & Morgenshtern, 2020, p. 120). During the study, ethical problems were considered. As a researcher, Calderwood and Morgenstern (2020) explain that I must:

“Protect participants and anyone who might be affected by the research process or results;
Protect against researcher needs taking precedence over participants’ and general public needs;
Maintain integrity, honesty, transparency, and professionalism aligned with social work practice,
Use a framework aligned with social work principles,
Achieve results that are valid and trustworthy; report accurate and balanced findings; and
Promote ethical/appropriate use of findings” (p. 120).

Another ethical challenge I had to consider is how my social location as a white female settler from a middle-class socio-economic background would differ from participants of a different social site. Thus, I had to consider what rights I had to explore the experiences of off-campus students with other social locations than my own. Therefore, as a part of my social work degree placement at OPIRG Peterborough, I have selected to investigate a population that are also students such as myself and who are potentially experiencing more significant housing challenges than myself to ensure they have a place to call home.

It was critical that before engaging with the survey, participants read through and provided their consent. The consent form for this research study included: the study name, a description of the researcher, the purpose of the research, what the participants will be asked to do in the study, the potential risks and discomforts one may experience when completing the survey, the potential benefits of the research study to the participant, an explanation of their voluntary participation, a description of their decision to withdraw from the study, how their information will be held confidentially, and who to ask about further questions about the research.

Research Design

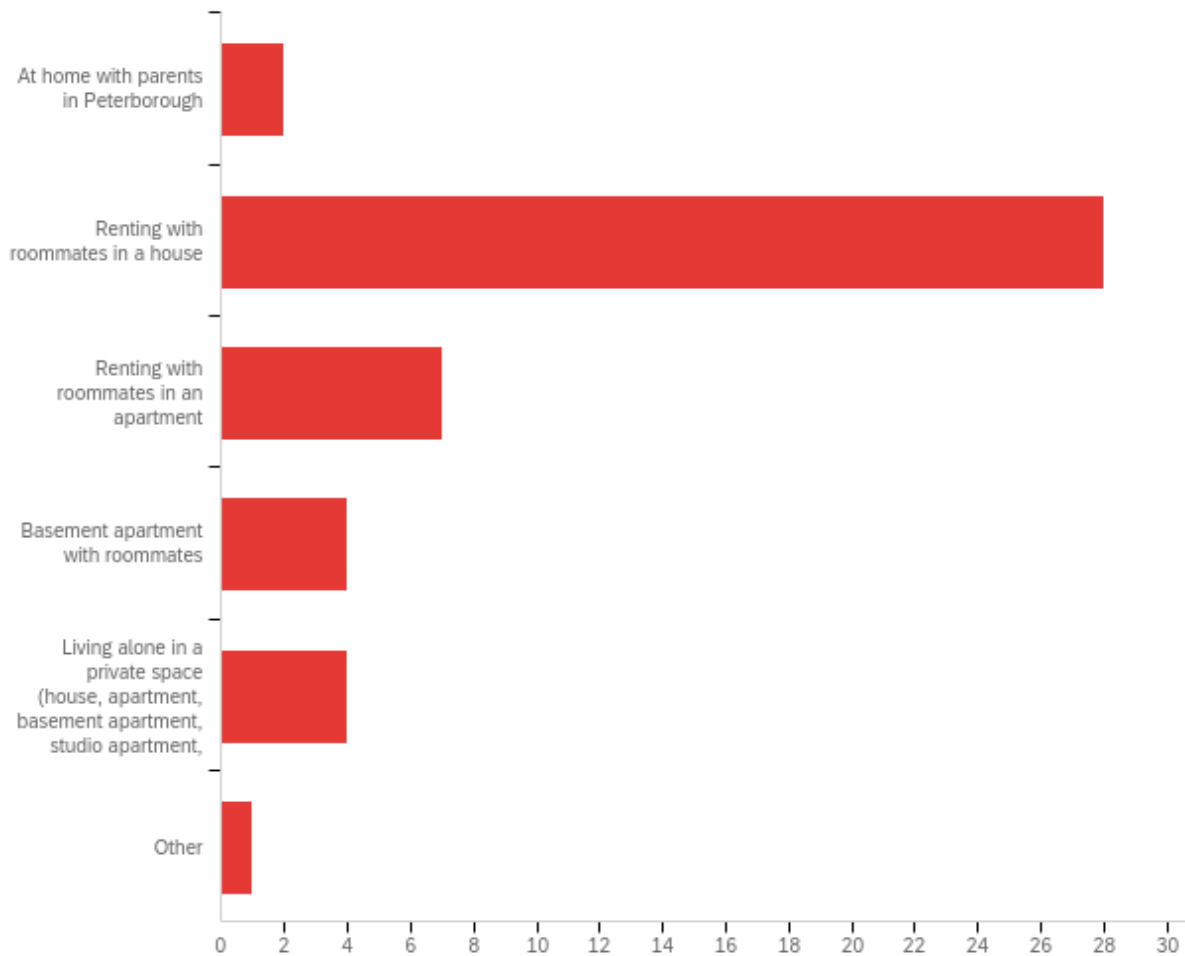
The research conducted in this study used a qualitative data collection method. Two methods of information sharing were used to gather diverse living experiences from Trent University's off-campus students, including students from different disciplines and years of study. First, a poster was developed to collect off-campus students' experiences. It asked for the interested participants to be over 18 and a student at Trent University Symons campus who lived off-campus in Peterborough, Ontario. The poster included information about the study, how to contact the researcher for further questions, and a QR Code to participate in the online survey. The data for this research was collected electronically through the online survey platform Qualtrics where it was encrypted and password protected. Posters were posted at Lady Eaton College, Champlain College, Otonabee College, the Student Centre, and Peter Gzowski College. In addition, a copy of the poster was posted on OPIRG Peterborough's social media platforms.

The qualitative online survey consisted of a total of twenty-three questions. The questions ranged from descriptive questions without risking confidentiality to questions that asked participants to select an option from the list that best fits their situation and to then elaborate on their experiences.

Participants

A total of 52 responses were collected in the online survey. Four respondents were in their first year of study at Trent, eight were in their second year of study, eighteen were in their third year of study, nine were in their fourth year of study, and thirteen selected others. Six respondents identified their gender as man, nine identified as non-binary, twenty-nine identified as women, one identified as genderfluid, one identified as Two-Spirit and six respondents chose not to identify. Eleven respondents identified as transgender, thirty-two did not identify as transgender, and nine did not answer the question. Out of the 52 participants, 56% identified as white or Caucasian, 6% identified as Indigenous, Anishinaabe, or First Nation, 4% identified as Asian, 2% identified as Black, 2% identified as African, 2% identified as Ambiguous, 4% identified as Mixed, 2% identified as Indian Sikh, 2% identified as South European, and 23% chose not to identify. Out of the fifty-two participants, 7.6% defined their sexual orientation as asexual, 19% as bisexual, 37% as heterosexual, 7.7% as lesbian, 7.7% as pansexual, and 21% as queer.

The current living arrangements of the respondents differed. 4% responded that they lived at home with their parents, 54% were renting with roommates in a house, 13% were renting with roommates in an apartment, 7.7% were living in a basement apartment with roommates, 7.7% were living alone in a private space (house, apartment, basement apartment, studio apartment), 2% selected their current living situation as other, and 12% of respondents did not answer. The current monthly expenses with housing were mixed results as well. Out of the forty-three respondents that responded to this question, 67% paid \$500-\$700, 7.7% paid \$700-\$900, 14% paid \$900-\$1,100, and 7% paid \$1,700 plus.



Themes, Findings, Analysis

In response to the research question, ‘How does the housing crisis in Peterborough, Ontario impact Trent University off-campus students?’, themes emerged around three main areas: housing sacrifices, student well-being, and support. Within housing sacrifices, experiences of employment, and competition were noticed. Also, safety, food insecurity, and mental health difficulties were identified in student well-being. Finally, within support, further recommendations were provided. The research results will be noted, accompanied by an analysis of the findings of the research question.

Housing Sacrifices

Employment

A student's housing accommodations represent a significant expense in their post-secondary experience. For several students, housing in cities near their campus is required to pursue post-secondary education (Mutz & Currie, 2019, p. 60). However, numerous challenges hinder a student's ability to secure and maintain housing. First, although Sotomayor et al. (2019) explain that being a student is "often assumed as a full-time occupation," students are regularly required to spend an unwarranted amount of time in the "“hustle economy” juggling multiple part-time jobs, complex responsibilities, and trying to address their housing insecurity and financial stress” (p. 3).

In the survey, the respondents detail their experiences of balancing their studies while working to pay for off-campus housing. One respondent shares, “I’m thinking about finding a job this or next semester to kind of cover my expenses on rent. But actually I don’t have enough time cause the courses workload is quite high. So if I find a job it will definitely impact my studies and lower my performance academically”. Another respondent states that they have had to "work significantly weekly hours, which leaves me with less time and energy for my academics.” One participant also explains how working has affected their academics and overall well-being. They state that they "wanted to focus on academics during the school year, but my parents could not afford to assist me with rent AND things like food, gas, and enjoyment costs. I had to maintain a part time job to be able to afford these things, and still did not have much left over for enjoyment. It was also extremely draining on my mental health, energy, and time management to complete assignments between moments of school and work".

Competition

Another theme raised by the literature and survey responses is the changes universities have made to compete in Canada's ever-changing neoliberal society. As more Canadian universities have had to become more dependent on student tuition to fill the "financial holes" left by a lack of public funding, universities such as Trent University have dramatically increased enrollment. However, in most cases, dormitory construction has not been able to keep up with enrollments (Revington & August, 2020). For example, Trent University's current residence spaces at the Peterborough campus can only accommodate 2,043 students. This leaves 10,606 (Trent by the numbers, 2022) students who went independently to find housing in Peterborough's limited rental market.

Trent's off-campus respondents echoed the challenges of finding housing in a highly competitive rental market. Most respondents explained that their options were out of their budgets, did not meet their needs, or were already rented out by the time they responded to the ad. Spending months on finding housing is a common theme as well. Survey participants explain that they had searched for two, three, and even five months until they found a place to live in Peterborough. One respondent states, "I think both times I've moved I viewed like 15-20+ places and applied to all of them before I got a place to stay." Another person shares, "I spent months looking and applying and applying and felt like I was getting nowhere. The only reason I was able to find my current place was because I knew the person who was moving out. It seems like the only/best chance you have is to know someone who has a place or have five friends to rent with".

Student Well-Being

Safety

In a competitive market, students often have to settle with rental options that they are uncomfortable with or that are unsafe. The literature points to students experiencing deteriorating units, overcrowded, unhygienic units, and units unmaintained by landlords (Pillai et al., 2021, p. 13). These "predatory practices of landlords" often expose students to "overcrowding, lack of privacy, lack of access to communal areas, no ventilation, poor heating or cooling and no fire code standards, among other unsafe conditions." (Sotomayor et al., 2019, p. 7). The student respondents were similar to the literature. Many commented on their units' unsafe living conditions and how landlords were unwilling to attend to the repairs. One respondent stated, "My first house that I was in for second & third year was really bad. I didn't have any windows in my room and our house was infected with bugs. Our landlord did not care. My current house is better but the student housing area downtown is extremely unsafe. I am too afraid to get a job serving downtown because of the walk home at night". Another student shares, "I've had much worse experiences previously, had a landlord who dealt with a broken/cracked bathtub/shower that leaked water into the living room by putting duct tape on it and then just waiting 6 months to do anything else." Students are also putting their health at risk while staying in unsafe properties. For instance, one experience shares, "The house I ended up living in cannot have windows open and has caused my allergies to worsen and there is also no ventilation in the kitchen. A doctor even acknowledged that my housing conditions are making my health worse." Likewise, another participant explains, "There is mould on the bathroom walls, our smoke detectors don't work, our front door lock is dying and will lock us out consistently and our laundry floods the main floor."

Food Insecurity

Making sacrifices was another prominent theme in the literature and data. Calder et al. (2016) argue that students are often "making a choice between rent and food" (p. 3). Similarly, Sotomayor et al. (2019) comment that "many post-secondary students from low-income households experience college or university with minimal food and housing security" (p. 3). The respondents had similar answers when answering how Peterborough's housing crisis has impacted them financially. To make ends meet, off-campus Trent University students are cutting into their grocery budgets to pay for housing. Respondents comment, "I'm paying much more than I want to for housing and its straining me to find money for groceries. It physically hurts to pay each month." Others share their experiences of barely being able to afford food, putting more money into paying rent and thus eating more unhealthy options. Some students have to reduce their meals to have money to pay for rent. A respondent shares, "I only eat once or twice a day, but sometimes I have to cut that down to one or zero times to meet bills. With the cost of food rising alongside rent, sometimes I skip eating for days." Another participant explains, "This [Peterborough's housing crisis] has led to hungry days/nights and choices in foods that I don't enjoy but are cheap." Going to bed hungry is also common. One student shared, "Biggest change is spending less on groceries and non essential items which just kinda sucks. Cuz now it's just like yes I can afford my room but I'm going to bed hungry and I can't really do any of my old hobbies because I can't afford supplies."

Mental Health

A student's physical health is not the only area sacrificed due to Peterborough's housing crisis. Their emotional and mental health is also impacted. First, looking for housing places considerable stress and anxiety on the participants in the survey. For example, one participant responded, "I spent the entire spring and summer being constantly stressed about where I would

be living which impacted my ability to prepare for the school semester." Another participant shares, "You feel like you're going to be homeless when you first start looking. It feels overwhelming and impossible, especially when you're 18." Searching for housing creates a constant stress on students. A student shares, "The constant looming threat of homelessness or not being able to find a place to live just sticks in the back of your mind. No matter what else you're doing, there's this knot in your stomach and the threat of not having a place to live gets closer every day you haven't found a place to live yet." Retaining housing is another cause for significant stress. One student comments, "I went into a seasonal depression and my grades fell a lot due to having financial stress due to expensive housing." Another states, "I've ended up in the psych ward multiple times over the past six years due to stress related to money and housing security." Overall, most students explain feeling trapped. One respondent comments, "We're stuck in our house. We're house poor."

Supports

Since colleges and universities strive to increase enrollment to boost revenues, Haverila et al. (2020) argue that institutions should try to retain students (p. 360). In a recent study, Haverila et al. (2020) found that university "support services are a key determinant of whether students choose to withdraw from an institution or not" (p. 364). When asked if they believed Trent University supports its off-campus students, every single respondent answered that they did not feel adequately supported. One respondent shares,

"I have seen other students at Trent who were impacted severely by the housing crisis and had to couch surf with friends, commute hours just for class, even some accessing the shelters just for a bed inside and in the same city as the university. Especially for international students, there is not enough attention or compassion for these students to have housing around the campus that they spend thousands of dollars on just to attend. Also, having no option for a dining plan when I lived on campus in dorms is still something that I am paying for as a 4th year student. There is no way to get that money

back to me and this is money I could use for more important/essential things now that I am off campus, and the school has provided no options or solutions to the many students who are still desperately trying to use up their meal plan before graduation.”

Many respondents point out that by bringing in so many more students each year, Trent University is making it impossible for its current students to access support or housing. One participant comments, “If the school supported students, they wouldn’t be bringing in a record number of admissions each year. They would monitor rental websites and flag houses that do not meet the safety requirements. The school could provide more funding for those that need it.” Another student states, “If they wanted to support off-campus students, they’d accept a normal amount of students to begin with instead of accepting way too many students.” One participant also shares, “ [Trent University) blame(s) students for not being able to find housing when they accept thousands more students each year while ignoring the lack of new space to house them. The last time more residences were built was over a decade ago. They would rather avoid ownership than actually acknowledge the fact they are responsible for a large part of the issue.” Others called Trent University out for failing to provide housing options for upper-year students. Furthermore, another respondent states, “Trent has a responsibility with the increase in international students to make sure that there are houses available.” Another even went so far as to suggest that Trent University “caused the housing crisis by not having adequate upper-year housing.”

Recommendations

Off-campus students at Trent University Symons campus share numerous housing challenges while finding housing in Peterborough, Ontario. Respondents have also stated that they do not feel supported by Trent University during Peterborough's housing crisis. However, when asked what changes, if any, do you believe Trent University needs to make to better

support its off-campus students regarding Peterborough's housing crisis, students shared the following responses: "Offering housing to upper years. Investing in downtown Peterborough in general" and "Being in communication with the city and government to create more housing options closer to campus for students. For students like me who lived on campus in their first year but have not lived on campus for 3 years, having a way to access unused meal plan funds and be able to use that money elsewhere. Even the minimum required amount to put onto the meal plan in residence is a lot of money to give upfront, and it is currently still weighing on my mind as a source of guilt/stress (trying to spend it all before graduation, unreasonable use of a lot of money that could be going to rent or regular groceries)". Several suggested that Trent University needs to build more residence buildings for upper-year students. Finally, students recommended that Trent University not accept as many students as they have been. Responses included: "Lower acceptance rate – a rate that is sustainable with the housing rates. Or at least be transparent about housing – when we first moved here there wasn't much/any coverage on the housing crisis. It might have impacted my interest in studying here", "Not letting in so many students that they don't have the room for. Why are you upping your acceptance rates when the students you already have are attempting to live in their cars and generally are struggling" and "I believe Trent needs to halt or slow their growth in enrollment, as the available housing cannot support the number of incoming students."

Conclusion

This research study utilized a phenomenological approach to investigate the question, "How does the housing crisis in Peterborough, Ontario, impact Trent University off-campus students?" To accomplish these results from an online survey were separated into three themes and subthemes to organize respondents' answers. Sacrifices, experiences of employment, and

competition were noticed within housing. Also, safety, food insecurity, and mental health difficulties were seen in student well-being. Finally, within support, further recommendations were given by the respondents. The research results were supplied, accompanied by an investigation of the findings of the research question. Based on the results of this research project, Trent University's off-campus students are negatively impacted by Peterborough's housing crisis. Overall, the findings indicate that their academic career and well-being are negatively affected while trying to navigate and maintain off-campus housing. The results from this study also suggest that as an institution, Trent University is responsible for increasing its support for its off-campus students by creating more off-campus residence options and limiting enrollment to curb competition in Peterborough, Ontario's limited rental market.

Limitations

A significant limitation of this project was its timeframe. As a placement student for the Bachelor of Social Work degree, the study had to fit within two school semesters during practicum hours. If more time could have been dedicated to the research, the project may have allowed in-depth interviews with Trent University and Fleming College students.

A second limitation is attempting to complete a Master's thesis level type project independently as a Bachelor's student. Therefore, most of my first-semester practicum was spent familiarizing myself with the types of theoretical approaches and research methods required to complete a project such as this.

Future Research

Further research opportunities could involve interviewing or surveying Fleming College students in Peterborough, Ontario and Trent University's off-campus students at the Durham

campus. A call to action could also be explored by interviewing Trent University's administration and Peterborough's City Council members.

Call To Action

The findings of this study reveal that off-campus Trent University students in Peterborough, Ontario, are experiencing unprecedented challenges due to Peterborough, Ontario's housing crisis. The challenges and struggles brought to light from this study must be taken genuinely and acted upon by the Trent University administration and all levels of the Canadian government. The experiences of Peterborough's off-campus Trent University students must be addressed to implement positive social change. Post-secondary off-campus students should not have to miss meals, sacrifice their educational experience, or compromise their safety or health to ensure they can find or maintain appropriate housing while getting a degree. These student experiences are unjust, and for the service and degree they are paying thousands of dollars into, more action and support need to be given by Trent University. To ensure social justice for all its students, the relevant institutions must take immediate action and change, so others do not have to go through similar experiences in Peterborough, Ontario's housing crisis.

References

- Calder, M., Richter, S., Mao, Yuping., Burns, K., Mogale, R., & Danko, M. (2016). *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 46, No. 2, 92-110.
- Calderwood, K., & Morgenshtern, M. (2020). Multiple ways of knowing using qualitative and quantitative methods. *Trent's Department of Social Work*.
- Census Profile, 2016 Census. (2022). Retrieved from <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=3515014&Geo2=PR&Code2=61&SearchText=Peterborough&SearchType=Begin&SearchPR=01&B1=Visible%20minority&TABID=1&type=0>
- Elson, K. (2022). *Growth at Trent University strains Peterborough's housing supply*. The Peterborough Examiner.
<https://www.thepeterboroughexaminer.com/opinion/columnists/2022/01/08/kevin-elson-growth-at-trent-university-strains-peterboroughs-housing-supply.html>
- Haverila, M., Haverila, K., & McLaughlin, C. (2020). Variables affecting the retention of students in higher education institutions: A comparison between international and domestic students. *Journal of International Students*, 10, No. 2, 358-382.
<https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i2.1849ojed.org/jis>
- Motz, T.A., & Currie, C.L. (2019). Racially-motivated housing discrimination experienced by Indigenous postsecondary students in Canada: Impacts on PTSD symptomology and perceptions of university stress. *Public Health*, 176, 59-67.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2018.12.011>
- Oxford Learner's Dictionary. (2022). *Intersectionality*.

<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/intersectionality?q=intersectionality>

Pillai, A., Vieta, M., & Sotomayor, L. (2021). University student housing as business proposition and entrepreneurial activity: The Canadian case. *Housing Policy Debate*, 1-24.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10511482.2021.1883703>

Revington, N., & August, M. (2020). Making a market for itself: The emergent financialization of student housing in Canada. *Economy and Space*, 52, No. 5, 856-877.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X19884577>

Sotomayor, L., Tarhan, D., Vieta, M., McCartney, S., & Mas, A. (2019). When students are house poor: Urban universities, student marginality, and the hidden curriculum of student housing. *Cities*, 124, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2022.103572>

Trent University. (2022). *Trent by the Numbers*. <https://www.trentu.ca/about/trent-numbers>

Trent University. (2022). *Trent University Ontario's #1 Undergraduate University 12 Years Running*.

<https://www.trentu.ca/news/story/34491#:~:text=In%20the%20overall%20national%20rankings,%2C%20and%20%231%20in%20Ontario.>

Trent University. (2022). *Welcome to Student Housing*. <https://www.trentu.ca/housing/>