

# Time to tackle the rooming-house paradox

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For more than a decade, the Institute of Urban Studies undertook several projects that explored rooming houses and single-room-occupancy hotels. What we found was an industry rife with contradiction, comprised of Samaritans and villains willing to either help or exploit. In an initial estimate, we contended that there are as many as 10,000 people comprising the hidden homeless population of Winnipeg. Within this number, most lived in rooming houses, single-room hotels or "sofa-surfed" from place to place, while others drifted onto the streets or into shelters.

In addition, we allowed our affordable housing stock to spiral downward in two fundamental ways. First, the federal government significantly diminished its role in the provision of affordable housing, off-loading the majority of responsibility to the provinces, which have not built enough units. Second, we allowed what remained to decline, leaving many to scramble for the worst of the worst.

A decade-long boom in the Winnipeg housing market, meanwhile, rewarded some, but it also meant that affordable housing became a commodity, leading to conversions and a decline in the rooming-house stock in Spence, Osborne Village and West Broadway districts.

To tackle the bigger problem of poor-quality housing, a practical solution would be to convene another task force, as was done in the 1990s, and undertake a quick and comprehensive sweep and inspection of all the rooming houses and hotels, with the mandate to enforce building codes, occupancy standards and licensing.

With swift action, we could effectively close many of the worst offenders. In doing so, however, we would have to realize that for a heavy hand, a hefty price would be paid, as many would be plunged into crisis and end up on the streets, putting increased pressure on our limited shelters.

Herein lies a paradox. While we know it is critical to have all Canadians live in safe, affordable housing, closing hundreds, if not thousands of rooms would put a massive burden on an already strained system.

For more on this story, [click here](#).

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