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Ontario's Student Housing Is Also a Climate Crisis

What if the place students live is quietly contributing to Ontario's climate crisis? Although student housing is typically presented as an affordability issue, it is also an environmental one, and ignoring this fact is intensifying the issue.

Students are being forced into older, energy-inefficient homes or farther away from campus due to a lack of purpose-built student housing throughout Ontario, particularly in university cities like Guelph (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2023). Many of these homes use more energy than contemporary structures and were not built with multiple tenants in mind (Natural Resources Canada, 2022). However, students who are unable to find housing often rely on cars or long commutes, which increases transportation emissions, one of Canada's largest sources of greenhouse gases (Government of Canada, 2023). Thus, inadequate housing policies are directly causing damage to the environment. Despite having very few options, students are frequently held responsible for overcrowding or unsustainable living habits.

Students are left to fill gaps in an already congested housing market. This causes an increase in urban sprawl, inefficient land use, and higher emissions. Some argue that increased housing construction intensifies environmental harm from land development and construction emissions. Although this worry is legitimate, it ignores the long-term advantages of energy-efficient, high-density housing (United Nations Environment Programme, 2021). By keeping students closer to campus, purpose-built student housing can limit urban sprawl, drastically reduce per-person energy use, and support public transportation systems.

If Ontario is serious about tackling climate change, it must begin by incorporating student housing into its environmental strategy. Housing directly affects emissions and urban sustainability but is often viewed as an affordability issue. Investing in high-density, energy-efficient housing that accommodates growing student populations and lessens environmental impact is a responsibility that governments and academic institutions must take.

Long commutes, urban extension, and energy consumption per person can all be reduced by purpose-built student housing. Without these adjustments, students will still be forced into unsustainable and ineffective living situations without their own fault. Meaningful progress requires systemic change because individual action alone cannot fix a system that is fundamentally flawed.