

Assignment 1

Professor Gabby Resch

Data Visualization and Storytelling

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## **"The Unaffordable City: A Student's Life in Toronto"**

### **1. Introduction & Rationale**

As an international student living in Toronto, I have experienced first-hand the rapid rise of rental prices over the past few years. Housing has become the single largest expense in my life, consuming nearly 50% of my monthly budget. This project aims to tell a human-centered data story that illustrates how the city's rental inflation impacts the daily life, financial well-being, and emotional state of students like me. By combining my personal experience with public rental data, I hope to help others understand the real human cost behind the numbers.

### **2. Method & Storytelling Approach**

I will use a storyboard format that combines narrative text, photographs, and simple data visualizations. The story will begin with my arrival in Canada as an international student from China and my experience living in Scarborough, one of Toronto's suburban areas. Although I have stayed in the same area since I came to study, I have witnessed how rapidly rent prices have increased across the city. I plan to integrate line graphs from CMHC or Rentals.ca to illustrate the rise in average rent for one-bedroom apartments in Toronto from 2019 to 2025. My goal is not to analyze the data statistically but to show how these numbers reflect the challenges faced by students and newcomers trying to build a life in one of Canada's most expensive cities.

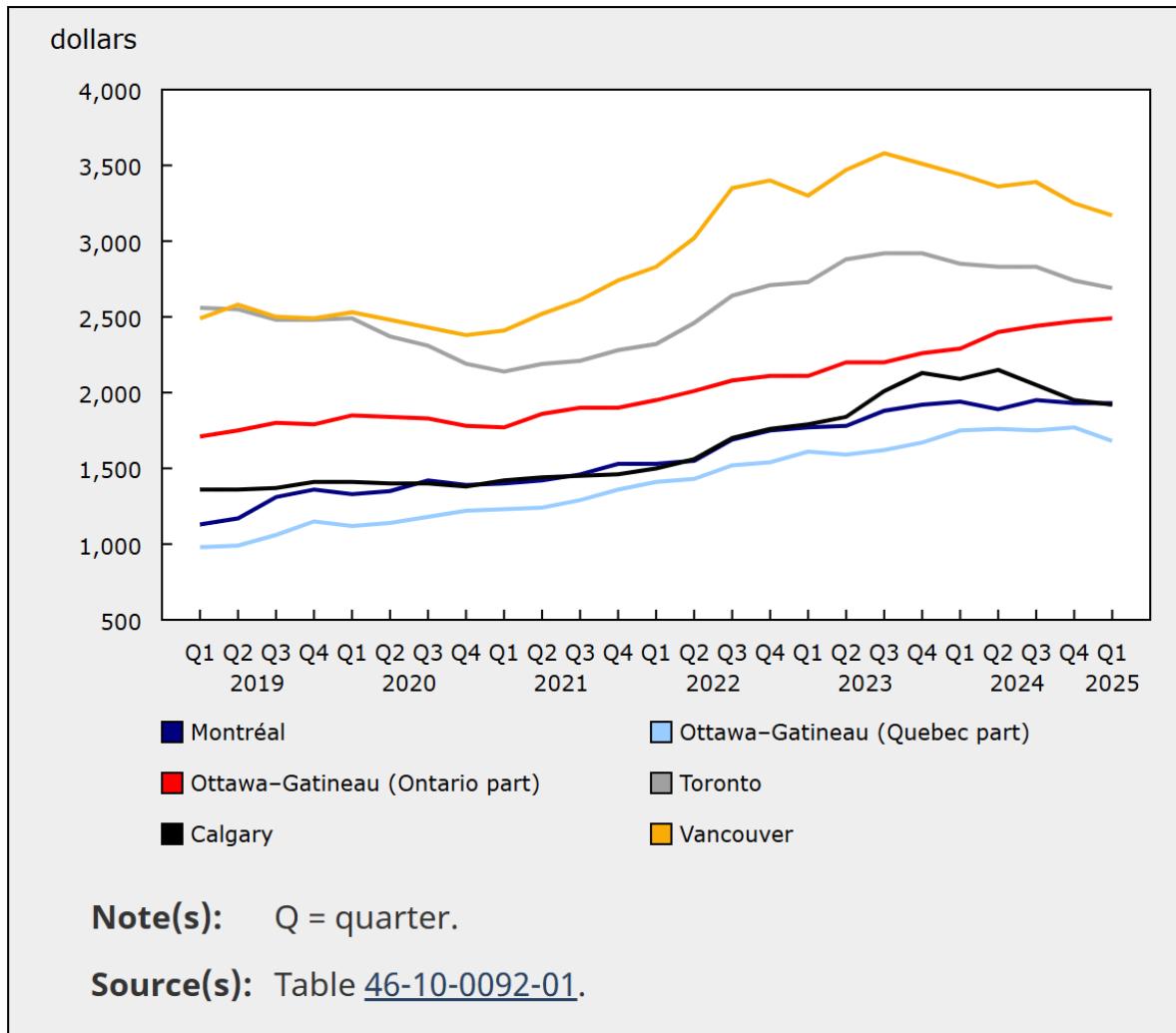
### **3. Iteration 1 – Initial Concept Sketch**

My first draft emphasizes the emotional tone of the story. The storyboard opens with a photograph of my small rented room in Scarborough—simple, sunlit, and

quiet, yet a constant reminder of the cost of living as an international student. The accompanying text describes my arrival from China to begin my studies in Toronto, filled with anticipation and curiosity about a new life abroad.



However, the calm atmosphere of the room contrasts with the financial reality behind it. A following chart from Statistics Canada (Table 46-10-0092-01) shows that the average rent for two-bedroom apartments in Toronto rose from about \$2,560 in 2019 to roughly \$2,690 in 2025, remaining among the highest in Canada. This subtle but steady rise in rent reflects the ongoing strain many students face. The visual transition—from a quiet personal space to data on increasing rents—mirrors my own journey from early optimism to growing financial pressure. Early feedback suggested adding smoother visual transitions between the emotional scenes and the supporting data.



Statistics Canada. (2025, June 25). *Average rents for two-bedroom units by selected census metropolitan areas, quarterly* (Table 46-10-0092-01). Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250625/dq250625b-eng.htm>

#### 4. Iteration 2 – Visual Refinement

The second iteration presents a sequential visual narrative that mirrors the emotional and financial pressure of student life in Toronto. Each frame captures a different moment — working long shifts at a restaurant, walking through snow

to save on bus fare, commuting to school on early morning buses, and recording late-night work hours in my phone.

The layout uses real photographs to connect lived experience with economic data. A rent trend graph appears beside these personal scenes, highlighting the contrast between rising housing costs and the daily struggle to keep up. This version communicates not only statistical reality but also human resilience and empathy.

Instead of taking the bus, I walk through the snow to save a few dollars each week. The path feels endless, but every step means another meal or a small relief from rent pressure.

My phone notes are filled with working hours – late nights and early mornings. Each entry represents time exchanged for rent, a cycle that defines my student life in Toronto.

QIAN YANG

All iCloud

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9.6 18:00-02:00 8H  
9.7 17:00-00:30 7.5H  
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9.12 19:00-23:00 4H  
9.13 17:30-01:30 8  
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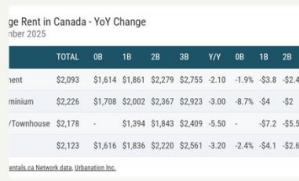
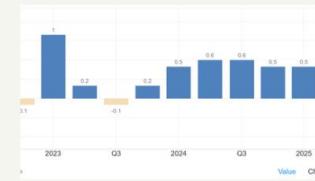
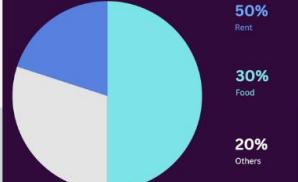
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9.20 5:30-13:45 8.25  
9.21 5:30-12:00 6.5H  
9.24 5:30-12:45 7.25H  
9.27 8.5 5:30-02:00

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Late evening at Haidilao Hot Pot, where I work part-time after class. The warm lights contrast with the cold air outside – a reminder that rent doesn't wait for anyone.

## 5. Iteration 3 – Final Storyboard

In the final storyboard, I refined the visual narrative to highlight the broader social and economic tension behind Toronto's housing crisis. Instead of contrasting city and suburb life, this version focuses on how the economic downturn has deepened the financial pressure faced by international students. I added a simplified map of Toronto showing rental prices by area to contextualize the affordability gap across the city. I also incorporated a pie chart to visualize my monthly spending, revealing how rent has grown to occupy nearly half of my total budget while food and other expenses have sharply declined. These adjustments make the storyboard more cohesive, balancing personal experience with supporting data and strengthening the emotional impact of the story.

FRAME 1	FRAME 2	FRAME 3
		
We begin with a wide shot of Toronto's skyline at dusk. The city lights shimmer against the cold sky, symbolizing both opportunity and the rising cost of living for newcomers.	The latest rent declines have coincided with record high apartment completions, population decreases for non-permanent residents, and a weakening job market.	The Canadian GDP declined by 0.4% from the previous quarter in the second quarter of 2025, reversing the 0.5% gain from the earlier period.
FRAME 4	FRAME 5	FRAME 6
		
A visualization of my monthly budget: nearly half goes to rent, while food expenses have been reduced to essentials. The chart captures the silent trade-offs behind every paycheck.	The scene shifts to a small rented room — a quiet space filled with textbooks, a laptop, and warm lamplight. It represents both the simplicity and struggle of student life in Toronto.	As the camera moves toward the waterfront, I reflect on resilience — even under financial pressure, there is determination to stay, learn, and grow in this city of dreams.

1. **Rentals.ca.** (2025). *National rent report*. Retrieved from <https://rentals.ca/national-rent-report>
2. **Trading Economics.** (2025). *Canada GDP growth rate*. Retrieved from <https://tradingeconomics.com/canada/gdp-growth>

## **6. Audience Description**

The target audience for my data story includes Canadian policymakers, educators, and domestic students who may not realize how severe the rental crisis feels for international students. They are generally data-literate but may overlook the emotional and social impact behind housing statistics. Through a balance of visuals and narrative, I aim to make them care about the people behind the numbers — to see that “affordability” is not just a chart but a daily struggle.

## **7. Conclusion & Reflection**

This project highlights how data storytelling can humanize economic issues. By connecting rental data to my own lived experience, I learned that visualization is not only about clarity but also empathy. The process of sketching, revising, and mapping my own story helped me see myself as part of a larger pattern — a generation of young renters struggling to belong in an expensive city. I hope my storyboard will inspire both understanding and action toward fairer housing policies in Toronto.