

Neighbourhood Change Research Partnership

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Rooming houses in Halifax: Issues, opportunities, and policies

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1. Rationale & Potential Policy Relevance

Rising housing costs and increased demand for central city living are affecting the supply of affordable housing in Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM or Halifax). Central neighbourhoods that once accommodated working class and disadvantaged populations increasingly attract more affluent residents, with new tastes and new housing options. In the context of neighbourhood change in the city, inexpensive housing alternatives – aside from public, cooperative, and non-profit housing – are threatened in several neighbourhoods. Another affordable housing option – rooming houses – appear under threat as well. “Rooming houses are one of the least-costly forms of transitional and permanent accommodation available to low-income Canadians”, especially those with mental or physical health issues, or dealing with substance abuse (CMHC 2001, 1).

What is a rooming house? Rooming houses (or homes), boarding houses, lodging houses, or single-room occupancy (SRO) dwellings provide inexpensive rental accommodation, often protecting vulnerable people from homelessness (CMHC 2002). In towns or neighbourhoods adjacent to universities and colleges, property owners may similarly subdivide houses or build homes with multiple bedrooms to rent singly to students, a phenomenon that Halifax planning staff have referred to as ‘quasi-rooming houses’ (Dunphy 2005). SROs “fall into a grey area of the housing market. They can provide flexible but precarious housing accommodations to individuals who are part of the hidden homeless population, or for those who may have exhausted other options” (Kaufman and Distasio 2014, 2). Because the cost of other housing has risen while wages and assistance benefits remained stagnant, need for SROs has grown (CMHC 2001).

Winnipeg has experienced significant loss of rooming house units in the last decade in two neighbourhoods studied by Kaufman and Distasio (2014). Vancouver lost hundreds of small, low-rent units in the run-up to the Olympics (Paulsen 2007). Redevelopment and gentrification in Montreal has constrained the supply of SROs there (Alfaro 2010). The shortage of affordable housing in Toronto has sparked concerns about the development of illegal suburban rooming houses (Kwan 2014). The situation for SRO dwellings has also been changing in Halifax over the last decade, with fewer in some neighbourhoods but more in others. Bousquet (2013) reported that Halifax went from 153 rooming houses in 2007 to 25 by 2012. SRO units in central neighbourhoods have been lost to fire, conversion, or demolition (Bousquet 2013). During the 1990s and 2000s, however, Halifax landlords began subdividing older homes in neighbourhoods near the universities for shared student accommodations, leading to vocal concerns from neighbours:

“Mr. M addressed Community Council noting that Halifax is one of the most livable cities in Canada. Mr. M went on to suggest that HRM is in danger of losing that distinction as an increasing number of houses are turned into rooming houses. Utilizing photos Mr. M gave one example of a single family dwelling which was converted to a 17 bedroom rooming house with the backyard converted to a parking lot.

Mr. M went on to outline the number of conversions which have occurred on his block noting that his and one other are the only single family dwellings left on the block. Mr. M noted that neighbourhoods are under assault and residents need this Community Council’s help.” (Peninsula Community Council 2005, 5)

In response, Halifax amended the bylaw for the area to limit the number of bedrooms permitted within

dwellings in certain neighbourhoods, but existing multi-unit structures were allowed to remain.

Concentrations of SROs in lower income neighbourhoods often lead to concerns about blight and urban decline; concentrations of shared student accommodations in university neighbourhoods generate worries about parking, garbage, and noise. Communities may resist housing for disadvantaged populations. In some cases municipalities have adopted exclusionary regulations to restrict the number and location of group homes and boarding houses (Finkler and Grant 2011). After the City of Waterloo adopted regulations for licensing lodging houses in 2011, an inquiry from the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2013) found the policy's requirements discriminatory and likely to diminish the availability of housing for groups protected under human rights legislation. Regulations and licensing can play an important role in protecting the quality and neighbourliness of rooming houses, but can limit the supply and increase the cost of units.

Cities are increasingly considering licensing to regulate SROs, especially in response to issues related to the growth in shared accommodations in neighbourhoods near universities and colleges (Mills 2014). HRM's rooming house licensing program today licenses about 15-20 rooming houses (HRM 2012). Current regulations may not apply to many room-rental properties, perhaps because they were operating prior to adoption of the bylaw, they are not considered to be 'rooming houses', or they 'fly under the radar'. The effect of HRM's regulations on the supply and quality of SROs has not been fully assessed, although McGillicuddy (2009) explored some aspects of HRM policy prior to licensing.

HRM's 2006 regional plan called for an affordable housing functional plan, which was never produced (Fraser 2013). The new 2014 regional plan policy (HRM 2014) says relatively little to indicate the city's position on SRO housing. Policy S-30 discusses strategies for increasing affordability, including "(h) identifying existing affordable housing and development of measures to protect it", and policy S-34 says "HRM shall investigate other means of supporting affordable housing including reducing or waiving of fees" (HRM 2014, 58). To address concerns about the need for affordable housing in Halifax, the municipality, United Way, Housing Nova Scotia, and others have formed an Affordable Housing Working Group and commissioned a consultant's study of local issues.

The purpose of this research is to assess the status of rooming houses in Halifax and to consider what kind of policy and regulatory environments can support healthy and well managed SROs to help meet the demand for affordable accommodations. Staff within community development in HRM and in United Way Halifax share an interest in gaining a better understanding of issues related to SROs in the city, and are active partners in the research. We will examine the role local government policy may play, based on understanding local conditions and best practices in other places. To the extent that data are available we may emulate some strategies used by Kaufman and Distasio (2014) in documenting how the number and distribution of SROs may have changed in Halifax. We will explore best practices in providing and regulating SROs. We will consider available measures to protect or enhance the availability and quality of SROs in Halifax. Some years ago CMHC (2001) examined the regulatory context and looked at case studies and best practices (CMHC 2002) to ensure a supply of safe and affordable SROs. Since conditions have changed in the supply, demand, and regulation of SROs since then, and the neighbourhoods that house SROs have changed, it seems appropriate to update our understanding of conditions in Halifax. To safeguard the supply of valued affordable housing, municipalities need to find ways to enhance the supply of housing and to slow the conversion of rooming house stock to other uses (CMHC 2001): better understanding of the Halifax context can help address that objective.

2. Research Questions

- 1) How are single room occupancy units characterised, defined, and understood in Halifax?
- 2) Where are rooming houses and quasi-rooming houses located in Halifax?
- 3) To what extent is it possible to determine where and how many SRO units have been lost (or gained) over the last decade?
- 4) How is the supply of rooming house (SRO) dwellings changing in Halifax neighbourhoods?

- 5) What role do government policies and regulations play in influencing the supply and quality of rooming houses?
- 6) What policy and/or regulatory options may contribute to resolving identified issues?

3. Specific Fit with the NCRP Objectives & Research Questions

The research supports the NCRP interest in investigating issues related to low-rent housing in the context of neighbourhood change. It thus narrows in on research questions 2 and 3 from the proposal, focussing on the consequences of socio-spatial inequality and polarization, and policy strategies to manage or alleviate them. The work will allow us to look at the effects of particular kinds of regulatory interventions and value shifts on housing supply. We will look at the experience of other communities to identify examples of community interventions that may have yielded positive results in protecting the supply of SRO housing options.

4. Research Design & Methods

We will use a mixed-methods approach to the work. We will recruit and train a graduate research assistant to work with us over a 20-month period to help collect, analyze, and disseminate the results of the research. We will also hire an undergrad RA to help with the mapping component. In the work we will:

- Review material (newspapers, reports, council minutes) related to rooming houses and their regulation
- Analyze HRM policy and regulations that affect the supply of SRO housing; examine the licensing system
- Work with municipal officials and field test sites to document and map rooming house locations
- Interview key informants: municipal officials, landlords, neighbourhood association members, and other stakeholders to identify issues related to providing SRO dwelling units [15 to 20 interviews]
- Review policies and best practices for managing and regulating rooming houses in North America and Europe and evaluate for suitability to the Halifax context
- Prepare reports and scholarly papers.

5. Role of Community Partners

This proposed research originated from concerns among our community partners. The community partners are involved in preparing and designing the research and will use the results to inform their activities. Our community partners regularly attend team meetings, participate in research oversight, suggest research questions, and organize events in their organizations and in the community to help disseminate our findings.

6. Role of Students / Research Assistants and Contributions to Training

We will train a **graduate research assistant** in data collection, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination. The RA will work part-time during academic terms (fall and winter) and full-time during the summer. We will recruit a student in the two-year Master of Planning program at Dalhousie: these students require a 15-week full-time work placement as part of their cooperative graduate education program. [Summer research assistantships qualify as appropriate work term placements.] The student will then continue to work on the project in second year, completing their master's research project on a theme related to the research. (The selected student will begin at Dalhousie in September 2015 and complete studies in April 2016.) We expect to co-author reports and journal articles with the RA.

We will recruit an **undergraduate research mapping assistant** in Winter 2016 to work with data provided by HRM and field checked as required to create digital maps of rooming house locations. To the extent possible, we will also try to identify locations of quasi-rooming houses. The undergrad RA will be a senior student in the Bachelor of Community Design program who has the requisite mapping and field testing skills. (We hope to engage the student in the broader research program for their undergraduate thesis work.)

7. Schedule (timeline of research tasks, including deliverables submission dates)

- Collect and review material (newspapers, reports, council minutes) related to SROs and their regulation [fall 2015]
- Collect and analyze HRM policy and regulations that affect the supply of SRO housing; examine the licensing system for SROs [winter 2016]
- Work with municipal officials and field test sites to document and map rooming house locations – [undergraduate RA -winter 2016 – We hope that an **undergraduate thesis** will result.].
- We will prepare a **report** on initial findings by June 2016.
- Interview advocates for affordable housing, municipal officials, landlords, neighbourhood association members, and other stakeholders to identify issues related to providing SRO dwelling units [approximately 15 to 20 persons – summer 2016]
- Review policies and current best practices in managing and regulating rooming houses in North America and Europe and evaluate for suitability to the Halifax context [fall 2016].
- The RA will prepare a **master's research project report** by 31 December 2016.
- Prepare **final report** by 15 May 2017
- Prepare one or more **scholarly papers** [winter and spring 2017]

8. Outcomes / Deliverables

- Interim report – publish on the web and distribute to interested parties
- Map of rooming house locations
- Present interim results to partners' staff
- Master's research project report – publish to web
- Final report – publish to web
- Scholarly papers – publish in scholarly journals
- Present results to partners' staff and at conferences or workshops

9. Budget Explanation

Expenses are principally to cover the research assistants' labour. The university or the partners will supply workspace for the RA. We will apply for a Nova Scotia subsidy available for cooperative student employment for summer of 2016. This would be worth approximately \$3500, if successful.

Graduate RA

- Fall 2015 – stipend for 10 hours per week for 13 weeks = \$2500
- Winter 2016 – stipend for 10 hours per week for 13 weeks = \$2500
- Summer 2016 – student summer work term – 35 hours /week for 15 weeks @ \$23 [inclusive of benefits] = \$12,075
- Fall 2016 - stipend for 10 hours per week for 13 weeks = \$2500
- Winter 2017 - stipend for 10 hours per week for 13 weeks = \$2500

Undergrad RA

- Winter 2016- mapping -10 hours per week for 12 weeks @\$18 - \$2160

Supplies, equipment, printing maps: \$400

Student travel: \$500 – to encourage the graduate RA to present the research at either the Canadian Association of Planning Students conference or at the Canadian Institute of Planners conference

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Sent to the NCRP's Research Advisory Board for comment: date _____ deadline: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Funding approved by the NCRP's Board: \$ _____ date _____ |

SSHRC Budget Worksheet

	Amount requested from NCRP	Contributions (In-Kind / Cash)	Contribution source	Total Project Cost
Personnel costs				
Student salaries and benefits/Stipends				
Undergraduate *	2160			
Masters *	22075			
Doctorate *				
Non-student salaries and benefits/Stipends				
Postdoctoral				
Other				
Travel and subsistence costs				
Applicant/Team member(s)				
Canadian travel				
Foreign travel				
Students				
Canadian travel	500			
Foreign travel				
Other expenses				
Non-disposable equipment (specify)				
Professional / technical services (specify: includes partner staff time contributed to or paid for by project, translation, editing, etc.)				
Other expenses (specify: includes honoraria, data purchase, field costs, printing, supplies, etc.)				
Supplies, printing maps, and equipment (mini recorder)	400			
Total	\$25,135			

* Please indicate hourly rates for students and estimated number of students:

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