Canada Housing Market Outlook: Housing Market Weathers the Storm, but the Pandemic Will Eventually Take a Toll

INTRODUCTION

Despite sustained weakness in the job market, house prices in June rose 0.9% over the previous month. Fiscal stimulus measures and mortgage deferrals, combined with low interest rates and Canada’s strong demographics, have kept Canada’s housing market marching ahead throughout the COVID-19 crisis. The housing market’s vigor will fade as high unemployment and lower incomes will restrain buyers’ return to the market.

House prices are set to fall from their current levels. However, the speed of the drop will vary considerably across provinces. All regions will experience price declines, but the Prairie provinces will register the most sizable peak-to-trough decline.
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BY ABHILASHA SINGH

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Recent performance

The effort to combat the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak left its mark on the Canadian economy. Canada’s GDP contracted at an annualized rate of 38.7% in the second quarter—the worst decline on record. Unemployment soared to 13.7% in May, exceeding the record high of 13.1% from late 1982.

Residential construction came to a standstill in March and April in many parts of the country as lockdown and social distancing orders prohibited workers from entering job sites. Even in areas with few restrictions, demand for new homes collapsed overnight as buyers were cautious because of skyrocketing unemployment, economic uncertainty, and fears of contracting COVID-19. The total value of residential building permits in April was down 22% from February levels while home resales plunged a whopping 57% to 199,176 annualized units in April and newly listed homes declined by 56%.

The rate of new COVID-19 cases has edged higher since bottoming out in early July as Canada’s economy reopened, but the rate is holding stable at about a fifth...
of its early-May peak. The reopenings have spurred job growth, yet employment in August was still lower than February’s pre-pandemic high by more than 1 million jobs. Unlike the labor market, which remains in poor shape, the residential real estate market has not just weathered the crisis but thrived (see Charts 1 and 2).

Fiscal support such as unemployment assistance, onetime stimulus checks, and six-month deferrals on mortgage payments for troubled borrowers in the early months of the lockdown has preserved household balance sheets, and demand is rebounding.

Record low interest rates are also stimulating demand. The Bank of Canada has cut its benchmark interest rate for the third time since the pandemic started. The benchmark five-year mortgage rate has fallen from 5.04% in March to 4.79%, translating to greater purchasing power for homebuyers.

Construction activity has returned to pre-pandemic levels (see Chart 3). Annualized housing starts jumped to 262,000 in August from 226,000 a year earlier, marking the fastest pace of homebuilding since 2007. The August increase was primarily driven by multifamily starts, with urban multifamily starts up 27% on a year-ago basis. Urban single-family starts are rising but are still down 12% on year-ago basis.

Multifamily starts are seeing a relatively stronger recovery mainly because projects that were planned before the crisis are continuing given the development and planning costs. Builders have spent too much money on the projects to abandon them. This is particularly true for large multifamily ventures.

Home resales edged higher as provincial economies began to reopen and buyers and sellers became more comfortable transacting under social distancing rules. Home resales surged 26% month over month to an all-time high of 637,000 annualized units in July, largely due to pent-up housing demand during lockdowns (see Chart 4). Home resales growth has been primarily driven by single-family detached homes as opposed to condominiums, which supports the notion that the pandemic is driving more buyers to the suburbs and unshared property spaces.

New listings rose sharply Canada-wide in July. With demand outstripping supply, inventories have reached a record low of 2.8 months as homeowners who occupy their homes have declined to offer their residence for sale out of concern of being exposed to the coronavirus. The tightening in the housing market is also evident in the Canadian Real Estate Association’s sales-to-new-listing ratio, a reliable gauge of price pressure; the ratio jumped to 0.74 in July, one of the highest levels on record for this measure.

House price trends generally have held up since March despite the plunge in home resale activity as supply fell in tandem. House prices continue to rise with the RPS 13-metro area transaction-weighted composite house price index registering a monthly appreciation of 0.9% in August, boosting the year-over-year pace to 7.6%—the fastest pace since late 2017. High absorption of new homes is pushing up new-house prices. The new-house and land price index rose by 0.4% on a month-ag basis at the national level and by 1.8% year over year.

While house prices have been marching ahead, consumer debt performance has shown some signs of strain. Bankruptcy filings and insolvency proposals have been rising since late 2018. Further, Statistics Canada’s mortgage debt service ratio at 6.7% of disposable income in the first quarter of 2020 is still high compared with 6.4% of disposable income in mid-2016.

Meanwhile, the BoC’s housing affordability index—the cost of owning a home as a share of a household’s disposable income—improved in the second quarter of 2020 after having deteriorated in the three prior quarters. However, the improvement in the...
Regional disparity

House price appreciation remains regionally asymmetric and will likely stay that way. Chart 5 shows the asymmetry of RPS transactions-weighted composite indexes for the six largest metro areas and the RPS 13-metro area composite index. House price dynamics have not changed much over the past six months. Montréal and Ottawa still show steady appreciation, while Calgary and Edmonton have been pulling down on the 13-metro area composite index. The national composite house price index is heavily influenced by sales in Toronto and Vancouver—two of Canada’s most active and expensive housing markets. The indexes for Toronto and Vancouver recorded the largest 10-year price appreciation despite their policy-induced slowdown in 2017-2018 and have been gaining traction since mid-2019.

No province or metro area was immune to the historically sharp downturn, but the performance of the housing market is divergent. Provinces dependent on the energy sector—notably Alberta and Saskatchewan—were already dealing with soft market conditions. New single-family homes show dangerous signs of excess supply in Calgary and Edmonton. The share of first mortgages in arrears is also much higher for the Prairies than for Canada while housing starts are almost one-third below their year-ago levels, mainly due to elevated inventories of unsold new units in Alberta. And now they have been hit by the double whammy of COVID-19 and lower mortgage rates which more than offset the increase in house prices.

Policymakers’ response

Though Canada’s public health measures took a toll on the economy, they have been proving effective at minimizing the number of new coronavirus infections, even as restrictions on social activities were relaxed. For now, the trend in the daily number of new infections is holding below 500, about a quarter of its late-April/early-May peak and barely above its late-June shutdown-induced low.

The BoC is deploying extraordinary measures to maintain the normal functioning of credit markets and stimulate economic activity, far surpassing the steps taken in 2008. In total, the bank’s balance sheet has swelled from C$120 billion to nearly C$550 billion, a nearly fivefold increase. Policymakers will not start raising rates until the recovery is well underway. This suggests that a move will not come before 2023.

In addition, Canada’s largest banks and many other lenders have announced that borrowers struggling because of the COVID-19 crisis will be able to defer their mortgage payments for up to six months. The Bank of Canada has suspended a move will not come before 2023. Recovery is well underway. This suggests that a move will not come before 2023.

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Table 1: Canada Housing Market, History and Baseline Forecast

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<tr>
<td>Detached single-family house price index, % change</td>
<td>7.08</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>-6.72</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>7.49</td>
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<td>Condo apartment price index, % change</td>
<td>6.18</td>
<td>9.13</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>-6.52</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>6.25</td>
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<td>Composite house price index, % change</td>
<td>7.11</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>-10.2</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>8.29</td>
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<td>Real per capita disposable income, % change</td>
<td>12.43</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>-2.09</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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<td>Unemployment rate, %</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>5.83</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>9.65</td>
<td>8.56</td>
<td>7.25</td>
<td>6.87</td>
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<td>Avg mortgage rate, 5-yr, %</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>5.23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Housing starts, ths</td>
<td>192.67</td>
<td>214.16</td>
<td>208.55</td>
<td>208.26</td>
<td>162.98</td>
<td>181.93</td>
<td>191.63</td>
<td>171.27</td>
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<tr>
<td>% change</td>
<td>-11.77</td>
<td>-2.92</td>
<td>-2.62</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>-21.74</td>
<td>11.62</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>-10.63</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ratio, median dwelling price/median family income</td>
<td>8.64</td>
<td>8.02</td>
<td>7.93</td>
<td>8.41</td>
<td>7.44</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.82</td>
<td>8.18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ratio, outstanding mortgage debt/Disp. income</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.96</td>
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*yr over yr

Sources: RPS, Statistics Canada, CMHC, Moody’s Analytics
We expect greater resilience in lower-density markets outside Canada’s large urban cores. The pandemic has boosted demand for properties offering more space for working from home and fewer shared areas with neighbors. Smaller markets where such properties are more affordable will particularly benefit from this trend. Trends may diverge even within urban cores, where the condo segment’s prospects could be adversely affected by a drop in immigration. In Chart 10, we see the asymmetry in the forecasts across different subdivisions of the Toronto metro area. House prices in Oshawa rose at a faster pace because of higher house prices and lack of space in areas such as Mississauga, and we expect the trend to continue. Overall, Moody’s Analytics expects that housing prices will start meaningfully recovering in early 2022.

Risks
The marks of the Great COVID Crisis of 2020 will be felt for years to come. Not only will the effects of the economic shocks to employment and income take years to be fully absorbed, but consumer preferences have permanently changed as a result of the health scare. The risks to the baseline forecast are weighted decidedly to the downside because of the numerous unknowns related to COVID-19.

The impending arrival of winter raises concerns that a return to indoor activities will exacerbate the spread of the virus. A second leg downward in the labor and financial markets caused by a renewed wave of COVID-19 this fall and winter could spur a greater than expected decline in house prices.

The development and broad deployment of a highly effective coronavirus therapy or vaccine remains the greatest wild card in the forecast. If a vaccine is delayed, then so too is the timing of the recovery.

The pandemic will lead to even further widening in economic inequality, including housing. In the long run, the housing market will depend on several factors, including consumer preferences for homeownership and the ability of families to save for a down payment. While demand for single-family homes with ample space and large pantries may rise, so too might demand for smaller apartments and condos given the struggle many families will face in saving for a down payment.
About the Author

Abhilasha Singh is an economist at Moody’s Analytics, where she leads model development, validation, and forecasting for global subnational economies. She is responsible for coverage of emerging markets as well as U.S. and metropolitan area economies. She is also a regular contributor to Economic View. Abhilasha completed her PhD in economics at the University of Houston, where she taught microeconomics. She holds a master’s degree in finance from Pune University in India.
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