

Working Paper

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Issues and Best Practices in Rooming Houses

Defined differently across jurisdictions, rooming houses (or single-room occupancies) are a topic of debate in contemporary discussions on affordable housing. Some common themes discussed include market conditions, tenants' characteristics and needs, community acceptance, regulatory environments, and good housing practices. Rooming houses offer a potentially affordable market solution to housing individuals of modest means; however, rooming houses do not always provide both safe and financially viable accommodation. Cities need solid data, a comprehensive approach, and coordinated efforts with other service agencies as they develop policies to help with effectively regulating and managing rooming houses.

Rooming houses—where residents rent individual rooms but share kitchen and bathroom facilities--were a popular form of housing for single persons in the 19th century. In recent years, however, housing market conditions have shifted and other housing options have become more commonplace (Slater, 2004). Even today, however, low incomes and limited options for affordable housing mean that rooming houses remain a reasonable, though often short-term, market solution for some people (Gaetz, et al., 2014). Rooming houses typically offer the least expensive private market accommodations. Many factors, such as development pressures and rising property values, put rooming houses at risk (CMHC, 2002). Rooming houses often operate in older buildings, sometimes in poor repair, leaving them subject to fires (Kaufman and Distasio, 2014). In areas where neighbourhoods are changing, rooming houses may be torn down or repurposed during gentrification (Slater, 2004). In Halifax and many other cities, rooming houses are commonly restricted to areas zoned for multiple unit dwellings, adding pressure to convert or demolish rooming houses in favour of more profitable structures (SHS Consulting, 2015). Freeman (2014) claims rooming houses now thrive in suburban areas in Toronto; however, the licensing regime may not recognize them. Unlicensed rooming houses can raise concerns for tenant safety since they are not subject to inspections; moreover, residents may face the loss of their housing if units are threatened with closure (Freeman, 2014).

Tenants of rooming houses play a role in both the safety and financial viability of this form of housing. A century ago, rooming house tenants comprised the working class; today rooming houses often accommodate the working poor, individuals on social assistance, and persons living with disability or addiction (Slater, 2004). CMHC (2006, 2) defined the typical rooming house resident as “a single or divorced Canadian-born male of British, francophone (in Montréal) or First Nations ancestry in his late 30s or 40s living well below the poverty line”. In recent years, rooming house residents are said to include students, new Canadians, and senior citizens (Freeman, 2014). Tenants are increasingly diverse, and facing complex needs. Deane et

al. (2012) identified unmet needs for rooming house residents with mental illness in unlicensed rooming houses. Tenant needs often exceed what landlords can handle, such that both the tenant and landlord may require external support from social service agencies (Deane, et al., 2012). Getting access to appropriate supports and funds remains challenging.

Municipalities are tasked with providing housing for those with special needs while preserving neighbourhood character. Walker and Seasons (2002) identified two threats to rooming houses and group homes: exclusionary zoning and community opposition. Finkler and Grant (2011) called planning laws requiring minimum separation distances between group homes a form of exclusionary zoning designed to limit housing options for particular categories of tenants. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (2013) deemed this planning tool discriminatory against those with mental health issues.

Community opposition to rooming houses and group homes can influence their success. Walker and Seasons (2002) recognized the supportive housing model as a more acceptable form of housing for people with mental illness, as tenants have in-house access to professional help. This model can mitigate issues of zoning and NIMBY responses (Walker and Seasons, 2002); however, supportive housing may lack the sense of community present in the group home setting (2002).

For rooming houses to function effectively as an affordable and safe housing option, appropriate policy and regulation will be necessary. Municipal licensing of rooming houses is intended to ensure minimum health and safety standards are met. The first challenge encountered, however, is defining “rooming house”. Freeman (2014) suggested dropping the name “rooming house” altogether, to avoid the stigma associated with the term, and recommended coming up with a new term such as “single-room dwelling” or “shared accommodation” accompanied by a broader definition (Freeman, 2014, 23). Whatever the term used, and however generous the regulatory process, not all landlords choose to register their properties. In Halifax, following adoption of a bylaw setting out the process to licence rooming houses, not all landlords participated, and the number of licensed properties has steadily diminished. As Murphy (2015, online) reported, “some low-income housing advocates believe there are rooming houses that simply delist from the city's registry in order to fly under the radar and avoid inspections and potentially costly upgrades.” Moreover, a new category of “quasi-rooming houses” –homes subdivided to accommodate university students—appeared in the south end of the city. To address the challenges with managing single-room occupancies in the city, HRM is reviewing rooming house definitions and policies (SHS Consulting, 2015).

Many housing advocates argue that zoning could be more inclusive of rooming house accommodations. For example, in Toronto, rooming houses are prohibited in the suburbs and permitted in the downtown, yet they exist throughout the city (Freeman, 2014). Freeman (2014) suggested that as-of-right zoning would simplify bureaucratic processes and allow rooming houses the potential to increase in number. Licensed rooming houses have declined in numbers in Toronto (Freeman, 2014), Winnipeg (Kaufman & Distasio, 2014), Halifax (SHS Consulting, 2015), and many other cities. Appropriate processes for licensing rooming houses can help

ensure tenant safety and help advocates for inclusive zoning to get unlicensed rooming houses on the radar (Freeman, 2014). Finding ways to ensure that effective regulation does not inadvertently reduce the availability of safe and affordable units remains a challenge.

Tenants of unlicensed suburban rooming houses are often new immigrants and students (Donovan, 2008). Student-oriented rooming house accommodations have been appearing in many cities adjacent to universities (Foster et al., 2014). The city of Ottawa has documented complaints against alleged illegal rooming houses filled with students (Mills, 2014). Students Nova Scotia has acknowledged rooming house accommodations with problematic lease agreements and called for collaborative planning to address the issue (Foster et al., 2014).

Developing appropriate municipal policy requires clarifying best practices for regulating and managing rooming houses. The Calhoun Research & Development (2011) identified several principles for good practices for rooming houses. Regulations must ensure safety for tenants but not be too strict; landlords must be able to make a profit; cooperation and interaction are key to building relationships of mutual respect. Some recommendations from Calhoun (2011) included establishing landlord and tenant associations, maintaining a licensing or registration system as well as a formal tenant-landlord mediation process, developing an information sharing bulletin, and collaborating to provide on-site services for tenants. Lottis & McCracken (2014) emphasized the need for coordination and leadership in government efforts, as well as outreach and education efforts to accompany government regulation.

If effectively regulated and operated, rooming houses have the potential to provide safe and affordable housing for a diversity of low-income tenants. In light of current market conditions that threaten the supply of rooming houses across Canadian cities, further review of policy and practices would be beneficial. Research that clarifies the policy and local housing contexts within which rooming houses operate can help illuminate the challenges and identify possibilities for pro-active responses.

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