The Role of Stigma in Rooming House Regulation:

A Halifax Case Study

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Abstract

Municipalities often regulate and restrict rooming houses through licensing programs and zoning bylaws. This paper examines the motivations behind the desire for regulatory intervention in this affordable housing option by tracing the stigmatization of rooming houses over time. By interviewing stakeholders in the rooming house sector in Halifax, we explore community perceptions of this form of housing and the challenges facing the sector. Descriptions of rooming houses as transient, substandard, and volatile depict this form of housing as a temporary place of residence, not meeting the standards of 'home'. Language such as 'safety' and 'cleanliness' is used to construct societal expectations of appropriate housing based on Victorian values. The discourse around rooming houses frames rooming house tenants as vulnerable and landlords as abusive. This disempowering discourse suggests the need for regulatory intervention to keep landlords accountable and rescue tenants from horrific situations. However, there is a tension as stakeholders realize that regulatory intervention may not solve rooming house ills, but exacerbate the problem by further limiting this form of affordable housing and contributing to the displacement of many marginalized individuals.

Keywords: rooming houses, stigma, regulatory intervention, marginalization

Introduction

Societal understanding of appropriate housing dates to Victorian notions of "home" and "family life" (Groth, 1994; Alexander, 2005). Values of privacy, cleanliness and autonomy contribute to a discourse that marginalizes housing options that do not conform (see Breckinridge & Abbott, 1910). Rooming houses, also known as single-room occupancies (SROs), provide an affordable housing option that has become stigmatized in society because the structures fail to meet societal standards (Groth, 1994; Udvarhelyi, 2007). Rooming houses provide accommodation with shared amenities for single individuals. Rooming houses typically serve disadvantaged persons. They first appeared with the rapid urbanization of single persons in the 19th century with the rise of white-collar jobs in the city (Groth, 1994). They also provided affordable housing for working class families (Breckinridge & Abbott, 1910). Rooming houses can reflect economic pressure, as individuals come together to share resources (Slater, 2004; Sandoval-Stausz, 2007; Skaburskis, 2010).

Rooming houses come with a long history of public concern and complaints of substandard conditions (Slater, 2004; Mifflin and Wilton, 2005). The societal discourse around rooming houses frames tenants as vulnerable people who require state intervention to save them from their predicament. However, the discourse disguises a lack of acceptance for difference and attempts to protect a "normalized" way of life - the lifestyle of the dominant culture (Alexander, 2005). As a response to community pushback, cities often enact regulation to limit and restrict rooming house operations in low density, "single-family zones" (Alexander, 2005; Skelton, 2012). Such efforts suggest that rooming houses are inappropriate housing; moreover they perpetuate negative perceptions and contribute to the marginalization of this affordable option (Udvarhelyi, 2007; Wacquant, 2016). Little scholarly attention is focused on the embedded stigma that drives the desire for regulation and marginalizes forms of affordable housing (Hastings, 2004). Tracking rooming houses throughout history verifies long-term stigmatization, which increasingly marginalized rooming houses.

A Brief History of rooming houses

In the 19th century, living in a rooming house (often called a lodging house or a residential hotel) or boarding with family were popular housing options. Rooming houses were considered a suitable form of housing for the working class, immigrants, and visitors (Slater, 2004). Residential hotels came in diverse forms, some intended to serve wealthy unattached persons while others attracted more transient, less affluent folks (Groth, 1994).

In the early years of the 20th century, widowed women rented rooms to lodgers as a respectable business venture (Breckinridge & Abbott, 1910; Groth, 1994). The rooms were often in older homes, not originally purposed for high occupancy, which officials claimed posed safety and health concerns (Breckinridge & Abbott, 1910; Sandoval-Stausz, 2007). Other issues of privacy and "proper" living standards also concerned critics. In Chicago in 1910, renting in a rooming house as a single individual was seen as acceptable and economical, but renting a single room to a family was thought to have a "demoralizing effect" (Breckinridge & Abbott 1910).

Housing advocate Lawrence Veiller wrote a book called *Housing Reform* in 1911, in which he berated rooming house type accommodations. He suggested "Bad housing conditions generally first manifest themselves when several families are found living in a dwelling intended for a single family" (Veiller, 1911, p.3). For Veiller, poverty was seen as a "germ disease, a contagion" manifesting in poor conditions, such as "dark rooms" (Veiller, 1911, p.5). Veiller described overcrowding as leading to a social problem called "the lodger evil...It is fraught with great danger to the social fabric of the country. It means the undermining of family life; often the breaking down of domestic standards" (p.33). He claimed that improving domestic life would in turn improve social condition; thus housing reform should focus on preventing rooming house accommodation. Veiller (1911) advocated to "safeguard the future" through state intervention to protect weaker society members (p.39). His language was dramatic; "When there are no homes there will be no nation" (Veiller, 1911, p.6).

Around 1923, many women were living in rooming houses, breaking free from the traditional home to seek employment in the city (Groth, 1994). Rose (1947) stated, "Living in rooming houses, or as a roomer in a family home, is now the most popular form of living arrangement for unattached persons" (p.433). Yet there was growing public concern for single people living alone. As Groth (1994) stated "Rooming house residents, too, knew they were on a social edge, but to them it was often a leading edge, one moving toward more independence" (p.91).

Tenant demographics of rooming houses shifted in the 1950s with the growth of the suburbs and widespread homeownership (Campsie, 1994; Archer, 2009). Rooming houses became housing for the working poor, the unemployed, and students (Campsie, 1994). In San Francisco, hotel managers, in order to keep occupancy levels high, began lowering prices and allowing less affluent tenants to replace former more affluent guests (Groth, 1994). Eventually most of the affluent tenants moved on "feeling that their social standing, comfort, or safety was in jeopardy" (Groth, 1994, p.184). With economic changes and more hotels converting to cheaper lodging houses, observers described a "visual decay" (Groth, 1994, p.185; Archer, 2009). Lower profits and decreased levels of maintenance advanced concerns of poor conditions and fire danger to the attention of city officials. Despite poor conditions, "For the most outcast people – drifters, unemployables, thieves, or prostitutes – rooming houses simply offered a place to be" (Groth, 1004, p.160).

Starting in the 1960s, community-based care became a community concern and a topic of attention in North American planning (Skelton, 2012). Societal thinking began to shift toward normalizing disabilities and re-integrating people into society. A transformation of care occurred, called deinstitutionalization, where patients transitioned from living in institutions into neighborhoods. The movement had effects on urban form as concentrations of care facilities or group homes appeared in inner cities (Skelton, 2012). Through deinstitutionalization, many individuals with mental disabilities and addictions moved into rooming houses, causing another shift in tenant demographics (Slater, 2004; Drake, 2014). This process further stigmatized rooming houses as neighbourhoods often

did not welcome individuals with mental challenges, in fear of the "stigmatised other" (Slater, 2004, p.321).

In the 1960s, planners characterized many rooming houses as "urban blight", and a significant number were lost due to redevelopment (Groth, 1994; Slater, 2004; Mifflin and Wilton, 2005; Archer, 2009). In the 1970s, gentrification contributed to an "SRO crisis" as numbers dwindled (Groth, 1994; Slater, 2004). Some people saw the crisis as a positive result with the "removal of substandard housing and unwanted neighbourhoods," yet others felt "this wholesale closing and destruction of residential hotels is a major tragedy and a root cause of homelessness in the United States" (Groth, 1994, p.10).

By the 1980s, the remaining aging housing stock in Toronto experienced landlord neglect and reactionary government policies often failing to address the changing status of SRO housing (Campsie, 1994). Toronto implemented licensing and inspections for rooming houses in 1974. Regulations appeared during a time of changing land values and urban renewal: many landlords of SROs sold their properties to developers instead of bringing them into compliance (Campsie, 1994). Around this time, deadly fires in SROs caused the City of Seattle to tighten rules and require upgrades for multi-story buildings, for which funding was provided, but no funding was allocated for rooming houses (Durning, 2013, p.12). The United States Federal government funded almost no hotel-style public housing and urban renewal efforts contributed to the SRO losses (Groth, 1994).

Ideals of the 1980s encouraged low-density development and maximum privacy for families; thus, "hotels...begun to be forbidden housing; their residents, forbidden citizens" (Groth, 1994, p.17). Housing law began to classify properties by "one family" in an attempt to restrict SRO uses (Alexander, 2005, p.1247). Zoning was used to protect neighbourhoods "constructed exclusively for nuclear families" (Skelton, 2012, p.2). Without protective planning policies in place, rising land values and gentrification continued to drive closures of many "larger traditional rooming houses" into more profitable uses (Archer, 2009, p.35). Remaining rooming houses became a "last resort" to those with no other option (Archer, 2009, p.35).

In 2006, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) described the average rooming house resident as a middle-aged, Canadian-born male, typically single or divorced, and living well below the poverty line – he may have physical or mental health challenges or other addictions which may prohibit employment. Other rooming house residents included students, recent immigrants, some women, and individuals who desire a smaller space (CMHC, 2006). Recent studies describe tenants of rooming houses as a diverse population, including seniors and international students, with the common need for low cost housing (Freeman, 2014; Lottis & McCracken, 2014). Today, an affordable housing crisis has increased societal reliance on rooming houses (Gaetz, Gulliver, and Richter, 2014). Renting a single room tends to be the least expensive option in the private housing market (CMHC, 2002). Rooming houses are frequently described as a form of functional homelessness or the "last stop before homelessness" (Chan, 2014, online).

Rooming houses are characterized as housing for those who have no other choice. However, history shows that rooming houses have served the needs of diverse people and are sometimes preferred. Groth (1994) claims, "Studies consistently show that many Americans prefer hotel life over other available and affordable options...[it is] because of public policy and new economic forces, this preference is in a precarious position" (8).

City officials, planners, and politicians often regulate rooming house options based on public concern, as congregate forms of living continually face attacks from middle and upper class citizens (Groth 1994; Alexander, 2005; Skelton, 2012). In the 19th century, people believed that hotel life endangered the dominant culture and the critique was largely based in definitions of an acceptable "home" – an ongoing debate today (Groth, 1994; Mifflin and Wilton, 2005). Socially constructed stigma suggests that the only way to better oneself and improve social status is to leave the rooming house (Groth, 1994; Drake & Herbert, 2015).

A marginalized and stigmatized form of housing
Stigmatization is "the labeling of certain individuals, groups and spaces as deficient, different and 'abnormal'" (Udvarhelyi, 2007, p.89). Stigma is socially constructed to

reinforce identities of "normal" or "other" contributing to the marginalization of certain groups and individuals (Goffman, 1968; Udvarhelyi, 2007). The stigmatization of rooming houses is based on ideals of an appropriate 'home' and public concerns for safety, privacy and cleanliness (Mifflin and Wilton, 2005; Udvarhelyi, 2007).

Goffman (1963) suggests that the extent of stigmatisation depends on the balance of power between the "stigmatized" and the "normal." Jacobs & Flanagan (2013) suggest that structural stigma is driven by a pathological understanding of poverty – blaming individuals for their socio-economic situation. Kearns et al. (2013) push against the pathological approach suggesting, "the subject is entirely the victim of stigma" (582). Social judgement is experienced or perceived by groups or individuals and creates an identity marked by rejection and discrimination (Kearns et al., 2013).

Stigma is closely linked with the concept of "risk society" coined by sociologist Ulrich Beck. Beck (1992) claims that in a "risk society" people constantly calculate the prevalence of uncertainty or risk. This calculated risk stems from the fear of the 'other' and is used as a guise to justify intolerance for difference (Breckinridge & Abbott, 1910; Beck, 1992; Rollwagen, 2014). Safety concerns and tenant behaviours often motivate neighbours to push for the implementation of regulatory intervention, which results in the restriction and exclusion of 'others' from attractive neighbourhoods (Skaburskis, 2010; Rollwagen, 2014).

A planning response: Regulatory intervention
The planning discipline often responds to community opposition with tools that facilitate exclusion and discrimination (Abrams, 1971). Many municipalities use zoning and minimum separation distance bylaws to restrict rooming houses and other unwanted housing options from "single family" neighbourhoods (Abrams, 1971; Alexander, 2005; Finkler & Grant, 2011; Skelton, 2012). These efforts attempt to protect ideals of appropriate housing and neighbourhood character (Breckinridge & Abbott, 1910; Kern, 2007; Udvarhelyi, 2007). Rooming houses are often labelled as transient or transitional

housing and do not fit the ideal of 'home.' Thus, rooming houses are deemed unacceptable for permanent living (Alexander, 2005; Mifflin and Wilton, 2005).

Rooming houses, like many other affordable rental options, are devaluaed in neoliberal society (Kern, 2007). Homeownership is favoured because it represents economic success and stability whereas renting is portrayed as unstable and transient (Slater, 2004; Kern, 2007; Rollwagen, 2014). The planning profession operates within the constraints of a neoliberal system, which disproportionately privileges homeowners over renters. Policies and plans seek to protect the idealized 'good' neighbourhood, which excludes housing options that do not fit Victorian values of 'home' and 'family life.' In this context, rooming houses face community pushback and efforts to limit their location and concentration (Skelton, 2012). Restricting housing options through regulation is a form of discrimination that reinforces ideas of appropriate lifestyles that exclude less affluent citizens (Alexander, 2005; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2013). In addition, regulation can limit the most affordable housing options, such as rooming houses.

The history of rooming houses shows that planning often prioritizes economic success and neighbourhood character at the expense of protecting affordable housing options. Yiftachel (1998) argues, "the tendency of planning policy to marginalize and oppress the 'other' is evident in all types of societies, but planners often avoid examining this problem" (p.401). The history of rooming house stigmatization and marginalization was driven by attempts to create better quality housing. However, these efforts reflected idealized middle and upper class suburban living (Groth, 1994; Alexander, 2005). Reformers, often from middle and upper class families, "rarely doubted that their own values were the best values" (Groth, 1994, p.204). Rooming houses may face legitimate problems, but many issues are "inherited from generations of misunderstanding" that reinforced stigma and intolerance (Groth, 1994, p.293).

The "enduring tension" is that "rooming houses fill the ever present demand for affordable and accessible housing for those with low income, while failing to meet common understanding of what constitutes appropriate housing" (Archer, 2009, p.35).

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The problem for rooming houses is not substandard conditions but the narrow view of appropriate housing and the stigmatization of those who cannot attain the cultural ideal. Stigma drives the need for regulation and further limits one of the few affordable housing options left in today's housing market. Rooming houses have seen major losses in North American cities and critics still push against this form of housing, threatening the last housing option for many individuals.

The continued existence of rooming houses despite a long history of pushback is telling. The demand for this form of housing persists in the housing market. The stigmatization of rooming houses, and other affordable housing options, is widespread, yet few studies examine stigma as a central concern (Hastings, 2004). People often suspect that racial and class prejudice and stereotyping contribute to neighborhood opposition, but little empirical evidence has been recorded (Tighe, 2012). This study examines the perceptions of rooming houses in Halifax to illuminate the reasons behind regulatory intervention and the possible factors contributing to the reported decline of this form of housing. In Halifax, rooming houses that meet the needs of low-income residents have been disappearing, while student-oriented rooming houses have been increasing near universities (Lee, Grant, & Ramos, 2016). Examining the situation on a local level can help identify the unique reasons behind this trend and the challenges facing the rooming house sector.

Cities across North America have approached rooming house issues with a regulatory solution, yet the outcomes of this intervention further marginalize this housing option. This study encourages planners to reflect on the motivations behind regulatory intervention and decipher which concerns around rooming houses stem from intolerance. We identify gaps in the image of rooming houses versus people's lived experiences to better understand the issues and explore the depth of rooming house stigmatization.

The Halifax case: Perceptions of rooming houses and the role of regulatory intervention
The Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) in the largest city within Atlantic Canada with

almost 400,000 people. Halifax is a located on the Atlantic coast and is home to many universities. The mid-sized city has experienced neighbourhood change and gentrification in recent decades, presenting a concern for loss of affordable housing (Prouse et al., 2014; SHS Consulting, 2015). Halifax shares a similar history of rooming houses to other cities across North America. During the 20th century, in Halifax, rooming houses were common for the working class and single individuals (Stickings, 2012). By 1996, a study completed by Metro Non-Profit Housing Association in Halifax, deemed rooming houses "very substandard housing" (Metro Non-Profit Housing Association, 1996, pg. 4). In recent decades, the decline of rooming houses has been widely reported (Lowe, 2013, AHANS, 2014). Multiple factors play into the loss of rooming houses including housing affordability, gentrification, rooming house fires, and rooming house closures (CMHC, 2000; Bundale, 2015; Lee, 2016).

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to better understand the current situation for rooming houses in Halifax. Evidence is drawn from a media analysis, which tracked stories on rooming houses over the past two decades, as well as an interview study. In summer 2016, we recruited stakeholders from the rooming house sector to participate in our study. Our community partners helped identify key individuals in the community. We also contacted local housing drop in centres, soup kitchens, legal aid offices, landlord offices, municipal and provincial officials, and neighbourhood associations. We conducted 37 semi-structured interviews with housing advocates, rooming house residents, housing providers, officials, and neighbours (Table 1). Each interview participant is identified by a code starting with the sequential number of the interview, followed by the stakeholder code, the sequential number of that stakeholder group, and a gender code. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, individuals are not named.

Example: 01*HA*01*f*

*01 (1st interview out of 37)

*HA (stakeholder group - housing advocate)

*01 (1st interviewee within the HA stakeholder group)

*f (female)

Table 1: Interview participants

STAKEHOLDER	Code	Male	Female	Total Participants
Municipal and Provincial Officials	MU/PR	3	3	6
Housing Advocates	HA	7	7	14
Rooming House Residents	RR	5	4	9
Housing Providers	HP	2	3	5
Neighbours	RA	1	2	3
Total		**18**	**19**	**37**

The interview data was transcribed and coded for major challenges. We also coded for the characterization of this housing option. We then completed a keyword search to uncover the major discourses in the data that frame rooming house issues and solutions. The results of the data analysis reveal that the most common topic discussed by stakeholders is regulatory challenges facing the rooming house sector in Halifax, specifically the lack of licensing and enforcement.

Licensing requirements to regulate rooming houses were implemented in Halifax in 2003 under the M-100 bylaw (governing standards for residential tenancies). In its early years, the M-100 bylaw functioned in a complaint-driven inspection system with little enforcement (Gulamhusein, 2005). In 2005, HRM recorded 77 rooming houses with many more undocumented and no licensing program in place (Gulamhusein, 2005). In 2013, a *Coast* article tiled "Rooming houses are disappearing in HRM [Halifax Regional Municipality]" identified 25 rooming houses, down from 153 in 2007 (Bousquet, 2013). In spring 2015, the city recorded only 18 licensed rooming houses but speculate there may be many more 'illegal' rooming houses in the city (SHS Consulting, 2015).
In July 2016, the M-200 bylaw passed through city council and replaced the M-100 bylaw. A news article released in 2016 revealed that not much has changed: "it's a complaint-driven process — meaning without a complaint, there's no inspection of properties" (Chiu, 2016, online). A local Councillor in Halifax admitted

The bylaw created more stringent rules around minimum safety...He says inspections would be prioritized, with dwellings that have 'more of a chance of risk' such as student rentals and converted properties being monitored more frequently. (Chiu, 2016, online)

The concern for student rentals is not new in Halifax. In 2005, the presence of unlicensed rooming houses, which staff called "quasi" rooming houses (detached homes subdivided for students) in Halifax's south end near universities, spurred a bylaw amendment (Bornais, 2005). The amendment limited the number of bedrooms permitted within dwelling units, but allowed existing uses to continue (Dunphy, 2005). Halifax continues to face complaints of a "student ghetto" causing neighbourhood decline around universities (Ritchie, 2014, p.3). Non-conforming and unlicensed rooming houses can be problematic because they are unmonitored and may be in poor condition, contributing to negative perceptions of the sector (Lottis & McCracken, 2014). Some common issues are noise, garbage, and overcrowding (Gumprecht, 2006; Ritchie, 2014).

Halifax, like many North American cities, experiences "studentification" (influx of students and services catering to them in a neighbourhood) with the expansion of universities and lack of sufficient accommodation (Sage, Smith, & Hubbard, 2012; Foster, Williams, and Andres, 2014). Foster et al. (2014) claimed that the expansion of student SRO accommodation not only creates public resistance, but also increased competition for low-income housing. In Halifax, the "quasi" rooming houses often escape licensing, in part, because they do not always fit the SRO definitions set out by the city (Murphy, 2015).

The local Councillor for South End Halifax claimed "We have a pattern on the peninsula of some landlords trying to basically operate lodging houses or boarding houses without understanding the law" (Luck, 2016). Megan Deveaux of Dalhousie Legal Aid, commented on illegal rooming houses claiming that landlords often take advantage of international students in rooming house situations. One common abuse is charging large

security deposits above the legal amount, which is 50% of one month's rent (Luck, 2016).

Abuse of power by rooming house landlords and the perceived persistence of poor housing conditions led many advocates to call on the city for action, often in the form of regulatory intervention. Our media review of local news coverage in Halifax indicated that the most common policy suggestion is "to enact tougher bylaws and enforcement" on rooming houses (Derksen, 2016). Regulation is seen as a way to address issues surrounding rooming houses and monitor the availability of this affordable housing option. However, increased regulatory standards can contribute to rooming house closures (Klinenberg 2003; Wiestmore, 2013).

The desire for regulatory intervention stems from a standard of appropriate housing based on common societal norms. We report on the common understandings among stakeholders in Halifax, on the challenges facing the rooming house sector, and the role of regulatory intervention. We then explore the motivations behind the desire to intervene and the tension that arises with regulatory intervention as the solution.

Characterizing a housing option

Demographics

The interview participants characterized rooming house tenants as low-income, often on Income Assistance, sometimes with addiction or mental health issues, students, and people in transition. They often described a spectrum of tenants with different ages, incomes, and diverse barriers to housing.

Housing advocates depicted rooming house residents as vulnerable and desperate people lacking supports, typically marginalized individuals. A metaphor of "predators and prey" was used to describe the vulnerability of tenants and the brutality of landlords (30HA12f). The term "gap guys" was used to describe the typical rooming house resident, often single men who cannot attain or do not want market apartments but are ready to move on from shelters (18HA08f). Rooming house residents mentioned students as the most common rooming house residents but also cited recent grads and marginally

employed individuals. When asked who lives in rooming houses, one tenant stated, "students, of course" (21RR05m).

Housing Providers also mentioned students the most, but advocated for rooming houses as a place for everyone. Many housing providers claimed that a spectrum of people live in their rooming house(s). Officials described rooming houses as a place for "transient folks" (09MU03m). They described a variety of people including seniors, young people, students, and construction workers; anyone single with modest income. Neighbours commonly labelled rooming house residents as students, people experiencing addiction, or unrelated individuals. One neighbour labelled rooming house residents as "a bunch of stray people" (24RA01f).

Attractiveness

Rooming house residents and housing advocates frequently spoke about the attractiveness of rooming houses. Both stakeholder groups described the social aspect of living in a rooming house as providing protection, camaraderie, community, and support. They claimed that the experience in a rooming house is better when tenants are "like-minded" (23RR06f; 30HA12f). Housing advocates suggested that rooming houses provide for a niche market, offering flexible, convenient, all-inclusive spaces. A rooming house is described as small, easy to manage space, providing people an opportunity to build a good reference. Rooming house residents emphasized flexibility and affordability as attractive aspects.

Affordability

Affordability is described as one of the major reasons rooming houses are an attractive option. Rooming houses are typically the most affordable option relative to other market options. Many stakeholders recognized that rooming houses exist in a wide spectrum of affordability, with some places being much cheaper than others. A rooming house was often described as the only affordable option for people on Income Assistance and the obvious option for students. Rooming houses provide a cheap option, but are often in

disrepair. As one housing advocate explained "some of the legal ones are pretty affordable...And they're older and older, and in disrepair" (10HA04m).

Descriptions

During interviews, rooming houses were often labelled as "slums" run by "slumlords" (26RR07m; 28RR09m; 16HP02m). Housing advocates described the temporary nature of rooming houses by using terms such as transient, revolving door, and in cases of emergency. Rooming house conditions are described as sketchy, substandard, decrepit, untenable, horrible, isolated, and volatile. They are seen as both a "symptom" and a "saving grace" (34HA14ff; 11HA05m). Rooming house residents used descriptive words such as crack house, freak show, and nightmare. Quasi rooming houses were described as the student ghetto or a vibrant culture. Housing providers focused on rooming houses as a springboard to other housing options. One housing provider used the term "starting point" to describe her rooming houses (36HP05f). A couple of officials used the term "residential income property" to define the function of rooming houses (08MU03m; 09MU04m).

Rooming houses are described as places for people with limited income. They are places of transition, filled with transient people. Rooming houses are not accepted as a permanent form of housing because they do not provide the characteristics of a 'home.' The interviewees recognize that rooming houses exist on a spectrum and can provide for the social needs of tenants, if the tenants have similar lifestyles. Yet there is still a dominating viewpoint that many rooming houses are in slum-like conditions, run by abusive landlords. We explore this stigmatizing discourse by examining the language used to describe rooming houses.

Stigmatizing discourse: Constructing socially acceptable conditions

During the interviews, many stakeholders used strategic language to paint a picture of rooming houses; others make reference to this negative image but they do not believe it themselves.

Rooming houses are stigmatized in a story that emphasizes poor conditions and vulnerability of tenants. Landlords are depicted as self-interested villains. As one rooming house resident stated, "the slumlords love people on [Income] Assistance because it's a cheque" (14RR03m). In this story, officials act as saviours putting an end to slum-like conditions and bringing landlords to justice in an effort to protect tenants. One housing provider calls on the city to "clean them up" when talking about illegal rooming houses (32HP03m). This discourse is countered by some interviewee accounts, for example, a student living in a quasi rooming house stated, "I don't really see myself as a vulnerable kind of…someone that's at risk of being evicted, being abused by a landlord, being in a living condition that many would say is unacceptable" (21RR05m).

We analyzed the interview data to discover the key messages in the discourse around rooming houses by systematically scanning each interview for terms such as stigma, clean, proper, and illegal (see Appendix). These words reveal common understandings around basic housing standards and what is deemed societally acceptable. Safety issues came up as the most prominent topic for all stakeholders except neighbours of rooming house properties (Table 2). Other keywords used by stakeholders include option, cleanliness, illegal, privacy, and proper. In this section, we explore the perceptions of stakeholders, looking specifically at the top three cited keywords: safety, option, and cleanliness.

Table 2: Keyword search results

KEYWORD	Housing Advocates	Rooming House Residents	Housing Providers	Officials	Neighbours	Total
Total Stakeholders	*14*	*9*	*5*	*6*	*3*	*37*
Safe/safety	11	6	4	4	0	25
Option	10	4	1	2	0	17
Clean/cleanliness	6	5	2	1	0	14
Illegal	4	1	2	4	1	12
Privacy	4	3	2	1	1	11
Proper	4	1	2	2	0	9

No interview questions directly addressed safety or cleanliness. These topics emerged spontaneously from questions such as: what kinds of issues have you encountered in dealing with rooming houses; how well managed are rooming house units in Halifax; what kinds of things make them an unattractive housing option; and what particular challenges do tenants face in living in rooming houses?

The topic of rooming houses as an option came up from direct questions such as: what kinds of things make rooming houses an attractive option; and what kinds of things make rooming houses an unattractive option? The term 'option' also came up from indirect questions such as: in what ways are the numbers of rooming house units changing in Halifax; how are the locations of rooming house units changing; how affordable are rooming house units in Halifax; how convenient are rooming house units in Halifax; and how well managed are rooming houses in Halifax?

Safety

Safety issues was the most prominent topic discussed by stakeholders with twenty-five of the thirty-seven interviewees mentioning the word. A majority, eleven out of fourteen housing advocates mentioned safety. When talking about safety, housing advocates said that tenants might not report safety issues due to fear of eviction. Safety was also cited as a common reason for rooming house closures. Housing advocates explored safety issues within rooming houses as well. They suggested that tenants might live in fear of other tenants; one advocate mentioned that trans-identified individuals are especially vulnerable (30HA12f).

Many housing advocates considered rooming houses less safe than apartments, largely because you cannot choose your roommates. Some reasons for lack of safety include no locks on bedroom doors, buildings not up to code, lack of security, and no incentive for the landlord to invest in safety measures. Suggestions to improve safety included ensuing a lockable room, having a superintendent, and holding the city responsible to guarantee standardization of rooming houses. Housing advocates recognize that efforts for safety are often based on value judgements about acceptable standards. Yet they stressed a need to act against unsafe conditions. As one housing advocate said,

> *Without adequate standards, then we are putting again some of the most*
> *marginalized people in our community at risk, right, by just offering them really*
> *substandard, unsafe, unsanitary places to live. And it's not good enough.*
> (31HA13f)

Six of nine rooming house residents talked about safety. They described issues with fire safety as well as concerns about other tenants. They explained that in a shared setting there is a lack of responsibility, leading to unsafe conditions. Rooming house residents claimed that the level of safety expected in rooming houses depends on the licenser, sent by the City of Halifax, and may differ between inspections. Comradery was described as a safety provision as people look out for one another. However, rooming house residents communicated a need for clear safety expectations, inspections, and supervision. They suggest that everyone is entitled to safety but many people are unaware of the standards. By some interviewee accounts, landlords engaged in illegal and unsafe activities and tenants had to educate themselves on safety standards. A rooming house resident in Halifax as an international student said, "I'm not sure how to compare it because I can only compare it to my previous experiences...because living in Canada is quite different from being some place other than Canada." (27RR08f).

Housing providers expressed a need to balance safety and economics. Four of the five housing providers mentioned safety. They suggested there is little or no enforcement of fire safety issues, thus not all rooming houses are held to the same standard. There was concern that the city is ignoring most rooming houses in Halifax and leaving people in vulnerable situations. As one housing provider stated, "when the government is enabling illegal activity, it's very, very bad for society. And it's not ethical, it's not responsible, and it really exploits the most vulnerable" (32HP03m). Many housing providers claimed regulation could ensure safety and expressed a belief that safety is a basic right.

Four out of six officials mentioned safety. They claimed that safety is a common issue and a municipal responsibility. Concerns were expressed for the safety of tenants who have no supervision and for those living near rooming houses. Officials suggested that the rooming house licensing program is reasonable and provides an enhanced standard of

safety. For officials, health and safety violations warrant building closures, yet they expressed hesitancy to displace people. One official explained,

> *We are a little bit lax on enforcement unless like there's an eminent danger to life. Because we know that if we actually go in there, if the city goes in there guns blazing, that it will create a social crisis that the province has no ability to respond to.* (05MU01m)

Option

The term 'option' is used in discussions around the viability of rooming houses – whether or not it is financially feasible to remain an option and whether or not it meets basic standards of appropriate housing. The term also highlights the agency or lack or agency faced by tenants in the rooming house sector. Seeking instances of the word 'option' uncovers discussions about factors that contribute to, or diminish, agency.

Seventeen of the thirty-seven interviewees described rooming houses as a housing option. Ten of the fourteen housing advocates mentioned rooming houses as an option. They described rooming houses as the first available option, the last option, and the only option. One housing advocate stated, "rooming houses are a viable, useful, meaningful option for folks" (10HA04m). Affordability and availability are the major reasons rooming houses are an attractive option – rooming houses are described as fast, cheap, and adequate.

Four of nine rooming house residents talked about rooming houses as an option. They suggested that rooming houses provide a viable option if well managed, but there are not many rooming houses available (23RR06f). Lack of options is a challenge for those who rely on rooming houses as their only affordable option. One rooming house resident described, "they're not readily available in the price range that folks can afford now...I look in the paper once in a while just to see what the options are when I get a little pissed off. And the availability isn't there" (03RR01f). With fewer options, tenants lose agency in choosing their living conditions. Rooming houses are portrayed as housing option under demand, yet they continue to disappear.

Cleanliness

Fourteen of the thirty-seven stakeholders mentioned cleanliness when talking about rooming houses. Housing advocates often labelled cleanliness as an issue of hygiene and health. Some rooming houses are described as clean and well managed, but many are not. Housing advocates suggested that maintaining cleanliness is both a landlord and tenant responsibility. Sharing amenities compromises cleanliness; thus, according to housing advocates, rooming houses need inspections to ensure they are well maintained (20HA10f). Cleanliness is described as a basic standard and lack of cleanliness as inappropriate. One housing advocate claimed, "I think no matter how much you're paying for your rent in a boarding house, you should have an expectation that things are going to be safe and clean" (19HA09m).

Cleanliness is a common issue for rooming house residents. Unclean bathrooms were a common complaint among rooming house residents, as well as bugs/infestation. Expectations of cleanliness were often unmet (15RR04f). Tenants stated that cleanliness is a factor in attractiveness. Some rooming house residents claimed that people lose the sense of responsibility in shared accommodation, especially if the manager or landlord doesn't care (23RR06f).

Illegal, privacy, proper

The term "illegal" was prominent in discussions with officials. Many officials recognized the negative connotation associated with illegality, often tying it to risk of fire. Officials claimed awareness of an "underground economy" of rooming houses and stated that they use regulations to prosecute landlords (08MU03m). However, illegal zones were described as an issue, keeping the majority of rooming houses in Halifax hidden and unmonitored. One official stated, "if the land use…wasn't so restrictive, then I think you'd see more of these buildings just properly licenced" (09MU04m).

Housing providers talked about "privacy" more than any other stakeholder. They suggested that people want personal space, as it is important to their "autonomy" and "sanity" (32HP03m). Many officials mentioned the word "proper" when talking about

building structure, licensing, monitoring, and safety. Officials suggested that many rooming house buildings are not maintained properly, which is a safety concern.

Stakeholder opinion

Stigma toward rooming houses and their residents came up in conversations with all stakeholder groups. Absentee landlords were a concern for housing advocates, rooming house residents, officials, and neighbours. Most neighbours expressed negative attitudes toward rooming houses, sharing concerns of property values, public safety, and neighbourhood character.

Housing advocates recognized that stigma might stem from general attitudes towards low-income people, lack of public interest in supporting rooming houses, police incidents, and tenants lacking support. One housing advocate explained, "Unfortunately the perceptions still from past times are negative" (01HA01f). Advocates claimed that potential rooming house tenants might avoid rooming houses due to the negative community perception. One housing advocate suggesting that the closure of a rooming house in Dartmouth had improved the neighbourhood (02HA02m).

Rooming house residents suggested that no one cares about "old drunks" (describing rooming house tenants) (03RR01f). Tenants often keep issues hidden to avoid critique and potential loss of housing. Housing providers recognized the bad reputation of rooming houses because they experience community mistrust and opposition. Yet, they say the stigma is not accurate, but a creation of society. One housing provider said, "I look at them differently than I used to. They're only a burden to society because society makes it that way (36HP05f). The same housing provider also suggested that student rooming houses are more of a problem than those filled with Income Assistance recipients; thus stigma is misplaced.

Officials recognized that poor conditions are unacceptable and that regulation is required to ensure a basic level of safety and societal acceptance. One official suggested that negative perceptions are perpetuated by the media (22MU05f). Neighbours expressed distaste for student rooming houses, which undermine their neighbourhoods (33RA03m).

They often associated rooming houses with police incidents and discuss the challenges living beside Income Assistance recipients, including "feel[ing] uneasy" (29RA02f).

Stakeholders talk about stigma as a divided concept. The stigma faced by students living in rooming houses is different than the stigma facing income recipient rooming house residents. Using Goffman's (1963) argument, the extent of stigmatisation is dependant on power relations. Students may face fewer stigmas because their condition is temporary, whereas an income assistance recipient may be deemed a hopeless case - stuck in poverty by his own failings. Within stakeholder groups, stigma is distributed differently. For example, one tenant described the other tenants living in his rooming house, but distinguished himself as different. He stated, "there was only like 4 or 5 us in there, but all crack heads. I'm not a crack head. I smoked before that. I didn't get too bad into it like the people I was living with there" (13R02m). Landlords also differentiated themselves from other landlords suggesting that other properties were poorly managed and illegal. One landlord blamed these 'other' housing providers for the problems associated with rooming houses (32HP03m).

The story and the solution

The story told by stakeholders depicts rooming houses as facing issues of safety and cleanliness. This story, although true in some cases, may be a hyperbole in others. Many interviewees recognize that media proliferates a negative image of rooming houses, painting poor conditions as the norm for rooming houses. The negative image helps spark a movement to crackdown on 'slumlords.' For example, a Daily News article published in 2001 is titled "Could tenants be victims in slumlord crackdown?: The city wants to protect those living on the margins of society, but it's easier said than done" (Moar, 2001, online).

Language such as 'slum' and 'slumlord' justifies the 'crackdown' or the strict regulation of rooming houses. Similar language is used to depict public housing as a "crime-ridden" place for "prostitutes, drug dealers, and other criminals" evoking fear in the white middle class (August, 2014, p.1323). Wacquant (2007) examines the relationship between

stigmatization and public policy, suggesting that stigma creates the "faceless, demonized other" which then justifies policies which displace local residents (p.68).

> *Whether or not these areas are in fact dilapidated and dangerous, and their population composed essentially of poor people, minorities and foreigners, matters little in the end: the prejudicial belief that they are suffices to set off socially noxious consequences.* (2007, p.68)

Push for regulatory intervention: A misguided initiative

The discourse around rooming houses and rooming house residents is disempowering and generates a perceived need for regulatory intervention. In recognizing poor rooming house conditions and lack of safety, most stakeholders call for enhanced licensing and enforcement (Table 3).

Table 3: Most commonly mentioned regulatory challenges facing rooming houses

REGULATORY CHALLENGES	Housing Advocates	Rooming House Residents	Housing Providers	Officials	Neighbours
Licensing and enforcement/oversight	52	22	11	23	6
Education/public information	14	10	1	4	**7**
Definitions/bylaw clarity	4	9	1	27	
Land use bylaw				8	1
Reporting	11	2			1
Closures	16	3		3	
Policy/procedure	25	2	1	7	1
Departmental/ staffing/resources	2	2		9	3
Lack of initiative/incentives	11	1	5	6	1
Role of municipality	9	1	2	17	
Private market reliance	2		1	2	
Need for research/data	3		2	10	

Interviewees talk about lack of enforcement as the biggest challenge facing the rooming house sector in Halifax. Yet many stakeholders recognized the flaws in enforcing licensing too hastily. One housing advocate stated, "The city and the province and everyone else has made it hard for them to operate. So yeah, they've definitely closed down" (18HA08f). Similarly, an official stated, "we just shut them all down and it exacerbated the problem" (05MU01m). Some respondents take a step further and recognized that regulating rooming houses cannot solve the problems facing the rooming house sector because issues are complex. As one housing provider described, regulation is "not a comprehensive solution" (16HP02m). All stakeholders mentioned lack of higher-level support from the provincial and federal governments as the biggest challenge facing rooming houses in terms of sector support (Table 4).

Table 4: Most commonly mentioned sector support challenges facing rooming houses

SECTOR SUPPORT CHALLENGES	Housing Advocates	Rooming House Residents	Housing Providers	Officials	Neighbours
Initiative barriers	11				
Coordination/communication	4		4	7	
Higher level support/oversight	25	4	7	12	2
Helplessness	5				
Tenant willingness to receive help	3				
Landlord willingness to collaborate	1				
Need research			2		
Approach (reactive/agency or individual)	4				

A tension is shown in the data between the perceived need for urgent action on poor housing conditions and the caution in avoiding the creation of more homelessness in the city. This dilemma suggests a need to evaluate our intentions in regulatory intervention

and reflect on the root causes of the challenges facing rooming houses and their occupants. If we understand the nature of rooming house issues as substandard conditions and a lack of landlord accountability, then regulatory intervention is the answer. However, if we understand that rooming house issues are tied up in complex social and economic challenges, we realize a regulatory solution is not sufficient. Participants recognized both the need for balance and a collaborative approach, yet there was an overwhelming sentiment to enforce regulation as a first step. The recognition that licensing alone cannot solve the challenges facing rooming houses means the pursuit of a regulatory solution deserves critique.

The history of rooming houses and regulatory intervention reminds us that housing law is based on protecting the "single family" way of life (Alexander, 2005). Concern for tenants in vulnerable situations is justified; however, regulatory invention does not achieve the desired outcome of ensuring safe and affordable housing. Instead, regulatory intervention undermines agency for tenants who choose to live in rooming houses as well as for landlords who operate them. Enforcement of strict regulation paired with restrictive zoning and pro-revitalization planning policies threatens the financial viability of rooming houses. In Halifax, the restriction of rooming houses from lower density zones, the financialization of urban property (treating property as a financial asset), and the political push for revitalization of older housing stock contribute to rooming house losses (Rutland, 2010; SHS Consulting, 2015).

Public acceptance of redevelopment in Halifax is gained in part by 'creative city' ideals, attempting to attract young talent, and urban design ideas of intensification and densification (Rutland, 2010; Grant & Gregory, 2016). Whitzman & Slater (2006), argue that stigmatizing language "becomes the justification for discriminatory housing policies in a neighborhood" (p.693). For example, using the term "ghetto" and the term "village" to describe different neighbourhoods create labels that legitimize gentrification (Whitzman & Slater, 2006, p.693). The desire for regulatory action and acceptance of planning policies that disadvantage rooming houses stems from a stigmatized perception

of rooming houses that perpetuates marginalization of this form of housing and its residents.

Considerations for planning practice

The planning disciple has a tendency to protect the dominant culture (Groth, 1994). We see this in the way housing law has clung to Victorian values and the ideals of the "single family life" – a life only attainable for upper middle class folks (Alexander, 2005). In the current neoliberal, market-driven society, planning privileges those with wealth; in the case of housing this is the homeowner (Bramley, 2007; Kern, 2007). More affordable housing options become marginalized as planners regulate space to protect the 'safety' of neighbourhoods (Rollwagen, 2014). Neighbourhood character becomes a term used to idealize a way of life and justify efforts to protect it (Ritchie, 2014).

Societal values of 'autonomy,' 'cleanliness,' and 'privacy' justify the regulation of affordable housing options which fail to satisfy these values. Stakeholders in Halifax depicted regulation as a measure to save helpless tenants from their situations. The irony here is that the tenants lose agency with the loss of affordable housing options. Multiple processes drive the loss of rooming houses: including, market forces appealing to Victorian values, which privilege the nuclear family; neoliberal values promoting redevelopment of older housing stock; mass media reliance on sensationalism to attract readers, which paints a negative image of rooming houses; and public opposition, often based on stigmatization and fear of the 'other' (Slater, 2004; Kern, 2007; Tighe, 2012; Kearns et al., 2013; Scally & Tighe, 2015).

Addressing the embedded stigmas is the first step to returning tenant agency and working toward more effective solutions. The continued use of terms such as "illegalities," criminalizes poverty instead of addressing economic disadvantage (Herring, 2014, p.292). Stigma results from stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination, which is derived from viewing vulnerable people as 'others' (Yang et al., 2007). As Yang et al. (2007) state "a social dialectic of interpretation and response effectively ensures that

marginalization is perpetuated, since others respond to a stigmatized individual as someone already burdened with shame, ambivalence, and low status" (p.1528).

The stigmatization of rooming houses serves different functions for different audiences. For example, media wants a story to attract readers, neighbours want political attention for state action, and advocates want to further their interests for funding and their pursuits of justice. Yang et al., (2007) claim that "stigma as a social process with multiple dimensions. Stigma is seen to be embedded in the interpretive engagements of social actors, involving cultural meanings, affective states, roles, and ideal types" (p.1527-8). Marwell (2015), reflecting on the work of Wacquant, argues that recognizing stigmatization in state action can enlighten us on "how governance arrangements are actively shaping marginality in new ways" (1097).

The justification for regulation is to protect the 'safety' of tenants, but in implementation, regulatory intervention protects the interests of the wealthy. The top-down approach to rooming house regulation frames the problem of rooming houses as substandard housing, which ignores the stigmatizing discourse. The role of the planner is to take a step back and to re-frame the problem. Rooming houses have a long history of stigmatization and have been marginalized; yet they still exist, proving there is a demand for this form of housing.

What can be done?
When planning discourages rooming houses through policies and bylaws, it limits the competition of this form of housing and may encourage landlord abuses with little incentive to improve conditions. Durning (2013) argues that moving away from regulation would see a revival of affordable options, as he states

> *A future unfettered by such rules would see the reemergence of inexpensive choices, including rooming houses and other old residential forms. Such units will not satisfy those of greater means and the expectations that accompany them. They would not try to. But they can meet an urgent need of young people, some seniors, and working-class people of all ages.* (p.16)

Instead of seeking regulatory solutions, planners can focus their efforts on supporting rooming house accommodation to increase options for tenants. As one rooming house resident in Halifax said, "So there has to be some sort of consideration for recognizing them and incentivizing...making sure that students like myself can still walk to school in Halifax 20 years from now" (21RR05m). A revival of SRO housing is already taking place in other Canadian cities. As one Halifax housing advocate noted, in Vancouver, BC Housing purchases old residential hotels to run provincially-owned and staffed SROs (10HA04m). The first step for planners is to recognize the embedded stigmas that frame the issues facing rooming houses. Then planners can approach solutions with a mindset to increase tenant agency.

In Halifax, landlords are often blamed for the problems associated with rooming houses; thus, they must also be part of the solution. Many landlords interviewed claimed that they wanted to help tenants succeed. How can the city partner with landlords to better the situation? Incentivizing the operation of rooming houses is in the interest of the public sector as it provides cost savings with less need to build affordable units. However, rooming houses are only the part of the solution. In Halifax, rooming houses are described as a niche market, filling a need for some but not others. A spectrum of housing options are required to meet the needs of diverse populations.

Currently, planning regulations disadvantage rooming houses. For example, the proposed Centre Plan for the Halifax Regional Centre (Halifax Peninsula and Dartmouth) designates areas with older housing stock as growth corridors (HRM, 2016). Pro-revitalization efforts encourage gentrification and the further loss of affordable housing, including rooming houses (Skaburskis, 2010). A strategy to mitigate the threat of redevelopment is implementing protective policies. However, the stigmatization of rooming houses and restrictive regulations will likely continue to discourage rooming house tenants and landlords to seek support. Thus, addressing stigma is a crucial first step.

Concluding thoughts

This study provides an insight into the experiences of stakeholders in Halifax, the perceived need for regulatory interventions, and the embedded stigmas. The results of the study challenge the acceptance of regulatory intervention as a simple solution to solve the complex issues surrounding rooming houses in Halifax. Drawing attention to the factors that contribute to the undermining of the rooming house model demonstrates how market forces and planning practices continue to stigmatize and marginalize rooming houses. Efforts for intervention are framed as acts of justice; yet, these efforts are rooted in intolerance of the 'other' and have resulted in dramatic losses of rooming houses in recent decades.

Understanding the rationale behind intervention can shed light on the root of the perceived need for regulation and allow for critical reflection. Tighe (2012) suggests that planners and policymakers have a role to "distinguish between legitimate opposition to affordable housing and that based on mispercetions or fear" (p.979). This study is a start in understanding those misperceptions and stigmas in Halifax and discovering the legitimate issues the sector is facing, which are rooted in an economic and planning structure that marginalizes rooming houses.

The current top-down regulatory approach to solving rooming house issues has led to further marginalization of this form of housing and thus is an ineffective tool. However, there is a role for planning to protect and encourage the rooming houses that remain in the housing market today. Planners can help shed light on the embedded stigma facing rooming houses and their residents and shift the discource from disempowerment to empowerment. Rooming houses play a vital role in the housing continuum and planners have an opportunity to protect this valuable option for those who have few options.

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Appendix

List of keywords by incidence

	INCIDENCE		
Keyword	*Low*	*Med*	*High*
Safe/safety			66
Clean/cleanliness			33
Option			31
Illegal			23
Privacy			21
Proper			19
Transitional		14	
Home		14	
Stigma		13	
Marginalized		12	
Secure		11	
Risk		10	
Substandard		9	
Order	6		
Accept	6		
Stereotype	5		
Racialized	4		
Image	4		
Values	4		
Last resort	4		
Perception	4		
Opposition	3		
Temporary	3		
Crowded	2		
Stepping stone	2		
Judge	2		
NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard)	1		
Precarious	1		
Reputation	1		
Turnover	1		
Attitude	1		
Dirty	0		

List of categories by incidence

	INCIDENCE		
Category	*Low*	*Med*	*High*
Demographics			59
Attractiveness			48
Descriptions			41
Affordability			40
No choice		28	
Need/importance		20	
Spectrum		13	
Niche		12	
Desirability		12	
Flexible	9		
Unattractive	9		
Temporary	4		
Availability	3		
Landlord control	2		
Conditions	1		
Profitable	1		