Rooming House Residents

Challenging the Stereotypes

by Stephen Hwang, Rochelle Martin, J. David Hulchanski, and George Tolomiczenko

Inner City Health Research Unit, St. Michael’s Hospital, Toronto, and Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto

1. Roomers in Toronto

Who lives in Toronto’s rooming houses? The tenants are generally people on low incomes, but beyond that, it is hard to make generalizations. Roomers are a diverse group – probably more diverse than is generally assumed.

This was one of the findings of a recent survey carried out in order to learn about the health status of roomers and about factors that might contribute to the health of roomers. The study also provided information on other characteristics of roomers, some of which challenge common stereotypes of roomers as socially isolated, undereducated, unemployed individuals with multiple personal problems. This report summarizes the findings, which provide a demographic profile of Toronto’s rooming house residents.

2. The study method

In 1998 the research team interviewed 295 residents of 171 licensed rooming houses in Toronto. They excluded unlicensed rooming houses from the study because there was no consistent or reliable way to identify these establishments. The sample included both private, for-profit rooming houses and non-profit houses. All had at least four rooms and shared bathrooms and kitchens. Most were converted single-family houses.

Interview participants were chosen at random. If the selected resident could not be contacted after three visits, or refused to participate, or could not communicate in English, the interviewer approached the resident of the closest room. If the interviewer was unable to enter the house or if no one in the house was willing to participate, a roomer at a similar house was substituted. Each participant received $15 for completing the interview.

The survey questions covered demographic characteristics, lifestyle and health, as well as conditions in the rooming house and other health determinants.

3. Gender, age, ethnicity, and marital status

Of the 295 people interviewed, 84% (249) were men and 16% (46) were women. The participants’ ages ranged from 18 to over 75; most were between 25 and 55. The mean age of all participants was 40; for men it was 41 and for women, 37.

Most participants in the survey (82%) were white, 9% were black, 3% were Asian, 2% belonged to First Nations groups, and the remainder to other ethnic groups. However, since the survey excluded those who could not communicate easily in English, this figure may be somewhat skewed. It may also under-represent immigrants or refugees from countries in which it is considered either improper or dangerous to provide personal information to strangers. People from such countries might well have refused to be interviewed.

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Just under 64% of the tenants were single, never married, almost 28% were divorced or separated, 6.5% were married or living common-law, and the remainder were listed as “other,” which might mean widowed or possibly part of a same-sex relationship. The low number of married people is largely a function of the type of
housing, which does not easily lend itself to accommodating couples.

Eight of the 46 women interviewed (17%) had become pregnant in the previous five years, and six had given birth, but only one lived with her children at the time of the survey.

4. Employment and income

About one-third of all participants were employed, including more than half of the women. Since rooming houses are often associated with the unemployed and those on social assistance, it is interesting to note that 1 in 3 residents belongs to the “working poor.”

The mean monthly income for the participants was $961.95, slightly higher for the women. It is hard to assess the accuracy of these findings. Some people may have under-reported their income for fear of losing government assistance payments and some may have avoided mentioning additional sources of money, such as casual labour or panhandling.

Among those who were currently unemployed, the most common sources of income for the previous year were family benefits (42.8%), welfare (33.5%), and pensions, either Canada pension (9.8%) or old age pension (9.8%).

Individuals may move between states of employment and unemployment. Of those who were currently employed, 16% had been welfare recipients in the previous year. Similarly, 3.6% of those who were currently unemployed reported that wages and salaries were a source of income in the previous year.

The average amount that tenants spent on rent was 44.8% of their income, and the median was 40.9%. More than 10% of the tenants were spending more than three-quarters of their income on rent. There was little correlation between the ratio (above or below the average) and the age, gender, education, or marital status of the tenants, but those who were unemployed were much more likely to spend more than the average amount of their income on rent.

5. Education

Roomers include people with low levels of education, but also some university graduates, as the following table shows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>% MEN</th>
<th>% WOMEN</th>
<th>% OVERALL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade school only</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school grad</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some university</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University grad</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost 15% of the participants (and more than a quarter of the women interviewed) had a university degree – a surprising finding.

Monthly income differed significantly by level of education attained; those with higher levels of education reported higher levels of income. The following table shows levels of education broken down by employed residents and unemployed residents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>% UNEMPLOYED</th>
<th>% EMPLOYED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade school only</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school grad</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some university</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University grad</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Housing history

Rooming houses have been called the “lowest rung on the housing ladder,” meaning that they are only one step above homelessness. Therefore the interviewers asked participants if they had ever been homeless and if they had experienced homelessness within the previous five years.

About a third of the roomers reported having been homeless at some point, and of these 105 people, two-thirds (68 people) had been homeless within the previous five years. Also, about 30% of those who had been homeless at some point reported that the period of homelessness had lasted more than a year. For these individuals, loss of their room could easily send them back into a homeless shelter or onto the street.

Those who had previously been homeless could be said to be moving up the housing ladder, since they now had a roof over their heads. However, more than a quarter of all respondents had moved from a house or regular apartment within the previous 12 months, and could be said to be moving down the ladder.

The table on the next page shows the amount of time the tenant has lived at his or her current rooming house. The average time was 35 months (just under three years), and the median was 18 months. Almost 9% had lived in the same place for more than 10 years, and 14% for more than 3 years. These people are not mov-
ing up or down the housing ladder – for them, a rooming house is a long-term form of housing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME IN CURRENT PLACE</th>
<th>% OF PARTICIPANTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 3 years</td>
<td>66.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 5 years</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 10 years</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 years</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Smoking, drinking, and drugs

More than half (57%) of the survey participants were regular smokers; 38% were non-smokers, and the rest were occasional smokers.

When the interviewers asked about alcohol consumption in the past year, a third of the roomers said that they had not had a drink at all, and another 43% said that they drank regularly – between twice a week and every day of the week. Just under 10% said they drank every day. About a third reported that they had had a drinking problem at some point – that could include people who had overcome their addiction and now did not drink at all as well as people who were still struggling with the problem.

These results may be slightly skewed, since people often under-report their drinking habits. However, the findings do suggest that heavy drinkers are in the minority among roomers. Indeed, after paying for rent, food, and necessities, many low-income people have little money left over for alcohol.

Almost 70% of the participants said that they had not used any drugs in the past year other than prescription drugs. Of those who had used drugs, most had used marijuana.

8. Health status

About 60% of the respondents reported a chronic health problem, the most common of which were:

- arthritis or rheumatism;
- back problems other than arthritis;
- asthma;
- high blood pressure;
- migraines.

The researchers compared the incidence of these conditions (and others reported by participants) with those in the general Canadian population. The prevalence of chronic health problems was higher for male roomers than for men in the general population, but roughly the same for female roomers and women in the general population.

Even compared to other low-income people, roomers tend to have poorer health, which suggests that their health problems are not related to poverty alone. In particular, four conditions (migraine headaches, sinusitis, urinary incontinence, and epilepsy) remained significantly more common among rooming house residents than among low-income people in general.

Slightly more than a third of respondents reported mental or emotional problems, including depression, manic-depressive illness, or schizophrenia.

The researchers also compared the health status of roomers to the quality of the rooming house in which they lived. In general, the rooming houses that showed evidence of care and upkeep and that were located in quieter neighbourhoods tended to have healthier tenants. However, the relationship between housing quality and health status needs further study. It cannot be assumed that better quality houses ensure better health for their tenants.

Interestingly, organizational characteristics such as non-profit status and provision of meals were not correlated with residents’ health.

This study included only licensed rooming houses. Anecdotal experience suggests that housing conditions in unlicensed rooming houses are often substandard and therefore the health status of tenants of unlicensed houses may be even poorer.
9. **Access to food**

More than half (54%) of the survey respondents were food insecure – that is, from time to time they ran out of food and were unable to buy more. About a third had gone to a drop-in or meal program to eat during the previous year, and more than a third had visited a food bank in the previous year.

10. **Safety**

The interviewers asked survey participants how they felt about the safety of the rooming house. More than half said they felt “very safe” in the rooming house and another third felt “somewhat safe.”

Those who did not feel safe usually reported that they had been verbally abused or even physically attacked by another resident or by a non-resident who had been able to gain access to the house. About 23% of the residents had been verbally abused. About 10% had been physically assaulted, although most of those assaults occurred away from the rooming house.

11. **Social supports**

The researchers asked about contact with friends and family. Most respondents (84%) felt that they had someone in whom they could confide and 73% felt that someone loved them and cared about them. More than 20% belonged to an association or organization and 17% attended religious services at least once a week.

Nearly three-quarters of the roomers interviewed had been in touch with family members during the past year, and about a third were in contact every week, if not every day. Most roomers (85%) got together with friends regularly or occasionally, and 65% had regular or occasional contact with their neighbours.

These findings challenge the stereotype of roomers as socially isolated individuals and of rooming houses being places in which people generally avoid interaction. However, the people who agreed to be interviewed were probably the more sociable residents, compared to the roomers who refused to talk to the researchers.

12. **Conclusions**

In many ways, rooming house residents are as diverse as the general population of Toronto. They include people with steady employment, university graduates, teetotallers, churchgoers, and people in stable relationships. They also include people on social assistance, formerly homeless people, people with low levels of education, people with substance abuse problems, people suffering from mental illness, and socially isolated individuals.

These characteristics can be associated in any number of ways – a university graduate may be socially isolated, a churchgoer may have a drinking problem, and someone in a stable relationship may suffer from mental illness.

The only generalization one can make about rooming house residents is that most of them live alone, most have low incomes, and many are food insecure because of their income level. Beyond that, generalizations about rooming house tenants are likely to be misleading.
Homeless “squeegee kids”: Food insecurity and daily survival, N. Dachner and V. Tarasuk, #7, May 2002.

The case for social and community infrastructure investment: Toronto’s quiet crisis, P. Clutterbuck, #8, June 2002.


Downtown parking lots: An interim use that just won’t go away, A. Belaieff, #10, August 2002.

Housing discrimination in Canada: What do we know about it?, S. Nova, J. Darden, J.D. Hulchanski, and A.-M. Seguin, with the assistance of F. Bernèche, #11, December 2002.


The right to adequate housing in Canada, B. Porter, #14, April 2003.