

# Why parents are abandoning Vancouver (it's not just real estate)

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## EXCERPTS

When my wife and I arrived in Vancouver, the first thing we did was take a walk on the Seawall. Neither of us had ever been to the city before, but we'd taken a gamble and came with moving van in tow.

We'd only been married a few months. She was a student. I was job hunting. Money was unbelievably tight, and we ended up renting a place almost an hour south of the city. But we were smitten with the West End and the Seawall. "Wouldn't it be incredible," I said to my wife as we sat on English Bay, "to live here? Like, literally right here."

It took us only a year. Somehow, we scored a sublease for a tiny apartment overlooking the bay. Vancouver became our home, and we became beautiful clichés: young professionals, going for regular walks on the Seawall with locally-roasted and ethically-produced coffee in hand. We were car-free, spending most of our time either on foot or on bike. We knew the trails of Stanley Park by heart. My wife got involved with Vancouver's Greenest City Action Plan, which she worked on in between yoga classes. Our lives became rooted in the city. We were young. We were childless. But the ultimate cliché is that six years later, we were gone.

The people I know who've had kids in Vancouver talk about the experience like grizzled war veterans. It's always a tale of triumph and trauma, and they usually end the same way: with them leaving their home for a far-off land, wondering if they'll ever return.

You can blame the housing market for a lot, but I don't believe it's entirely to blame for this exodus. Sure, living in Vancouver is a specific sort of life, and not everyone can handle it. Apartments are small, real estate is crazy and rent is high, so you have to be willing to sacrifice square footage and let go of the idea of ever owning a detached home. But that's not why we left, nor why our friends did.

We were in love with our 450 Sq Ft apartment and embraced the idea of living small. We spent more time on beaches or in coffee shops. And we never flirted with the idea of owning a house, ever. We embraced Vancouver and all its quirks. So why did things go so wrong?

The terrible reality of parenthood in Vancouver was summed up perfectly by an email we received shortly after our daughter's second birthday:

We want to confirm that your child is still on our child care waitlist. We empathize with how difficult it is to find child care when you need it. As you know, there is a huge shortage of child care spaces in the city, which means that families often have to wait to get into a program. Please be assured that we will contact you when a space is available for your child.

We'd put our daughter's name on their list shortly after she was born. It's worth noting that this wasn't an email from a single daycare. It was sent on behalf of an entire network of daycares, who promised to email us the moment a spot became available, in any of their child care programs, anywhere in the city.

If you think that's disheartening, well, your poor heart might not be able to take this next part. This network is line 8 on our daycare spreadsheet. There are a total of 52 lines, one for each of the waitlists we put our names on. Most daycare waitlists require you to just fill out some paperwork; others demand that you pay a fee, just for the privilege of being in their queue (and yes, we paid, despite the fact that places that profit from waitlists deserve a special place in hell).

We've been on those 52 waitlists for more than two years now. In that time, exactly two spaces became available. One was at the most expensive daycare in the city, a place whose monthly fee was almost double our rent. We took it. Having graduated only months after our daughter was born, my wife was itching to find a job, and that couldn't happen unless we had childcare. The assumption was that one of two things would happen: either she'd get a job that paid enough to keep us above water, or we'd find a cheaper option before things got too dire. Months later, another slot did open up at a place that was slightly cheaper-but was also dark, dirty and an hour away. And that was it. Those were our two options.

Unless you have a hilarious amount of money or an incredible amount of luck, finding a daycare slot in Vancouver can take two to three

years. The wait isn't just preventing women (and men) from getting back into the workforce-it actively boots them out of it. Even if you have a job to take maternity leave from, you'll never find childcare in time to return to it.

Some parents manage to survive. I have a friend who works from home and manages to get things done with a toddler bouncing on her lap. I have another who went in with a few of their neighbours to share a part-time nanny, an option that's no cheaper but at least meant they had someone to look after their kid.

The childcare hurdle can seem insurmountable, but it's also the first hurdle in a marathon. Vancouver's infrastructure for families has started crumbling to pieces, if it ever held together in the first place. The city's population is booming, but it's hemorrhaging families at the same time. Perhaps it's no wonder that some schools have been forced to downsize or close entirely, resulting in the remaining schools becoming overcrowded.

The situation has gotten so out of hand that parents are finding that they have to enter lotteries to get their kids into school. Like, actual lotteries. I've met people who are terrified that their kids will have to go to school several neighbourhoods away. And then it's a life of lotteries, lotteries everywhere. There are lotteries to get your kids into schools, lotteries to get them into sports, lotteries to get into swim classes. It doesn't matter where you live. In most cases, it doesn't even matter whether or not you can afford it.

You know when these lotteries are happening, because every parent in the city has glazed-over eyes that day. They were up at the crack of dawn, repeatedly hitting refresh on a browser tab, hoping they'll be on the site during that 10-second window between when registration opens and when everything is full. People fight for years to stay in the city, only to discover that the life they'll lead will be left to chance. It's a depressing realization-and a hard way to live.

It's been four months since we gave up. We left Vancouver and landed in the middle of Vancouver Island. We're far from any major city, but we managed to escape the things that were threatening to drown us. We have childcare. School enrolment is a non-issue. We're renting an entire house but somehow managed to keep it under 900 square feet-anything bigger would feel weird.

I miss Vancouver. The Seawall still feels like home in a way I'm not sure any other place ever will. Going from the constant rush of Vancouver to the relaxed pace of the island is a bit of a shock to the system. But if this is penance for having the gall to start a family in Vancouver, I think we'll be okay. Vancouver, on the other hand, might not be.

The problem with curbing the tide of families leaving the city, and the talent drain that goes with it, is that there's no single solution. It's a systemic problem, and solving it is going to take holistic change.

The daycare problem isn't going to be solved just by making it cheaper, or by opening a few more daycares. We need hundreds of new slots, especially for young children. Kids under the age of three get turned away from a lot of daycares, which leaves no option but for one of their parents to put their career on hold-or end it completely.

And goddamn lotteries. Since when is your kid's education supposed to be left to chance? Vancouver wants to be the city of the future. In a lot of ways, it already is-a place where the population stays young and beautiful forever, because they're gone by 35. But the exodus of people who are experienced, stable and at the height of their careers is going to sting.

It's time for the city to present itself as something more than a youthful fling. It needs to nurture the families, the parents, and the children who grow up here and have a vested interest in the city's future. It's time for the city to grow some deeper roots.

-reprinted from Vancouver Magazine

**Region:** British Columbia <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** affordability <sup>[4]</sup>

accessibility <sup>[5]</sup>

spaces <sup>[6]</sup>

waiting list <sup>[7]</sup>

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