In releasing the report Toward Healthy and Affordable Housing, Montréal’s director of public health follows up on past interventions pertaining to housing carried out by health authorities, and aims to accomplish the following:

- Appraise the housing situation in Montréal
- Reiterate his commitment to prioritize public health expertise in this area
- Formulate recommendations to protect the health of Montrealeans

These new data are presented in the report, as are those of other studies led by Montréal’s public health department. Statistics from the National Household Survey (NHS 2011), Société d’habitation du Québec (SHQ) and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), as well as from the most recent census are used to construct a portrait of housing-related issues in Montréal. A literature review completes the work.

**Portrait of Housing in Montréal**

Renters are a majority (61%) on the Island of Montréal. In addition, the rental market has undergone substantial changes over the past few years. For example, the average rent for a three-bedroom apartment went up 38% between 2001 and 2014; inflation rose 28% during the same period. Housing starts for rental units declined from 3150 units in 2002 to 2300 in 2011. There was also a shortage of large affordable apartments for families (Figure 1).
The rental housing stock is ageing: 42% of private apartments were built before 1961 and their maintenance is often below par. While only 11% of apartments are earmarked for social or community housing (Figure 2), we have observed a marked decrease in federal funding for affordable housing programs. More than 22,000 households are on the waiting list for low-cost housing in Montréal, but only 2,000 dwellings become available each year.

Healthy and Affordable Housing

Housing is a significant determinant of health; one example is the increase in respiratory problems affecting residents of substandard homes. The cost of housing also greatly affects a household's capacity to eat well and meet other basic needs.
Our survey revealed that 25% of renters who devote more than 30% of their income to rent (50 000 households) reported not having enough food due to a lack of money (Table 1). Food insecurity can have health impacts over the long term. Having a poor diet plays a role in many health conditions, such as obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, cardiovascular diseases and several cancers.

### TABLE 1 – Problems reported by households, by condition of the property and rate of effort, Montréal, June 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>OWNERS</th>
<th>RENTERS</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Income spent on housing &lt;30%</td>
<td>Income spent on housing &gt;30%</td>
<td>Total renters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcrowding</td>
<td>2.3*</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty making ends meet every month</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>44.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Food insecurity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afraid of running out of food</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>27.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enough food</td>
<td>1.8*</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate quality of food</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of food bank</td>
<td>0.1*</td>
<td>1.6*</td>
<td>19.8*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant confidence interval
Source: Centre Léa-Roback, SALAM 2014.

### Impacts on Vulnerable or Marginalized Populations

The report highlights serious issues, such as the impacts of household insecurity on children’s growth and development and on their educational success. It presents specific challenges faced by new immigrants, Aboriginal peoples, injection drug users and people with mental health conditions (more than a third of the 106 people who died during the heat wave that hit Montréal in July 2010 had serious mental health problems). The report also points out the effects of unstable housing on the risks of HIV and HCV infection transmission, and on therapeutic outcomes of people with those infections. Finally, it sheds light on the fact that an ageing population and the arrival of new immigrants require appropriate social responses to housing, especially in Montréal.

### Main Recommendations

The director of public health asks that the federal government adopt a Canadian housing strategy that meets multiple housing needs, and calls on the government to reinvest in social and community housing. He asks that work continue toward providing Québec with a provincial housing policy, in partnership with cities. He puts forward recommendations designed to ensure that all municipalities on the Island of Montréal have regulations and resources to improve interventions targeting substandard housing, and offers to collaborate on implementing such interventions. He also encourages the health and social services network to prioritize housing in interventions with vulnerable populations.

To conclude, the director reiterates his concerns about poverty and social inequalities afflicting Montrealers. At this time, the housing market is part of the problem; however, there is no doubt that government intervention is part of the solution. Such actions can greatly improve the situation for the lowest income individuals, for a congenial social mix and for population health.
The Synthesis Report series features highlights from the main studies, research projects, interventions or promotion activities carried out in various fields of public health.

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Direction régionale de santé publique
CIUSSS du Centre-Sud-de-l’Île-de-Montréal
1301 Sherbrooke East
Montréal, Québec H2L 1M3
Telephone: 514-528-2400
www.dsp.santemontreal.qc.ca

Under the leadership of
Richard Massé, Director of Public Health for Montréal

Scientific supervision and coordination
Marie-France Raynault, Centre Léa-Roback

Research and manuscript development
Marie-France Raynault, Simon Tessier, François Thérien

Research and data processing
Emmanuelle Huberdeau, David Kaiser, Marie-Ève Simoneau

Mapping
Sophie Goudreau, Emmanuelle Huberdeau

Steering committee
Louis Drouin, David Kaiser, Norman King, Richard Massé, Stéphane Perron, Marie Pinard, Marie-France Raynault, Simon Tessier

Contributors
Danielle Guay, Isabelle Laurin, Sylvie Lavoie, Émilie Leblanc, Pascale Leclerc, Stéphane Perron, Terry-Nan Tannenbaum, Isabelle Thérien and Julie Bruneau from Université de Montréal, CRCHUM, Faisca Richer from Institut national de santé publique and Daniel Turp from Université de Montréal

Editor
Marie Pinard

Graphic design
Linda Daneau

Translation
Sylvie Gauthier

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The full report
Toward Healthy and Affordable Housing – 2015 Report of the Director of Public Health for Montreal, the French versions of the synthesis report and of the full report are available at dsp.santemontreal.qc.ca/publications