

Airbnb's Business During COVID-19

Is intensive short-term rental activity contributing to COVID-19 surge in Toronto's Waterfront community?

Airbnb Activity and COVID-19 Cases in Toronto's Waterfront Community

Reporting 84 recent cases as of September 20, 2020, the Waterfront-Island neighbourhood has led the recent surge in Covid-19 cases in Toronto. The neighbourhood with the next highest number of recent cases, the neighbouring Niagara community, reported only 40 recent cases.ⁱ

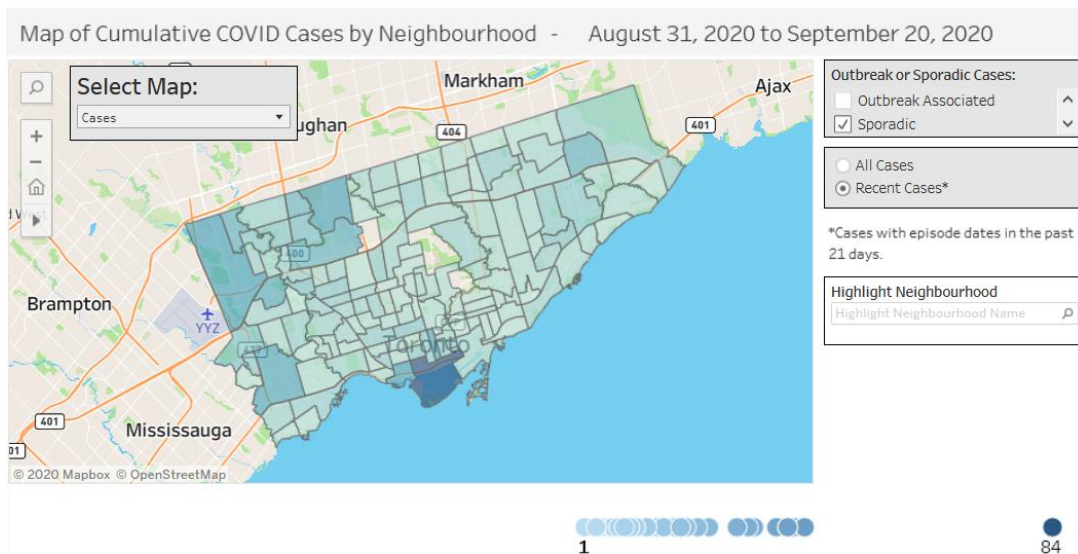


Figure 1: Recent COVID cases by neighbourhood, August 31, 2020-September 20, 2020

The Waterfront Communities is, according to data provided by Inside Airbnb, also the community with the highest number of Airbnb listings in Toronto (as of August 18, 2020), followed by its immediate neighbour, Niagara. Together these two neighbourhoods account for 21.4% of Airbnb listings in Toronto's 130+ neighbourhoods.ⁱⁱ



Figure 2: Recently and frequently listed entire homes for rent on Airbnb, August 18

During the pandemic, Airbnb activity appears to have become even more concentrated in these two neighbourhoods. Looking only at active ghost hotels - entire homes/apartments that are highly available, frequently and recently reviewedⁱⁱⁱ - we see the Waterfront Communities and Niagara account for 1,404 of the 3,800 such listings currently operating citywide, or 37%.^{iv} Most of these listings (820 of 1,404) were, moreover, offered by multi-listing hosts, host that are in violation of Toronto's short-term rental rules.^v

Airbnb activity in Waterfront/Niagara during Provincial ban

Ontario instituted a Province-wide ban on STRs (other than for emergency housing use) from April 4, 2020 to June 5, 2020.^{vi} Hosts violating the ban faced fines of up to \$100,000 per violation. The City of Toronto reportedly received over 180 complaints over these violations.^{vii}

We reviewed Airbnb activity taking place in Toronto during the Province's ban and found a subset of hosts appeared to be continuing a relatively brisk business, despite public health measures meant to save lives and protect the capacity of the health care system at the height of the pandemic. The majority of these hosts also violated the City's short-term rental rules.

While most Airbnb hosts ceased operations, some 74 Airbnb hosts received 10 or more reviews during the ban, and 23 hosts received 15 or more reviews.^{viii} Given that not all guests leave reviews, and that many guests stay more than one night, a unit receiving 15+ reviews could indicate nearly continuous transient use during the Provincial ban. Typically, reviews were left by a string of different guests – not likely a pattern displayed by guests needing to quarantine or isolate.

Nearly two thirds of the listings (15/23) most frequently reviewed during the ban were located in the Waterfront Communities and Niagara neighbourhoods. Most (16/23) were located in multi-residential settings, like condominiums or apartments.

Airbnb Host Data

| Listing ID | Host | Reviews during ban | Unique reviewers during ban | Host's listings | Neighbourhood | Property type | Estimated occupancy segment (last 12 mo.) |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| 26656133 | Alper | 29 | 29 | 2 | Waterfront Communities-The Island | Entire condominium | c) >180 |
| 18154899 | Andrew | 27 | 25 | 1 | Danforth | Private room in house | c) >180 |
| 29613234 | Noura | 25 | 23 | 1 | Niagara | Entire condominium | c) >180 |
| 9826723 | Ivy | 24 | 24 | 1 | Waterfront Communities-The Island | Entire condominium | c) >180 |
| 29480423 | Yinka | 24 | 23 | 1 | Mimico (includes Humber Bay Shores) | Entire condominium | c) >180 |
| 9975236 | Jason | 23 | 23 | 1 | Waterfront Communities-The Island | Entire condominium | c) >180 |
| 15239234 | Laura | 22 | 22 | 2 | Waterfront Communities-The Island | Private room in condo | c) >180 |
| 32769906 | Emmie | 22 | 22 | 1 | Niagara | Entire condominium | c) >180 |
| 42451477 | Erin & Carole | 22 | 21 | 6 | Waterfront Communities-The Island | Entire condominium | c) >180 |
| 22100548 | Vinny | 20 | 20 | 1 | Niagara | Entire condominium | c) >180 |
| 32570157 | Tee | 20 | 19 | 1 | Waterfront Communities-The Island | Entire condominium | c) >180 |
| 42074651 | Leo | 20 | 19 | 13 | Wychwood | Private room in guesthouse | c) >180 |
| 26931357 | Preet | 19 | 17 | 1 | Yorkdale-Glen Park | Entire condominium | c) >180 |
| 38782035 | Scott | 19 | 18 | 1 | Elms-Old Rexdale | Entire basement apartment | c) >180 |
| 6063858 | T. | 18 | 17 | 16 | Waterfront Communities-The Island | Entire condominium | c) >180 |
| 16779632 | Erin & Carole | 18 | 18 | 6 | Waterfront Communities-The Island | Entire condominium | c) >180 |
| 35972493 | Peter | 18 | 17 | 2 | Waterfront Communities-The Island | Entire loft | c) >180 |
| 29453607 | Ian | 17 | 17 | 1 | Weston-Pellam Park | Entire house | c) >180 |
| 16109795 | Erin & Carole | 16 | 16 | 6 | Waterfront Communities-The Island | Entire condominium | c) >180 |
| 15699861 | Rolyn | 15 | 14 | 1 | Dovercourt-Wallace Emerson-Junction | Entire apartment in house | c) >180 |
| 23187168 | Osmund & Anushka | 15 | 15 | 2 | Centennial Scarborough | Private room in house | c) >180 |
| 33348893 | Alexandra | 15 | 15 | 1 | Waterfront Communities-The Island | Entire condominium | c) >180 |
| 42205685 | Emmanuel | 15 | 14 | 1 | Niagara | Entire condominium | c) >180 |

Fairbnb Canada's Recommendation

During COVID-19, the so-called sharing economy might be distributing more than just access to people's homes or cars. With regards to the "home sharing" market, our data strongly suggests that there might be a close link between community spread of the COVID-19 and short-term rental facilitated indoor gatherings along Toronto's waterfront.

It is not the first time that we raise this issue. In March, we warned that Airbnb and other such operators may spread the pandemic and called on the Province to follow Quebec to issue a temporary short-term rental ban.^{ix} Our data suggests that despite this ban, short-term rental activity continued, concentrated in condo buildings along the waterfront, potentially putting local residents at risk.

As the City of Toronto and the Province of Ontario struggle to lower the contact points between residents to slow the spread of COVID19, in particular those linked to private gatherings, we strongly urge the City and the Province to track and report the potential involvement of short-term rentals in the spread of the pandemic. Moreover, we call on the City to immediately enforce Toronto's short-term rental bylaw, focussing on those hosts who continued to run a brisk business during the pandemic.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.toronto.ca/home/covid-19/covid-19-latest-city-of-toronto-news/covid-19-status-of-cases-in-toronto/>

ⁱⁱ Inside Airbnb, "Detailed listings data for Toronto," scraped on August 18, 2020: Count of ID by neighbourhood_cleansed. See <http://insideairbnb.com/get-the-data.html>. For more information on Inside Airbnb's methodology, please see here: <http://insideairbnb.com/about.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Highly available = > 180/year; recently reviewed = in last 6 months; frequently booked = occupied more than 180 days/month

^{iv} There are 3800 entire homes/apartments that are highly available, recently and frequently rented in Toronto, <http://insideairbnb.com/toronto/?neighbourhood=&filterEntireHomes=true&filterHighlyAvailable=true&filterRecentReviews=true&filterMultiListings=false>. 1184 of these are in the Waterfront neighbourhood, <http://insideairbnb.com/toronto/?neighbourhood=Waterfront%20Communities-The%20Island&filterEntireHomes=true&filterHighlyAvailable=true&filterRecentReviews=true&filterMultiListings=false>. 220 are in the Niagara neighbourhood, <http://insideairbnb.com/toronto/?neighbourhood=Niagara&filterEntireHomes=true&filterHighlyAvailable=true&filterRecentReviews=true&filterMultiListings=false>.

^v Ibid., multi-listing ghost hotels in Niagara = 107, <http://insideairbnb.com/toronto/?neighbourhood=Niagara&filterEntireHomes=true&filterHighlyAvailable=true&filterRecentReviews=true&filterMultiListings=true>; and Waterfront Communities = 713, <http://insideairbnb.com/toronto/?neighbourhood=Waterfront%20Communities-The%20Island&filterEntireHomes=true&filterHighlyAvailable=true&filterRecentReviews=true&filterMultiListings=true>.

^{vi} Edwards, S. (2020, Apr 06). Ontario bans Airbnb and short-term vacation rentals during pandemic. *Now Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://nowtoronto.com/lifestyle/ontario-bans-airbnb-coronavirus>; Edwards, S. (2020, Jun 17). Ontario's Airbnb ban is over, but the party never stopped in some Toronto condos. *Now Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://nowtoronto.com/lifestyle/real-estate/ontario-airbnb-ban-over-condo-party-toronto/>

^{vii} Brockbank, N. (2020, Jun 09). Toronto didn't issue any fines, despite nearly 180 short-term rental complaints during provincial ban. *CBC* Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-didn-t-issue-any-fines-despite-nearly-180-short-term-rental-complaints-during-provincial-ban-1.5600790?cmp=rss>

^{viii} Inside Airbnb, "Detailed Review Data for listings in Toronto," scraped August 18, 2020; count of reviews per listing between April 4, 2020 and June 5, 2020. Additional listing and host data obtained from "Detailed Listings data from Toronto," scraped August 18, 2020. See <http://insideairbnb.com/get-the-data.html>

^{ix} <https://twitter.com/Fairbnbcanada/status/1242456664877477891?s=20>