



# **WUSA Return to Campus Housing Survey**

**December 2021**



## Survey Overview

In response to anecdotal reports from students expressing their difficulties finding housing for the Winter 2022 term, WUSA developed a Return to Campus Housing Survey to understand the extent of these issues. Our goals are to create practical, impactful, and actionable recommendations to alleviate stress and burden on students, and advocate to the University of Waterloo administration on these recommendations. The survey went live on December 1, 2021 at 4:00pm and was available for students to complete until December 8, 2021 at 11:59pm. An email invitation for the survey was sent to 36,759 University of Waterloo undergraduate students at 4:30pm on December 1 and by the next morning at 8:30am, 2100 responses were already recorded. This is significantly more responses than previous surveys conducted by WUSA; for example, the Return to Campus Survey conducted just two months before used the same email invitation method yet received only 800 responses in this same timeframe. By the end of the survey period, 4451 responses were recorded, although many were in-progress responses, meaning that students opened the survey but did not continue through the questions. After removing 1567 in-progress responses as well as students who indicated they were not planning to live in either Waterloo, Kitchener, Cambridge, or Stratford, 2884 remained to be included in data analysis. Of these responses, 2728 were from students hoping to live in Waterloo, 95 from Kitchener, 52 from Cambridge and 9 from Stratford. This report focuses specifically on those responses from students in Waterloo.

## In-person vs. Online Courses

Students were asked to indicate which situations applied to them for Winter 2022 as it related to their classes and co-op placement. Students were able to select more than one option as we recognized that students might have a mixture of both online and in-person classes. As a result, the results outlined below do not equal 100% but rather reflect the percentage of total respondents that chose each individual option:

- 89.75% of students indicated they had in-person classes on Waterloo campus
- 18.63% of students indicated they had remote classes and would like to live in Waterloo
- 5.95% of students said they had a co-op placement that required them to be in Waterloo
- 4.89% of students said they had a remote co-op placement and would like to live in Waterloo

It is clear then that most students either had at least one class or a co-op placement that required them to be in Waterloo for the Winter 2022 term.

## Status of Housing Search

Students were explicitly asked whether they had secured housing for the Winter 2022 term. Of the 2728 students who responded to this question:

- 52.27% (1426 students) indicated that yes, they have committed to housing
- 47.73% (1302 students) indicated that no, they are still searching for housing.

At the time of the survey, there was less than a month before classes and co-op placements were set to begin for the Winter 2022 term, and there were still a significant number of students searching for housing. These 1302 students, of course, only represent the sample of students who chose to respond to our survey. We have no way of knowing the actual number of students who were still searching for housing in Waterloo at that time.

An additional piece of context that is important to consider is the fact that when our survey asked students who had not secured housing what their living situation was, **70.79%** selected the option **"If I cannot find my own housing, I will have to secure housing elsewhere as there are no family/friends I can live with."** Whereas **"I have family/friends in Waterloo I can live with"** and **"I have family/friends outside of Waterloo that I can live with"** only received 3.97% and 25.23% of responses, respectively. It is often a common assumption that students have friends and family to fall back on for accommodations, if necessary, but these results show that this is not necessarily the case. As can be expected, international students had the highest proportion (85.84%) of those who did not have family to live with. However, a large proportion of Canadian citizens (64.25%) also answered this way as well.

## Previous Housing Search Experience

To determine whether their previous experience searching for housing had any impact on the ability to find housing for the Winter 2022 term, our survey asked students whether they had gone through the process of leasing or subletting a place in Waterloo before.

- For students who had secured Winter 2022 housing, **64.84%** said they had gone through the process before
- Compared to students who had not yet secured Winter 2022 housing, **74.94%** said they had gone through the process before

Thus, compared to students who had secured housing, students who had not secured housing for Winter 2022 actually had more experience searching for housing in the past. This demonstrates that experience going through the process of leasing

or subletting a place in Waterloo previously does not necessarily guarantee success securing housing for Winter 2022.

## Housing Search Resources

It is also important to determine whether students are exhausting all available resources in their search for housing. To investigate this, students were asked to select which resources they had used to search for housing in Winter 2022. The options that students were provided to select from included:

- Facebook
- Other social media
- Asking friends and peers
- Asking family
- Craigslist and Kijiji
- Airbnb
- Company websites, emails, or phone numbers
- UW On-Campus Housing

Students were also given the option of noting any “other” resources they had used. Since students often use multiple methods during their housing search, the question appeared in a “select all that apply” format.

For students who had secured housing, 1372 students responded to this question and selected 4302 different choices. This means that these students utilized an average of 3.13 different resources throughout their housing search each. The resource that received the most selections was Facebook (21.48%) followed by asking friends and peers (17.36%) and applying to UW On-campus housing (13.25%).

For students who had not secured housing, 1290 students responded to this question and selected 6249 different choices. This means that these students utilized an average of 4.84 different resources throughout their housing search each. Similar to above, the resource that received the most selections was Facebook (19.11%) followed by asking friends and peers (16.79%) and Craigslist/Kijiji (13.99%). In addition, for students who had not secured housing, a higher percentage of total respondents selected each resource compared to students who had secured housing. For example, although Facebook was the most used resource for each group of students, only 66.35% of total students who had secured housing used it compared to 92.56% of students who had not secured housing. The trend was reflected for each resource option. This outcome was expected given that students who had not secured housing selected more different resource options than students who had secured housing.

Overall, these results demonstrate that both groups of students have used and are using a variety of different resources to search for housing for the Winter 2022 term. In fact, students who have not secured housing seem to be open to using more resources compared to students who have secured housing. This could possibly be a result of the need to adapt and utilize more resources the longer the search process takes.

## Academic Options

As students attempt to make plans for their Winter 2022 term particularly as it pertains to securing housing, it is important to recognize the extent to which students are considering different academic options. Our survey asked students if they had discussed any options for Winter 2022 with their Academic Advisor as it related to concerns securing housing. This question appeared in a “select all that apply” format so students were able to select multiple options from the following list:

- Selecting only remote or online courses
- Taking part-time course load
- Taking time off academics
- Removing majors/minors/specializations
- Taking course from a different institution
- Transferring to a different institution

Again, this means that the results outlined below equal more than 100%. For students who had secured housing, 1328 students responded to the question and 1218 students (91.72%) indicated that they had not been in contact with their Academic Advisor as it relates to their housing situation. In terms of options that were discussed, 5.80% of students discussed selecting only remote or online courses and 2.18% discussed taking a part-time course load. Less than 2% of students selected each of the remaining options. When looking at total choices by faculty, Arts had the highest percentage of students who had discussed any of these options with their Academic Advisor (26.61%) while Engineering had the lowest percentage (3.32%).

Similarly, most students who had not secured housing did not discuss any options with their Academic Advisor. Although this was to a lesser extent as 80.68% (973 students) indicated so compared to the 91.72% above. This means that more students who had not secured housing did discuss some of these other options. For example, 15.09% of students discussed selecting only remote or online courses and 4.98% discussed taking a part-time course load.

Finally, students who had not secured housing were asked to select options they would consider for Winter 2022. Once again, since students could select multiple options, the results outlined below do not equal 100% but rather reflect the percentage of total respondents that chose each individual option. Most notably:

- 48.30% of students would consider remaining enrolled in in-person courses but only attend in-person courses when necessary
- 41.86% of students would consider remaining enrolled in in-person courses but not attend in-person components
- 22.19% of students would consider taking time off from school

These results highlight how students are willing to possibly compromise the quality of their education, for example, by not attending their in-person class components and therefore not receiving the same instruction as other students in their classes who are able to attend in person. Moreover, students are also willing to consider taking time off school entirely which would have drastic implications for their degree progression.

## **Affordability and Travel Time**

When students who had secured housing were asked about the cost of their living situation, **62.4% indicated that the place they secured was either slightly or way more than they had budgeted.**

In addition, students who had secured housing were asked about the location of their place:

- 56.32% said it was less than 20 minutes to campus by walking and/or public transit
- 25.86% said it was on-campus housing
- 15.80% said it was between 20-40 minutes to campus by walking and/or public transit
- 1.15% said it was more than 40 minutes to campus

These results show that most students who have secured housing have not had to compromise on living close to campus.<sup>1</sup> In addition, it is important to note that first year students had the highest proportion indicate they were living in on-campus housing at 74.49%.

### **In terms of students who had not secured housing:**

- 72.15% would consider living in an on-campus residence
- 32.07% would consider living in a location that requires a car to access campus
- 32.41% would consider living in a location that requires GO Transit to access campus
- 39.75% would consider living farther than 40 minutes from campus via walking and/or public transit
- 82.95% Living farther than 20 minutes from campus via walking and/or public transit

These percentages demonstrate that students are willing to accept a variety of locations for their housing yet are still unable to secure something. Most notably, 39.75% indicated that they would considering living further than 40 minutes from campus via walking and/or public transit, but only 1.15% of students who had secured housing lived that far from campus.

## **Housing Conditions & Options**

Our survey also asked students about a variety of different housing conditions and options.

**For students who had secured housing**, when asked about the housing situation they secured for Winter 2022, they reported the following:

- 10.22% said their accommodations will be below-standard (e.g., unclean, in disrepair, limited heating, poorly maintained appliances)
- 13.56% said they will be taking on debt/loans to pay for housing
- 44.13% said they will be paying over \$800 per month as an individual
- 10.56% said they will be paying over \$1200 per month as an individual
- 5.37% said they will be subletting for more than the monthly rent defined in the tenant's lease
- 3.46% said they will be living in a non-bedroom (no windows or non-closing door)
- 5.33% said they will be sharing a bedroom with someone they don't know

**For students who had not secured housing**, when asked which conditions they have, or would, consider when searching Winter 2022 housing, they reported the following:



- 49.26% would consider accommodations that are below-standard (e.g., unclean, in disrepair, limited heating, poorly maintained appliances)
- 27.75% would consider taking on debt/loans to pay for housing
- 80.07% would consider paying over \$800 per month as an individual
- 42.61% would consider paying over \$1200 per month as an individual
- 63.32% would consider subletting for more than the monthly rent defined in the tenant's lease
- 34.79% would consider living in a non-bedroom (no windows or non-closing door)
- 21.77% would consider sharing a bedroom with somebody they don't know

When comparing these two groups of students, a higher percentage of students who have not secured housing are willing to consider these conditions than students who have actually secured these types of situations. Thus, in addition to being open to various locations for housing, students also seem to be willing to consider many different conditions, options, and overall living situations if it means securing housing for the Winter 2022. Many of these situations, particularly 3.46% of student who will be living in a non-bedroom (and the 34.79% who would consider this) or the 10.22% of students who will be living in below-standard accommodations (and the 49.26% who would consider this). It is important to note the precarious and vulnerable situation that students are in and the situations they are willing to put themselves in should be of concern and not taken lightly.

## Student Testimonials

Besides quantitative data related to students' experiences finding housing, our survey also asked students one question that asked them to elaborate on how their expectations around securing housing differed from their actual experience, particularly as it related to aspects such as cost, distance from campus, amenities included, number of roommates, and time spent searching.

Many students expressed how **they expected it to be easy to find a place but that was not the case**, highlighting the fact that while students expected some difficulties in their search, they underestimated the extent of the difficulties they would face. A variety of comments from students helped shed light on several issues associated with the search for housing. **The most prevalent concerns students noted was in the availability of good quality and affordable housing, complete with the basic amenities.** Usually, it is relatively easy to secure housing in the Winter term due to graduating students that move out of the city or students that sublet their apartments while on co-op in different cities. But, as one student reported, "...students on co-op in the winter term choose to stay in Waterloo due to having remote co-ops" and



as a result, **many housing opportunities that would have been otherwise vacant, remain filled.** In addition, incoming students have a smaller pool of available housing to pick from. In their desperation to secure housing, **students must compromise on vital aspects of housing such as cleanliness and safety.** One student stated that they were **"...paying more now for housing and utilities than any other time during [their] degree."**

Further, students reported the **intense competition for housing is such as advertisements on social media sites are flooded with responses within minutes.** One respondent stated that **"it [is] common to see posts for good places with 100+ comments"**. Consequently, apartments get taken off the market within hours of posting, making it extremely difficult for students to secure housing.

Desperate to find housing in these circumstances, students mentioned the need to **settle for low quality housing, being forced to share bathrooms and bedrooms with strangers.** One student stated that **"... [they are] paying 1.2k to share 2 washrooms among 5 people"** and living arrangements such as this lead to increased risk of transmission of COVID-19. This adds to the already high levels of stress experienced by students.

This imbalance in supply and demand of housing has led to an increase in rent, housing prices reaching exorbitant sums in Waterloo compared to previous years. **One student stated that rent prices were "...200-500 dollars higher than usual"** and apartments that used to rent out for ~\$700 are currently renting for \$900+ a month. Students commented that **finding housing has become a "...a cutthroat bidding war that people are abusing to make some extra cash, or outright scam students"**. A comment that sheds light on the true gravity of the situation was provided by a student who said the following: **"I participated in an auction where a price of a room that is \$900-\$950/month [went] up to \$1400/month. As a result, my friends and I signed up for a housing with a company that demanded 5-month rent deposit and 3-month post-dated cheques upfront."** Charging large sums in illegal deposits and asking more than the rent price for sublets has become common practice. There have also been illegal bidding wars for apartments, according to students who state that **"...illegal bidding kept happening and so a single bedroom for 800\$ became 1.2k a month very quickly."** Low availability of housing **has forced some students to take on more debt in order to be able to afford paying more than \$1000 in rent per month.** Others have had to spend large sums of money on hotels or Airbnb in order to avoid being homeless in the Winter.

Those that cannot afford these options have had to **look for housing at great travel times from campus** such as in Kitchener or other neighbouring cities. Some students that have family in cities near Waterloo are choosing to commute to Waterloo every day. One student stated that they “opted to simply stay at [their] parents’ house and commute this term” as “it was better than spending \$1k+/month [they] don’t have for an apartment.” However, as mentioned previously, living with family is not an option for many students.

**Additionally, students report that looking for housing is extremely time-consuming.** Some students have reported spending 2-3 months looking for housing with still nothing secured. Due to high competition, students have had to constantly monitor social media advertisements for months in order to secure housing. The uncertainty that accompanies this housing search has led to high levels of stress and anxiety in students, with one student stating that their “last idea was to live in E5 or sleep in the Walmart parking lot.”