

**Call This a Home?
Living Conditions in Melbourne's Rooming
Houses**

Final Report

**HomeGround Services
The Salvation Army – Crisis Contact Centre
Melbourne Youth Support Service**

26 June 2009

Executive Summary

For many years, community agencies have held serious concerns about living conditions in Melbourne's rooming houses. Anecdotal reports have suggested that violence, illegal evictions, poorly maintained properties, unhygienic living conditions and high rents are common.

This report presents the findings of a study undertaken in July-August 2007 by HomeGround Services, The Salvation Army Crisis Contact Centre (St Kilda), and Melbourne Youth Support Services. The study investigated living conditions in private and community rooming houses in Melbourne. The aim was to complement anecdotal evidence gained through service provision, with a larger and more robust evidence base.

The study drew on data from two primary sources:

- a survey of 16 rooming houses in Melbourne's inner suburbs, conducted by staff from HomeGround's Housing teams – the 'Worker Survey'; and
- a survey of 228 households, who were past and/or current residents of rooming houses in the inner and greater Melbourne area – the 'Resident Survey'.

The surveys focused on issues of safety and security, physical conditions and attributes of the premises, existence and condition of communal facilities, residents' rights and provision of information, and affordability. The Resident Survey, which covered 48 separate rooming houses, is the primary focus of this report.

The results of this study paint a bleak picture of living conditions within Melbourne's rooming houses. The quality of accommodation offered by the majority of the rooming houses surveyed was found to be unacceptable.

- 63% of Resident Survey respondents described the overall quality of their accommodation as either 'poor' or 'very poor'.
- Safety was seriously compromised for many residents. 57% of Resident Survey respondents didn't feel safe in their accommodation. In many cases doors could not be locked. Basic fire safety and first aid measures were often lacking. Safety risks were especially high for women and children.
- Physical conditions and features of many rooms were very poor. Some residents lacked access to basic facilities including working lights, heating, and power points.
- Communal facilities were sometimes limited or non-existent. When rooming houses did have communal areas, dirty and unhygienic conditions often prevailed.
- Residents' legal rights were regularly ignored. There were widespread breaches of the legal requirement to supply rooming house residents with information on their rights. Residents' bond money was rarely

repaid. Several residents claimed they were unfairly and/or illegally evicted.

- Rooming house rents were relatively high in relation to residents' income, in some cases up to 70% of income. This was one factor leading to frequent accommodation breakdowns and 'churning' through the homelessness system.

The combination of high rooming house rents and poor living conditions traps homeless people in a cycle of poverty and abuse that further undermines their health and wellbeing. It is unacceptable that this situation be allowed to continue.

The partner agencies to this study call for swift and decisive action by the Victorian Government to improve living conditions in Melbourne's rooming houses. A key element of this action should be the introduction of a set of rooming house standards for Victoria, covering areas such as amenity, facilities, safety and access to support services.

To be effective, these standards must be accompanied by mechanisms to:

- identify rooming houses in operation and ensure that they are registered
- regularly monitor compliance with the standards – some form of audit process is suggested
- enforce the standards through penalties for non-compliance.

For the foreseeable future, private rooming houses will continue to play a role in responding to homelessness. It is essential that rooming houses are safe, affordable, offer reasonable amenity and access to support, and are managed in a way that respects the rights of residents.

Currently, some of the most marginalised people in our society are being traumatised and exploited in private rooming houses. With committed action by the Victorian government and community agencies, change is possible. For the sake of rooming house residents, it is vital that this change occurs sooner rather than later.

Summary of Recommendations

To improve living conditions in Melbourne's rooming houses, it is recommended that the Victorian Government:

1. As a matter of priority, work with local councils to audit fire-safety compliance of all properties that fall under the definition of a rooming house within the Residential Tenancies Act.
2. Through Consumer Affairs Victoria, investigate alleged breaches of s.124 of the *Residential Tenancies Act* (failure by rooming house owners to provide information to residents), and act to enforce the law in this area.
3. Through Consumer Affairs Victoria, investigate alleged practices of illegal retention of 'key deposits' and other bond monies by rooming house operators, and implement mechanisms to prevent these practices.
4. Implement a set of minimum standards for rooming houses within its jurisdiction, covering areas of amenity, facilities, safety, and access to support services. To be effective these standards should be accompanied by:
 - a. appropriate measures to identify and register rooming houses;
 - b. regular compliance monitoring;
 - c. enforcement through penalties for breaches; and
 - d. an accessible and confidential complaints mechanism for rooming house residents.

It is recommended that the Victorian and Federal Governments:

1. Investigate mechanisms to increase affordability of privately-owned emergency accommodation options, such as reviewing the availability and extent of rent assistance for rooming house residents, or looking at ways to cap rooming house rents.

It is recommended that community-based services engaging with people living in rooming houses:

1. Work together to continue advocating to government for more adequate rooming house regulation.
2. In conjunction with the PILCH Homeless Persons Legal Clinic, prepare and distribute information to rooming house residents, outlining specific rights and avenues for redress under the law.
3. In partnership with researchers, conduct further research into issues of vulnerability and personal safety in rooming houses, including research into strategies that can assist rooming house residents to minimise risks to their safety.

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1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of a study undertaken in July-August 2007. The study was undertaken as a partnership between three Melbourne-based agencies providing assistance to people experiencing homelessness. The project partners were HomeGround Services, The Salvation Army Crisis Contact Centre (St Kilda), and Melbourne Youth Support Service.

The study investigated living conditions in private and community rooming houses in Melbourne. Previous research on this topic has often used a case-study approach, focusing on individual experiences. The study reported here adopted a different methodology, drawing on inspections of properties by agency staff, and surveying 228 residents who reported their experiences across a total of 48 separate rooming houses. The questionnaire was based on a set of informal rooming house standards developed by the partner agencies, focusing on safety, amenity and rights.

The partner agencies hope that this report will provide further impetus for reform of the private rooming house sector in Victoria.

The results of the study are also available in condensed form in the HomeGround Bulletin: *Call This a Home? Private Rooming House Standards in Melbourne*.¹

1.1 Aims of the study

The aim of this study was to investigate conditions in private and community rooming houses, in the inner and greater Melbourne area. Specifically, the project assessed the standards of accommodation and amenity within a sample of rooming houses. Particular attention was paid to issues of safety and security, physical conditions and attributes of the premises, existence and condition of communal facilities, residents' rights and provision of information, and affordability.

The partner organisations have held concerns about poor living conditions in Melbourne's rooming houses for many years. The study aimed to assess anecdotal evidence gained through service provision, against a larger and more robust set of quantitative and qualitative evidence gained through direct observation and rooming house residents' reports.

The partner agencies are committed to improving living conditions for their clients, and saw the project as providing a foundation of evidence which could provide guidance for future service delivery choices, and advocacy activities.

1.2 Partner organisations

HomeGround Services

HomeGround Services is one of Melbourne's leading housing and homelessness organisations. HomeGround's vision is to end homelessness in

Melbourne, and HomeGround's mission is to get people housed and keep people housed.

HomeGround has a unique combination of experience delivering high volume housing and homelessness services to people in crisis, providing property and tenancy management services to over 350 properties, providing short and long-term support services to people who are homeless as well as providing long term support services to people who have experienced homelessness in the past. HomeGround has also played a leading role in pioneering the introduction of new housing and support models in Victoria.

HomeGround has a strong reputation for quality service provision and for working in partnership with other community organisations across sectors as diverse as Criminal Justice, Mental Health, Primary Health and Aged Care. HomeGround has a long-standing commitment to sector development and evidence-based practice, and a track record of involvement in research projects including longitudinal studies of homelessness pathways.

Address: 68 Oxford St, Collingwood 3066. Phone: 03 9419 8855. For more information: www.homeground.org.au.

Salvation Army Crisis Contact Centre, St Kilda

The Crisis Centre offers a state-wide, open age service to people in need of support. The centre is open every day of the year (including public holidays) from 9 am – 11 pm. No appointment is necessary. The Centre also provides 24-hour telephone access (see numbers below).

The Crisis Centre provides a crisis response and follow-up referrals for assistance with housing and tenancy difficulties, finances and budgeting, substance abuse issues and mental health problems. The staff act as advocates with other community welfare agencies and government agencies, such as Centrelink and the Office of Housing.

The Centre further provides a 24-hour crisis response for women and children escaping family violence, who are seeking access to vital support services.

Address: 29 Grey St, St Kilda 3182. Phone: 9536 7777. Free Call: 1800 627 727. For more information: www.salvationarmy.org.au.

Melbourne Youth Support Service

Melbourne Youth Support Service (MYSS) is a statewide telephone information and referral service targeting young people aged 16 – 24 years inclusive. MYSS is centrally located in the CBD, and is a focal point for young homeless people within the city, as well as those young people who do not identify with any particular region.

MYSS is further complemented by being part of a co-location of services called Frontyard Youth Services. Frontyard brings together an integrated and collaborative team of collocated and affiliated services, providing physical,

emotional and social support to young people aged 12-25 years who are at risk within the Melbourne CBD.

MYSS is open 7 days a week – 9am-8pm Monday to Friday, 10am-6pm weekends and public holidays; closed Christmas day
MYSS is a drop in service.

Address: 19 King St, Melbourne 3000.

MYSS Phone: 03 9614 3688

Frontyard Phone: 03 9611 2411. Free Call from landline: 1800 800 531. For more information: www.frontyard.org.

1.3 Acknowledgements

HomeGround housing teams in St Kilda and Collingwood developed the Worker and Resident Surveys, undertook the Worker Surveys, and recruited many of the Residents surveyed in the research. Staff of the St Kilda Crisis Centre and Melbourne Youth Support Services also assisted in recruiting participants.

Jon Deakin, HomeGround Inner North Housing Coordinator, coordinated the survey process, undertook the initial data analysis and prepared the first draft of the report.

Independent consultant Bill Snaddon prepared subsequent drafts. HomeGround's Service Development Manager, Mark Planigale, prepared the final draft. Jon Deakin provided substantial assistance with drafts.

The following staff of the partner agencies also provided comments on drafts:

- Julia Canty-Waldron (HomeGround Services)
- Richard Elmer and Sally Coutts (The Salvation Army Crisis Contact Centre)
- Erin Ashmore and Nada Vindis (Melbourne Youth Support Services)

The final version of the report was prepared for publication by Daniel Scoullar.

2. Context

2.1 What is a rooming house?

There is no widely accepted standard definition of the term 'rooming house'.

The *Residential Tenancies Act 1997* (Vic), which contains provisions relating to rooming houses, defines a 'rooming house' as:

- a building in which there is one or more rooms available for occupancy on payment of rent –
 - (a) in which the total number of people who may occupy those rooms is not less than 4; or
 - (b) in respect of which a declaration under section 19(2) or (3) is in force.

Sections 19(2) and (3) relate to cases where the Minister declares a building, which otherwise may not meet the requirements, to be a rooming house.

The following more descriptive definition identifies different types and uses of rooming houses:

Rooming houses, sometimes referred to as boarding houses, generally provide housing for single people who, sometimes because of disadvantage, may find it difficult to access other private rental housing, or prefer to live in the rooming house environment for social contact.

Rooming house accommodation traditionally involves residents renting bedrooms – rather than self-contained flats or units – and the use of shared common facilities such as bathrooms, lounges, kitchens, dining areas and laundries. Some may offer one-bedroom units. Rooming houses can either be apartments houses (without the provision of meals) or boarding houses (providing at least one meal a day to residents). Over the last decade, or so, traditional 'boarding houses' have become increasingly rare.

Rooming houses can be privately owned and managed, also called 'private hotels', or publicly owned community housing which is managed by a community organisation.²

While it is true that the majority of rooming house residents are still single people, increasingly tight conditions in rental markets have seen more couples and families now residing in rooming houses.

2.2 Relevant legislation

'If rooming house residents and owners are familiar with their rights and duties and do their best to honour them, most conflicts can be avoided'.³

The *Residential Tenancies Act 1997* (Vic) (the *Act*) is the primary Victorian legislation covering operation of rooming houses. The supplementary *Residential Tenancies Regulations 2008* regulations provide for infringement penalties and other matters that relate to rooming houses.

There have been several amendments to the 1997 *Act*. In 2005 new laws were passed, stating in greater detail the rights of the tenant.⁴ These 2005 laws introduced tougher regulations for owners/managers who want to increase the number of people in a room: consent must now be given by all residents in a shared room if the capacity is to be increased.

The *Act* requires rooming houses owners/managers to give a copy of *Rooming Houses: A Guide for Residents and Owners* (Consumer Affairs Victoria publication) to residents on or before the day they move in. Failure to do so is an offence with a fine of up to \$500.⁵

Local council by-laws and requirements for registration may also differ from area to area.⁶

Residents and tenants

There is a legal distinction between residents and tenants of rooming houses:

A rooming house resident is someone who, with the agreement of the rooming house owner, lives in a room as their only or main residence. The resident has the right to use the facilities of the rooming house, for example, the kitchen, bathroom, toilet, and lounge or sitting room ... A resident who is renting a room from a rooming house owner and has signed a 'Residential Tenancy Agreement' with them is considered, in the eyes of the law, a tenant and not a resident. Therefore, slightly different rules will apply to their situation.⁷

Few people referred into rooming houses by homelessness agencies are offered the opportunity to sign a Residential Tenancy Agreement; the majority are therefore residents, not tenants.

2.3 Rooming houses as an accommodation option for homeless people

Historical background

Rooming houses have been part of the picture of accommodation options in Victoria for many years. Private hotels with low amenity historically catered to a population of low-income working people. In 1974, in response to concerns over the accommodation available for homeless people, the Homeless Persons' Assistance Program (Cth.) – later to become the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) – was introduced, and a number of large hostels and boarding houses were constructed.

Commenting in 2006, Doug Limbrick, then Director of FaHCSIA (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs), said the program of the early 1970s was 'very much an institutional response to homelessness'.⁸ Large congregate settings tended to further embed people in the homeless subculture, rather than providing pathways out.

During the 1990's, private boarding houses became increasingly used by homelessness organisations as an emergency accommodation option for people experiencing homelessness. This resulted in a shift towards greater transience of rooming house residents, and shorter durations of accommodation. The rooming house population has also shifted towards a higher proportion of people with complex needs, such as mental illness and problematic substance use.

Further trends have impacted on the rooming house sector over the past decade:

- Local governments have closed a number of private rooming houses because of poor amenity and health and safety concerns. This has resulted in the disappearance of some of the worst accommodation options, but in some cases has worsened the subsequent housing situation of former residents of those establishments.
- The sale of some private rooming houses to property developers has further reduced the stock of emergency accommodation options.
- Community-based rooming houses, which aim to set a high standard of management, have in some cases experienced difficulty with legacy properties of poor amenity.
- A new form of rooming house management has emerged: private companies which head-lease large numbers of houses from real estate agents and then sublet the rooms to individuals, couple or families. Due to the low number of rooms in these dwellings, in some cases these companies have been able to "fly under the radar" of rooming house legislation.

In response to these issues, Melbourne's community sector has advocated for safer and better-regulated rooming houses. Established in 1997, The Inner Urban Rooming House Project (IURHP) consists of inner-city councils and community organisations. HomeGround Services is an active member of IURHP. The group meets monthly to look at ways of improving the life of people living in rooming houses. In 2007, the group issued a submission arguing the case for further regulation of rooming houses, in response to Consumer Affairs Victoria's stakeholder consultation on the issue.

Rooming houses and homelessness

The most widely accepted definition of homelessness in Australia is Chamberlain and MacKenzie's 'cultural' definition, which identifies three categories of homelessness:

1. Primary Homelessness: people without conventional accommodation living on the streets, in deserted buildings, railway carriages, under bridges, in parks, etc.
2. Secondary Homelessness: people moving between various forms of temporary shelter, including friends, emergency accommodation, refuges, hostels and boarding houses.
3. Tertiary homelessness: people living permanently in single rooms in private boarding houses, without their own bathroom or kitchen and without security of tenure. They are homeless because their accommodation does not have the characteristics identified in the minimum community standard.⁹

This definition indicates that in general, any person living in a rooming house (whether short- or long-term) is homeless, because the amenity of their accommodation falls below the minimum community expectation for being 'housed'.

For many people, residence in rooming houses is a pragmatic response to the loss of conventional accommodation. A recent large-sample study of people experiencing homelessness in Melbourne found that 85% of homeless people in the sample had stayed in boarding houses at some stage.¹⁰ While the majority of rooming house residents are men, there is also a substantial minority of women and children, in many cases fleeing domestic violence.¹¹

Research has found that rooming houses serve to further entrench people in homelessness: "Although the initial stages of homelessness typically start with couch surfing, people soon begin to use boarding houses and welfare services and this is where many encounter the homeless subculture. In this social setting they start to learn the implicit rules and practices that structure interactions within the homeless subculture, including the widespread acceptance of substance use as a normal recreational activity."¹²

There has also been considerable attention in Melbourne's media in recent years in relation to poor amenity, lack of safety, and poor management practices in private rooming houses.¹³

Ethical dilemmas for homelessness services

Homelessness agencies face an ethical dilemma in regard to the use of rooming houses as emergency accommodation options for clients.

On the one hand, agencies are specifically funded under the THM program to assist people to access emergency accommodation. Over the past decade, this task has become increasingly difficult. Unprecedentedly low rates of housing affordability, linked with rising rental prices, have meant that many people are effectively excluded from the mainstream private rental market. Government investment in public and community housing has not kept pace with demand. For reasons explained above, emergency accommodation options have also become more scarce. Demand far exceeds supply for accommodation in government-funded crisis and supported accommodation programs. All of these factors have meant that people experiencing

homelessness find it difficult to access either long-term or emergency accommodation.

For many people presenting to homelessness agencies, the only accommodation available on any given day may be private rooming houses. It would be unethical for staff not to inform clients of this option.

On the other hand, staff of homelessness agencies are well aware of the poor living conditions and safety risks in many rooming houses. Staff hear reports of abuse suffered at the hands of fellow residents, and rooming house owners or managers. The agencies are therefore keenly aware of the negative effects on health and wellbeing that people may experience in rooming houses. Ultimately it is the client who decides whether to pursue any particular accommodation option, and whether to remain there if they find it unsafe. However, workers still feel a sense of responsibility for such negative outcomes.

The dilemma is especially acute where the client faces a choice between sleeping rough, and staying in a rooming house with a poor reputation. At times people choose to sleep rough rather than go to a rooming house. Women in particular are at risk in many rooming houses. There is also a heightened duty of care where children are involved. In the past homelessness agencies have generally been able to avoid placing families in rooming houses, however due to the paucity of other options now available, at times there is no other choice.

Homelessness services, as well as individual staff, face this dilemma on a daily basis. The struggle to find any accommodation for clients, and the knowledge that people are being referred into accommodation of poor quality, has a significant impact on staff morale and is one of the factors that may lead to worker burnout. The knowledge that the ongoing operation of many poor quality rooming houses is being subsidised by agency referrals, using government money, is also a source of frustration for staff.

Homelessness services have evolved a variety of strategies to assist them to manage this dilemma, including:

- Visiting a range of rooming houses to gain first-hand knowledge of living conditions; at some agencies this is included during staff induction to ensure that workers are aware of the nature of the accommodation that they may be referring people to;
- Seeking feedback from clients on their experiences in rooming houses;
- Maintaining lists of better and worse quality rooming houses and avoiding referring clients to those with poorest amenity or safety;
- Advocating to local and state government on issues concerning rooming house amenity and safety.

Despite these strategies, due to lack of other alternatives the partner agencies to this report are often compelled to refer people experiencing homelessness to rooming houses as emergency accommodation.

In this context, the study reported here aimed to compile data on a relatively large sample of rooming houses. The intention was to use the results to guide service delivery choices by providing staff with information on a range of rooming house accommodation options. The results were also expected to inform the direction of future advocacy activities.

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3. Methodology

This study draws on data from two primary sources:

- a survey of 16 rooming houses in Melbourne's inner suburbs, conducted by staff from HomeGround's Housing teams – the 'Worker Survey'; and
- a survey of 228 households, who were past and/or current residents of rooming houses in the inner and greater Melbourne area – the 'Resident Survey'.

The Resident Survey is the primary focus of this report.

After considering past research and relevant legislation on rooming houses, HomeGround staff based in St Kilda and Collingwood developed a set of informal standards that indicated a baseline of accommodation quality for their client group. The questionnaire used for the Worker Survey (see Appendix A) was then developed based on these standards. The Worker Survey considered the overall quality of living standards. It focused on questions such as the size of room, the condition of living facilities, and whether residents' rights were being respected.

HomeGround staff contacted all rooming houses by phone in the local service area, to request opportunities to conduct an in-house standards check. 16 rooming houses provided permission. HomeGround Housing workers conducted the survey in pairs. A total of ten staff shared the work. Three properties only allowed access to ground floor. One rooming house only allowed access to a ten-bed section of the rooming house – access was disallowed to the other two sections, located in adjacent buildings.

The information gathered from this initial stage was useful to the housing teams in making informed decisions about what accommodation options might be suitable for particular client groups.

After data was collected from this initial stage, HomeGround Housing teams decided to conduct a more comprehensive survey of clients who were current or former residents of rooming houses. The questionnaire for the Resident Survey (see Appendix B) was developed, with questions covering physical attributes of the property, safety, cost and other matters. The Salvation Army Crisis Contact Centre St Kilda, and Melbourne Youth Support Services became involved at this stage.

Participants were recruited by relevant staff teams at HomeGround Collingwood, HomeGround St Kilda, the Crisis Centre, and Melbourne Youth Support Service. Residents completed the survey while waiting to see a support worker, or alternatively, it was filled out once the resident had arrived at her/his rooming house. Surveys completed by residents already in rooming houses were sent back to HomeGround by reply-paid post. People completing the Resident Survey were not necessarily living in one of the 16 rooming houses considered in the Worker Survey.

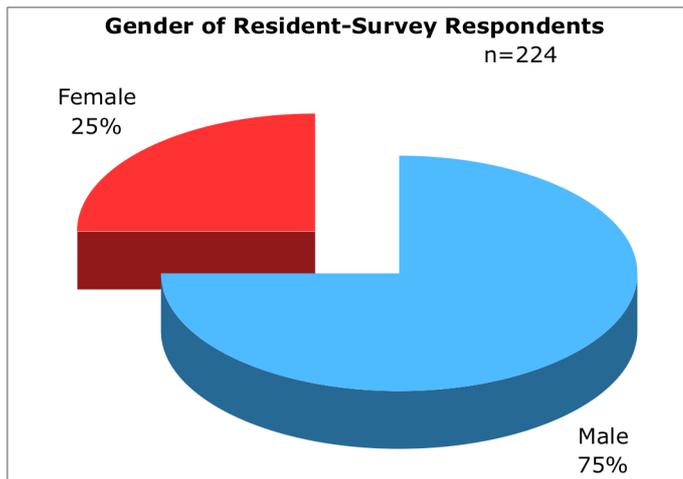
Data was manually entered and tallied in Microsoft Excel. The totals were used as the basis for the quantitative findings presented below. Respondents' comments were themed. Selected comments illustrating particular themes are presented throughout the findings, while the full list of comments appears as Appendix C.

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4. Respondent characteristics

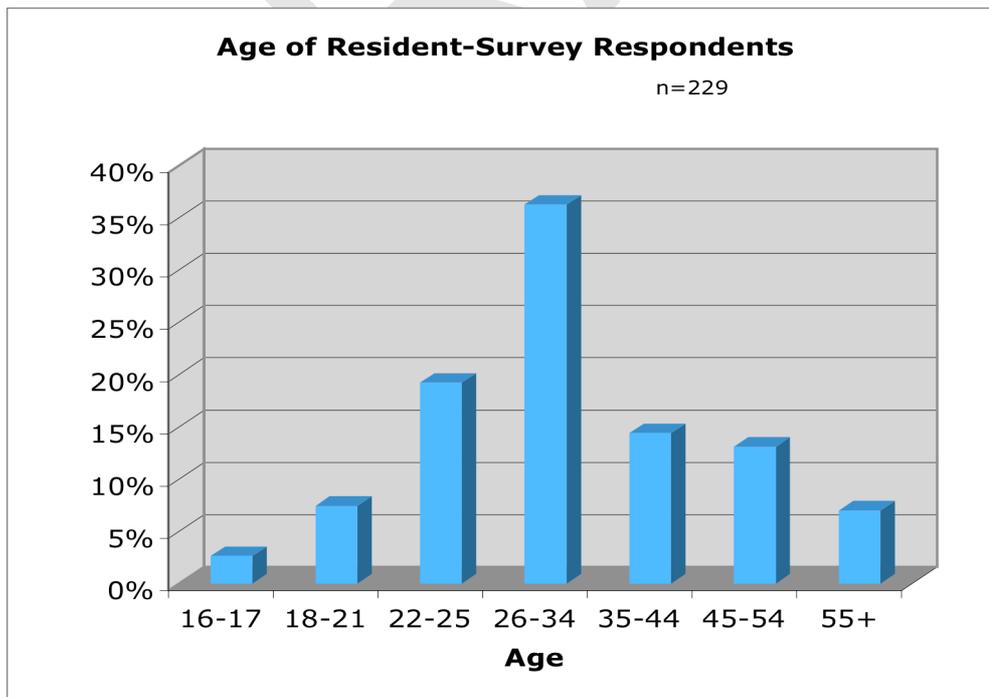
The sample for the resident survey was 228 households. In some cases, questionnaires were completed by couples, who answered some of the demographic questions separately. For these data items therefore, total sample exceeded 228.

4.1 Gender



From those who responded to the Resident Survey, 168 (75%) were men and 56 (25%) were women.

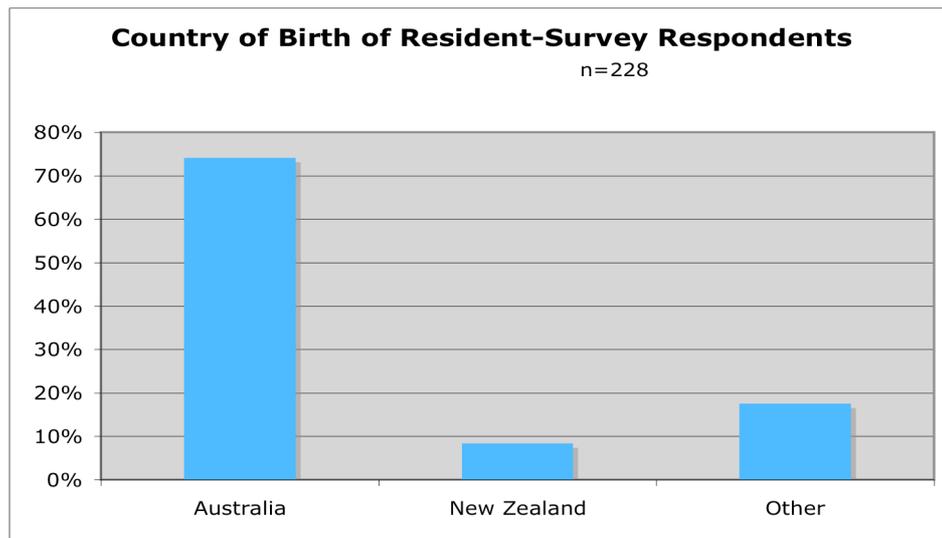
4.2 Age



The age distribution of Resident respondents was quite wide, but with a strong peak in the 26-34 year old age band (comprising 36% of total respondents). This figure is in line with the overall client demographics of HomeGround Housing, which also peaks in the mid twenties to mid thirties band.

The second largest age group to respond to the Resident Survey was the 22-25 year-olds, 19% of the total.

4.3 Cultural indicators



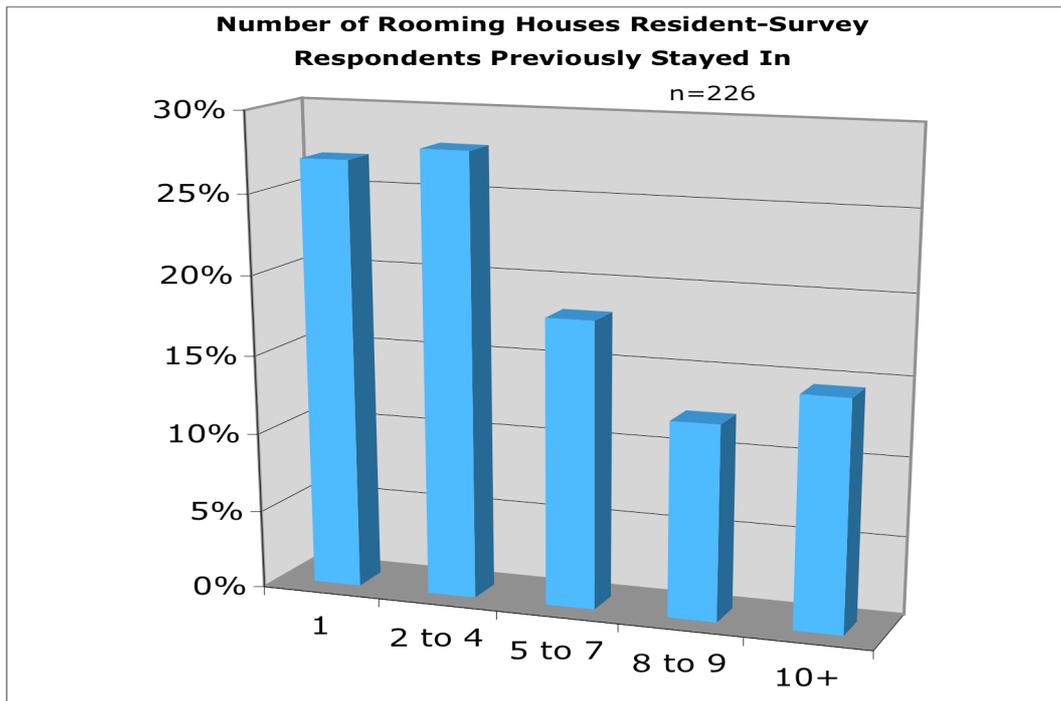
74% of Resident Survey respondents were born in Australia. The remaining 26% came from a variety of countries, many from parts of Africa and Asia; 19 respondents (8%) said they were from New Zealand.

Almost all (92%) of those who responded indicated English as their preferred language. The remaining 8% said English was their main second language, and could navigate around Melbourne's services with their current English skills.

4.4 Indigenous status

The Resident Survey found 15 respondents (7%) were of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background.

4.5 Previous rooming house residencies

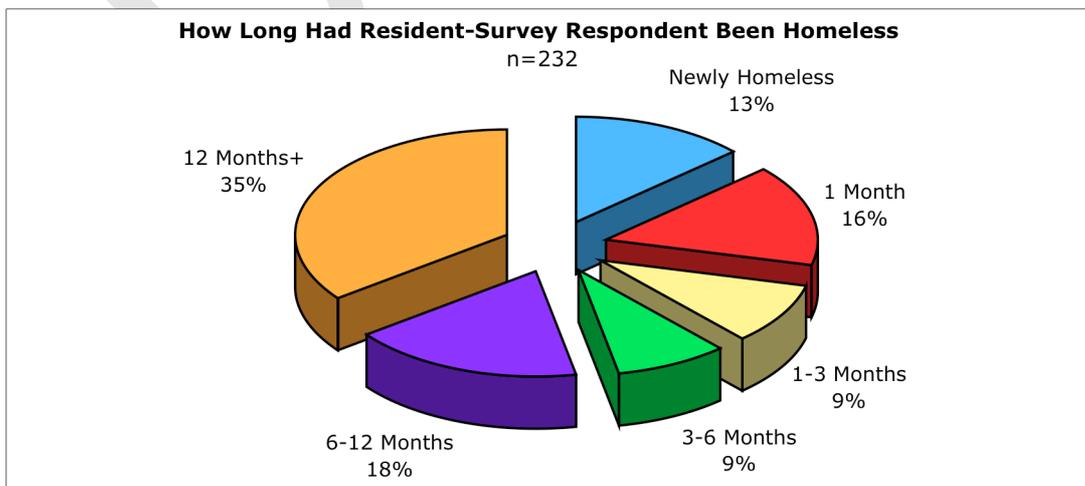


Over 45% of those surveyed had previously stayed in five or more rooming houses.

Resident respondents' comments indicated the following as common reasons for leaving rooming houses in the past:

- Feeling unsafe
- Rent was too high
- Evicted for no apparent reason.

4.6 Duration of homelessness



The pie-chart above shows how long respondents had been homeless prior to taking the Resident Survey. Over half (53%) had been homeless for longer

than 6 months, while 82 people (35%) had been homeless for over 12 months. This indicates that a significant portion of the rooming house population are long-term homeless, and in combination with the previous data item (number of previous rooming house residencies) paints a picture of significant transience and 'churning' of residents between rooming houses over extended periods. This is consistent with findings of other research including *Homelessness in Melbourne*.¹⁴

4.7 Comparison with national census data

The Resident Survey sample was not intended to be representative of either HomeGround's client population, or of the larger population of people using rooming houses in Melbourne. However, comparison with the Australian Bureau of Statistics report *Counting the Homeless 2006* shows a reasonable degree of correlation with demographic indicators for the homeless population resident in boarding houses Australia-wide. *Counting the Homeless 2006* found that 72% of homeless people in boarding houses were male, compared with 28% female (a slightly higher proportion of women than in the current sample); and that 6% were of indigenous background, comparable with 7% of the current sample.¹⁵

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5. Characteristics of rooming house sample

5.1 Number of rooming houses surveyed

The 228 Resident Survey responses were in relation to 48 separate rooming houses. This included 23 rooming houses that were operated by one housing company. There were 59 respondents who didn't state where they lived.

5.2 Number of rooms per rooming house

In the 23 rooming houses run by the same organisation, none had more than 6 beds to a room, and all were unregistered with the local council. The locations of these 23 rooming houses were scattered throughout the outer northern suburbs.

In terms of number of rooms in each property, great variety was found in the remaining 25 rooming houses. Some had as few as ten rooms, while others had as many as 80. Three were considered 'motels' and charged between \$44 and \$100 per night.

5.3 Gender-specific rooming houses

Of the 48 rooming houses surveyed, three were female-only. The remaining 45 rooming houses were mixed-gender.

5.4 Private and community-run rooming houses

Of the 48 rooming houses considered, only one was a community rooming house – ten Resident Survey responses were received in relation to that property.

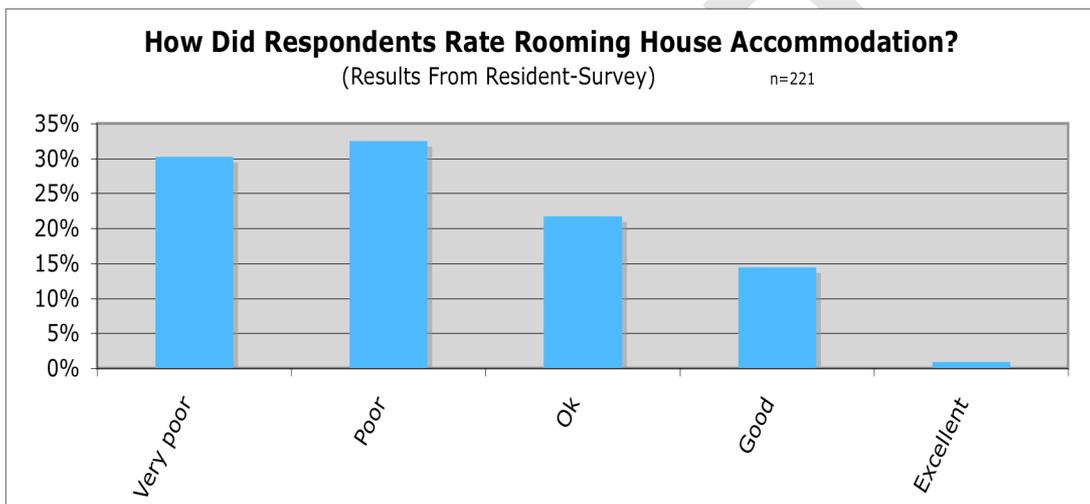
Due to the small size of the community rooming house sample, no reliable comparison between conditions in private and community rooming houses is possible within this report.

6. Results

The primary focus of this report is the results of the Resident Survey. These are presented below, themed under the headings of safety and security, physical condition and features of rooms, availability of communal facilities, residents' rights and provision of information, and cost. Where relevant, results from the Worker Survey are also provided.

6.1 General rating of accommodation

There were 221 respondents to the question, *How would you rate your accommodation?* Of these, 139 people (63%) rated their rooming house accommodation as 'very poor' or 'poor'. Less than 1% said their accommodation was 'excellent'.

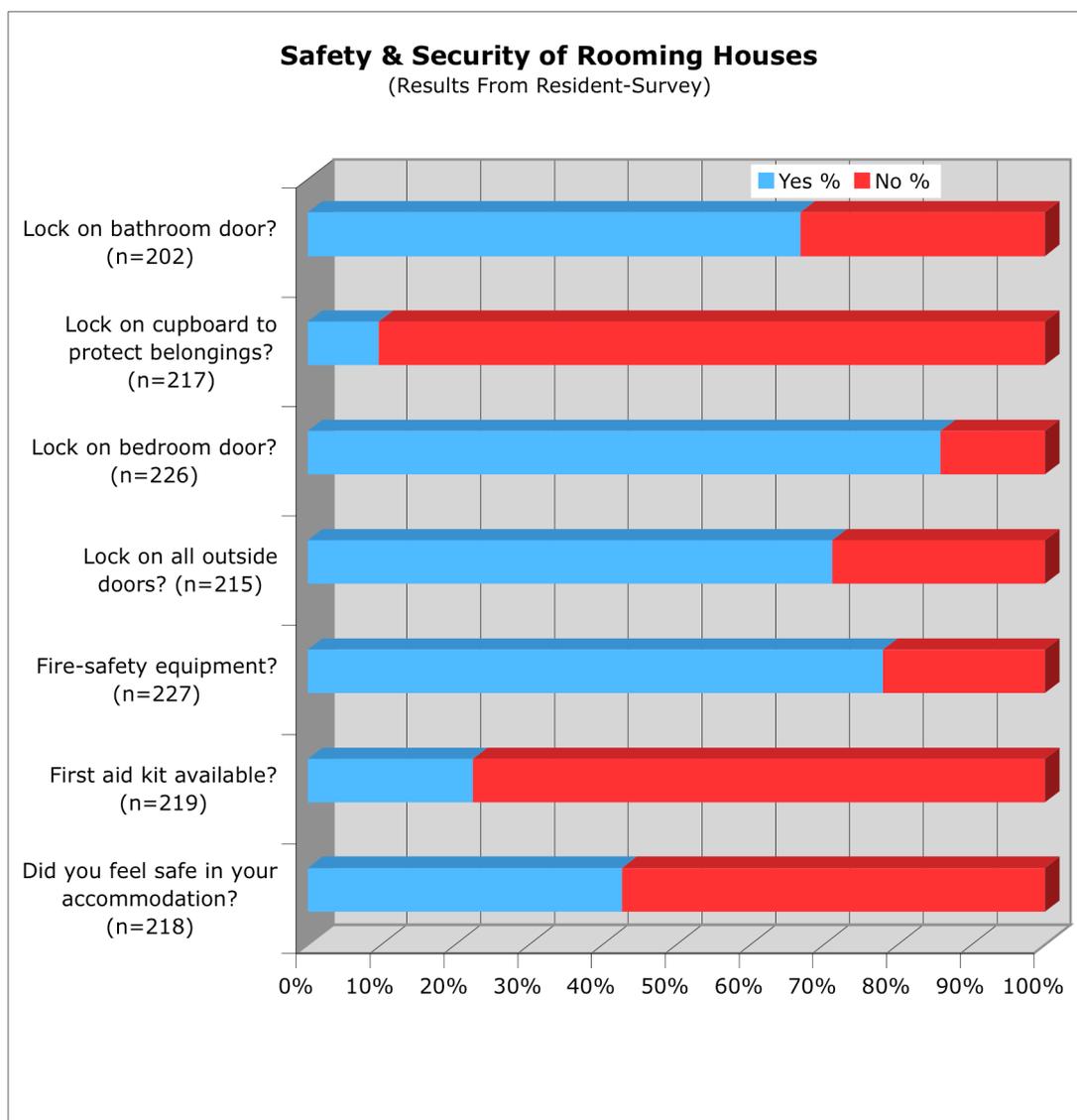


Resident comment: 'It was the lowest place I have ever stayed in my life, which includes 10 years in jail'.

6.2 Safety and security

Safety was a significant concern for the majority of respondents. This was particularly so for more vulnerable residents such as children, the elderly and frail, women, and those with health and/or mental health conditions.

The survey included a number of questions related to safety. Following are the results.



Lock on bathroom door

Of the residents who responded to the survey, 33% (67 people) said there was no lock on the bathroom door. Of these 67 people:

- over half were sharing a bathroom with ten or more people
- over half were women sharing a mixed-gender bathroom.

Locked cupboard/area to protect belongings

The Resident Survey found 90% of respondents (196 people) didn't have a cupboard or area to lock belongings. Several respondents mentioned that theft was common. Many said they rarely left valuables in their rooms.

Some respondents were frustrated by the behaviour of fellow residents:

Resident comment: 'They shouldn't let people that take drugs and steal other people's things, clothes, money, cars and bash up people for money sleep at any house or hostel'.

Though the partner agencies do not endorse exclusion from accommodation, the above comment is a telling summary of the daily risks faced by rooming house residents, and an indication of the need for safer options.

Lock on bedroom door

Fourteen percent (14%) of Resident Survey respondents (32 people) stated they couldn't lock their bedroom door. Over half of those were living in a rooming house with more than 80 people.

Resident comment: 'People keep coming in my room all night and trying to steel things. Woke up with one guy steeling my shoes'.

Resident comment: 'Could only lock bedroom door if I paid an extra \$25'.

The Worker Survey recorded a more troubling figure, with 31% of rooming houses without locks on some or all bedroom doors.

Lock on all outside doors

Almost one-third (29%) of Resident Survey respondents said their rooming houses didn't have locks on all outside doors. This meant anyone could walk into those rooming houses at any moment. Several respondents said they felt very unsafe, and often didn't recognise many people living around them.

Resident comment: 'Scary place. Waiting to get stood over again'.

The corresponding result from the Worker Survey found 19% of rooming houses without locks on some, or all outside doors.

Fire safety equipment

Building regulations state that rooming houses, like any other type of accommodation, must have adequate fire precautions. 22% of Resident Survey respondents said they didn't see any fire safety equipment. Staff conducting the Worker Survey didn't see any fire safety equipment in 31% of the rooming houses surveyed.

These proportions may be somewhat overstated, as residents or workers completing the surveys might not have seen existing fire-safety equipment. Even given this qualification, the existence of a significant number of rooming houses lacking basic fire equipment is cause for concern.

Resident Survey respondents also identified other fire hazards:

Resident comment: 'Bars on windows which were a fire risk'.

RECOMMENDATION: The Victorian Government, as a matter of priority, should work with local councils to audit fire-safety compliance of all properties that fall under the definition of a rooming house within the Residential Tenancies Act.

First aid kit

Over three-quarters (78%) of Resident Survey respondents said they didn't have 24-hour access to a first aid kit. This may have included some cases where a kit was onsite but only available at certain times, for example while a manager was on duty. The Worker Survey found no first aid kit in 56% of rooming houses surveyed.

While acknowledging the potential for theft or misuse associated with providing a first aid kit after hours, the partner agencies nevertheless consider the availability of first aid supplies to be a basic safety measure, and the lack of them in so many cases is a serious concern.

Perception of safety

Fifty-seven percent (57%) of Resident Survey respondents said they didn't feel safe in their accommodation. This echoes many comments made by rooming house residents when meeting with staff of the partner organisations.

Resident comment: 'I saw 3 people beaten up in one night and nobody did a thing'.

Of the 43% who said they did feel safe in their accommodation, 80% had been homeless for more than 2 years. A variety of possible explanations can be put forward for this finding, including:

- people who have been homeless for a longer period are more 'streetwise' and are better able to avoid danger
- as the duration of homelessness increases, people become used to living with a high level of risk, and eventually might come to accept some risks as 'normal', rather than as an indication of compromised safety
- people who have lived in numerous rooming houses over a period of time are more familiar with, and less shocked by, the rooming house environment.

RECOMMENDATION: Community agencies, in partnership with researchers, should conduct further research into issues of vulnerability and personal safety in rooming houses, including research into strategies that can assist rooming house residents to minimise risks to their safety.

Safety and gender

The study didn't specifically examine the relationship between gender and experiences or perceptions of safety. However, the partner agencies hear strong anecdotal evidence that women and children in mixed gender rooming

houses face significantly higher risks of physical and sexual assault than those in the general community. Women in female-only rooming houses are not immune from these issues.

Recently, HomeGround housing workers have heard several concerning reports about a female-only rooming house. A male manager was found in the bathroom while residents were showering – there was no lock on the door.

This was discussed at a THM co-ordinators meeting and all except two agencies boycotted this provider. Recommendations were provided to management re: areas of improvement and safety concerns– this venue now has new management.

Similar incidents are reported from time to time for other rooming houses.

There is an urgent need to provide safe, secure and affordable housing for women and families.

Drugs and alcohol

Although there were no set questions relating to sightings of drugs and alcohol in rooming houses, many residents made comments outlining their concerns with these issues. Drug and alcohol use in rooming houses, while presenting risks for those partaking, was also a safety issue for those trying to stay out of harm's way.

Resident comment: 'Makes me sick when I see syringes lying down especially in the bathroom'.

Discussion

A certain degree of risk is inherent in congregate settings where people with complex needs reside. Use of communal areas and facilities can be a source of tension. Such risks can be minimised through good management.

However, the safety issues reported by respondents to the Resident Survey went well beyond these risks. The Survey found evidence of basic security measures (such as lockable doors) not being provided. There are also regular reports of residents being stood over or assaulted by other residents, or at times even by rooming house managers.

Part 3 – s. 123 Residential Tenancies Act 1997

Security:

A rooming house owner must take all reasonable steps to ensure security for the property of a resident in his or her room.

These observations point to the need for enforceable standards, covering rooming house safety, which provide an avenue of redress for those affected by breach of the standards.

RECOMMENDATION: The Victorian Government should implement a set of minimum standards for rooming houses within its jurisdiction, covering areas of amenity, facilities, safety, and access to support services. To be effective these standards should be accompanied by appropriate measures to identify and register rooming houses; regular compliance monitoring; enforcement through penalties for breaches; and an accessible and confidential complaints mechanism for rooming house residents.

6.3 Physical conditions and features of rooms

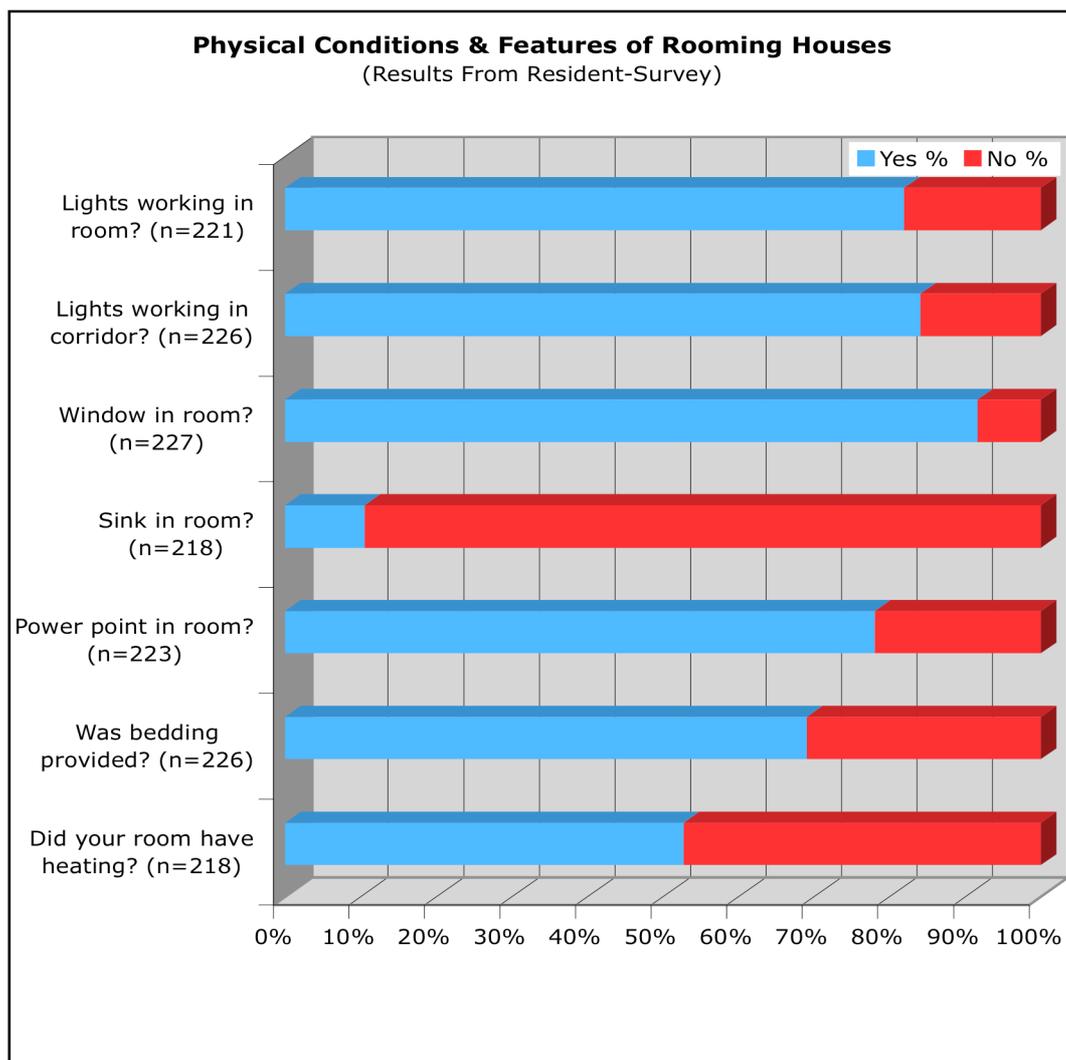
Part 3 – s. 120 Residential Tenancies Act 1997
Rooming house owner must keep room and house in good repair:
(1) A rooming house owner must ensure that the rooming house and its rooms and any facilities, fixtures, furniture or equipment provided by the rooming house owner are maintained in good repair.

Poor physical conditions of rooming houses concerned many Resident Survey respondents. In particular, the lack of basic features in bedrooms, such as working lights, power points and heating, was a theme running through many of the residents' comments. Some residents commented on the overall run-down nature of the properties:

Resident comment: 'Needs re-doing – carpets, painting, furniture and flooring all need re-doing. Flooring really dirty'.

A similar impression was captured in the Worker Survey.

The Resident and Worker Surveys included a number of questions relating to physical conditions and features of residents' rooms and the immediate surrounds. Following are the results.



Lights in room

Eighteen percent (18%) of Resident Survey respondents (40 people) said lights in their room didn't work.

The Worker Survey found lights not working in residents' rooms in 13% of cases.

Lights in corridors

Of Resident Survey respondents, 16% (36 people) stated they didn't have lighting in communal corridors. Of these:

- 60% were women
- Over half were sharing the rooming house with over 100 other residents.

Window in room

Of those who responded to the Resident Survey, 8% (19 people) said they didn't have a window in their room.

There was disparity here with the Worker Survey, which found only 1% of rooms that didn't have a window. The Resident Survey figure is likely to be more reliable as an overall representation of rooming house conditions, as the Resident Survey covered a much larger number of rooming houses, and staff conducting the Worker Survey were prevented from viewing some areas of rooming houses.

Sink in room

Presence of a sink in a resident's room can be an advantage, as many residents do not have a great deal of privacy when washing, and communal bathrooms were often in dirty and unhygienic condition.

Resident comment: 'Filth and disease in the bathroom'.

Only 11% of residents (23 people) had a sink in their room. Most of the rooms that did have a sink were either couple or family rooms.

The Worker Survey found that 15 of the 16 rooming houses surveyed didn't have sinks in rooms.

Power points in room

General community standards would suggest that access to electrical power is a basic expectation in any form of accommodation. The Resident Survey found that almost one-quarter (22%) of respondents did not have access to a power point in their rooms.

This Worker Survey found that 19% of rooming houses lacked power points in some rooms.

Bedding

More than a quarter (31%) of residents said they had to provide their own bedding. The Worker Survey confirmed this, finding that six out of the 16 rooming houses surveyed (37%) didn't provide bedding. Where bedding was provided, it wasn't always of good quality.

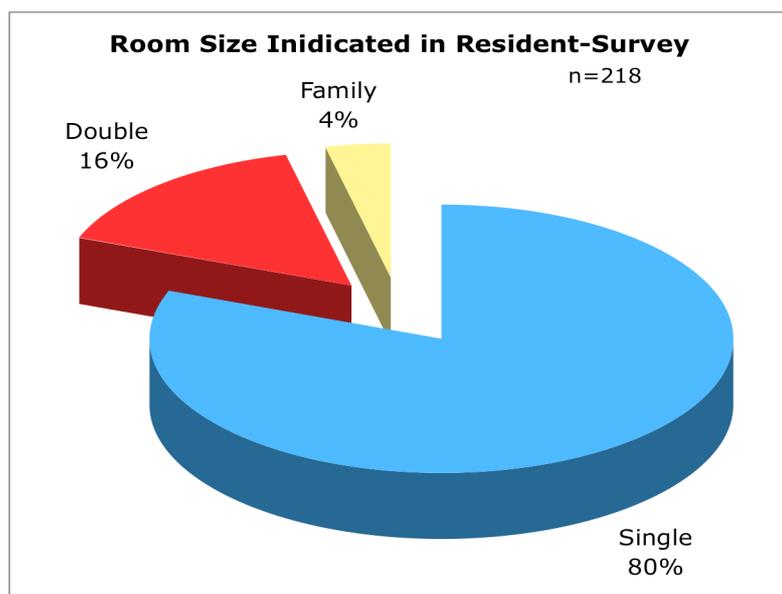
Resident comment: 'Bedding was not clean'.

Heating in room

The Resident Survey found 47% of respondents (103 people) didn't have heating in their room. The survey was conducted during winter. The Worker Survey found similarly concerning figures, with 13 of the 16 rooming houses lacking any form of heating or cooling in some or all rooms.

Of further concern was that 25% of residents surveyed said no bedding was supplied and also had no heating in their room.

Size of room (single, double or family)



The Resident Survey found single rooms most frequently used, with 80% of respondents (176 people) sleeping in a room designed for one person. Double rooms were next, with 16% (34 people), and family rooms were least likely to be found, recording 4% (8 people). All families who responded to the Resident Survey, except for one, were sleeping in a room designed for couples.

Housing Information and Referral workers are increasingly finding that they are forced to offer families rooming house accommodation, due to the lack of other affordable accommodation options. Given this context, it is expected that overcrowding in rooming houses is likely to increase over the next few years.

6.4 Access to communal facilities

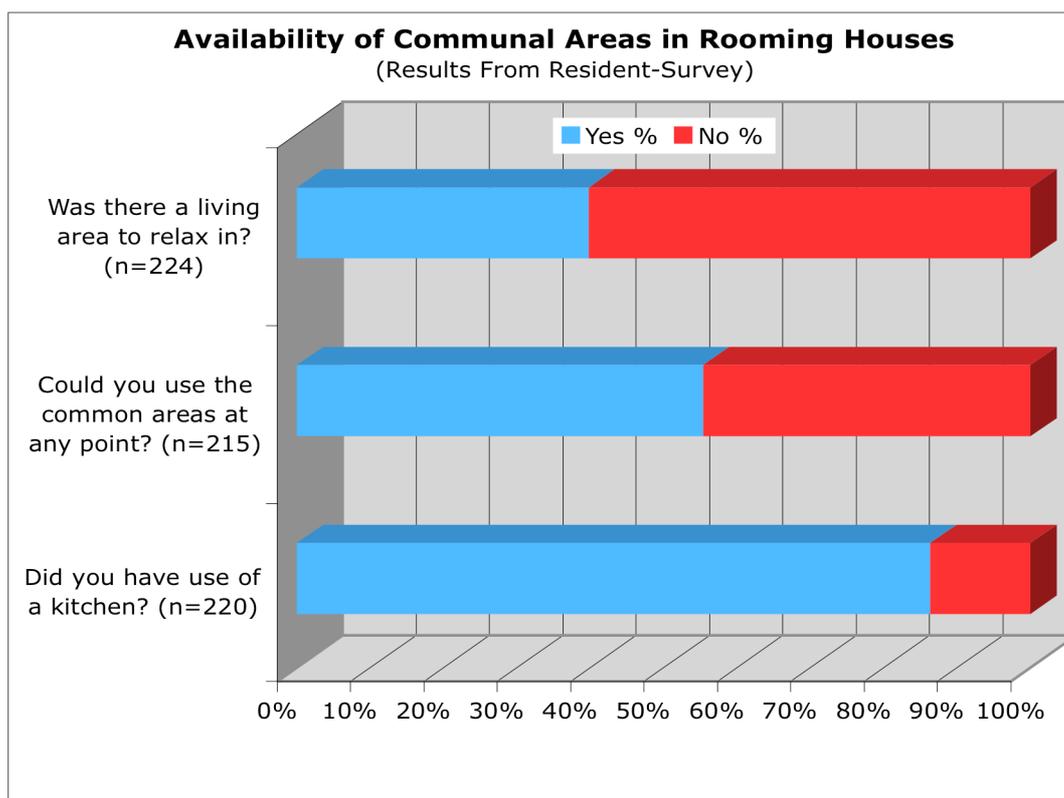
Part 3 – s.121 Residential Tenancies Act 1997

A rooming house owner must—

- (a) provide a resident with 24 hour access to his or her room and the toilet and bathroom facilities;
- (b) provide access during all reasonable hours to other facilities for the resident's use in the rooming house.

Communal facilities are integral to the operation of rooming houses. When managed appropriately – kept clean, safe and relaxing – communal facilities provide rooming house residents with an important social outlet.

This section considers residents' access to communal facilities, such as living areas and kitchens, and considers how many people were using the same bathroom.



Availability of living area

It is well known to workers in the homelessness sector that many rooming houses in Melbourne don't provide an appropriate lounge or living area. It was of little surprise, therefore, that 60% of Resident Survey respondents (135 people) said there was no living area where they could relax.

Access to common areas

In rooming houses where common areas were found, 45% of respondents (96 people) said access to this space was restricted in some way. Many respondents said they could only use a common area between the hours of 8 am and 7 pm.

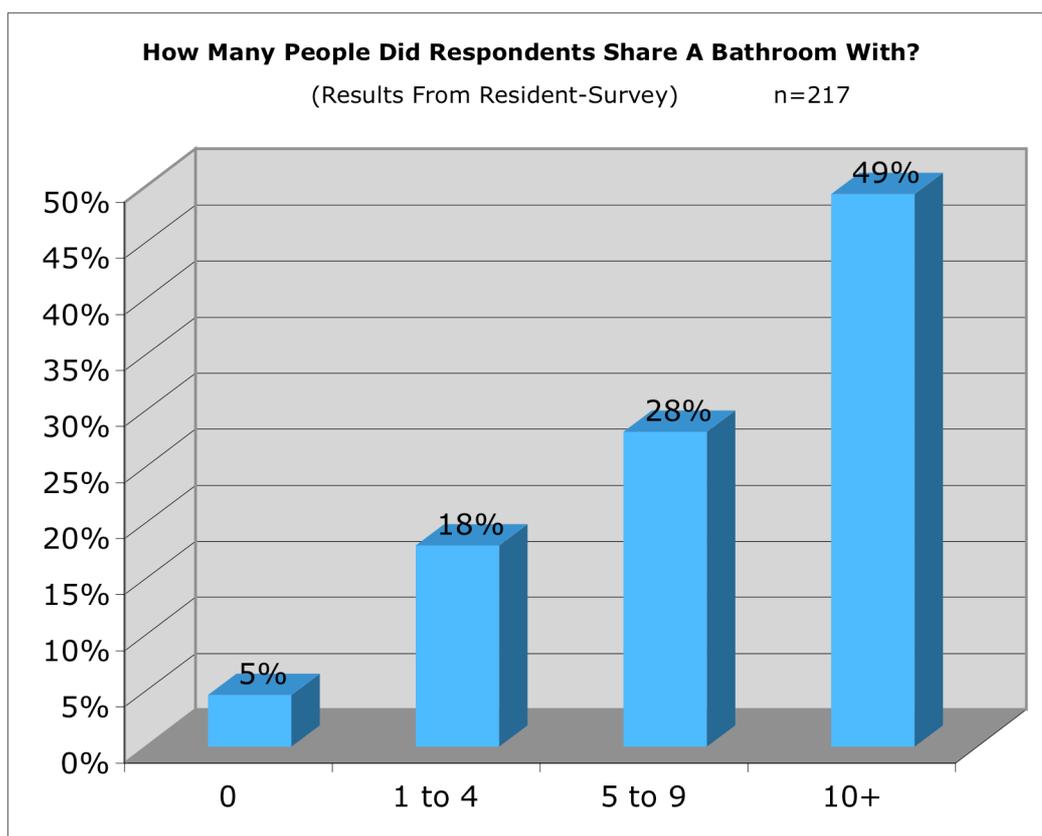
In large rooming houses, where safety and noise can be issues, restrictions such as these are understandable. However, this restricted access can be a problem for residents leaving early in the morning and/or returning late in the evening, such as night-shift workers or students.

Availability of kitchen

The Resident Survey showed 14% of respondents (30 people) without access to a kitchen. Several respondents stated they only had access to a kitchen between 8 am and 7 pm.

Number of people sharing a bathroom

Almost half (49%) of the residents said they shared a bathroom with 10 or more people.



Sharing a bathroom with a number of people can be normal in some situations – university dormitories and youth hostels, for instance – but when unhygienic and dangerous conditions prevail, and safety is compromised, individual wellbeing is at risk. However, for many rooming house residents, there is no other choice.

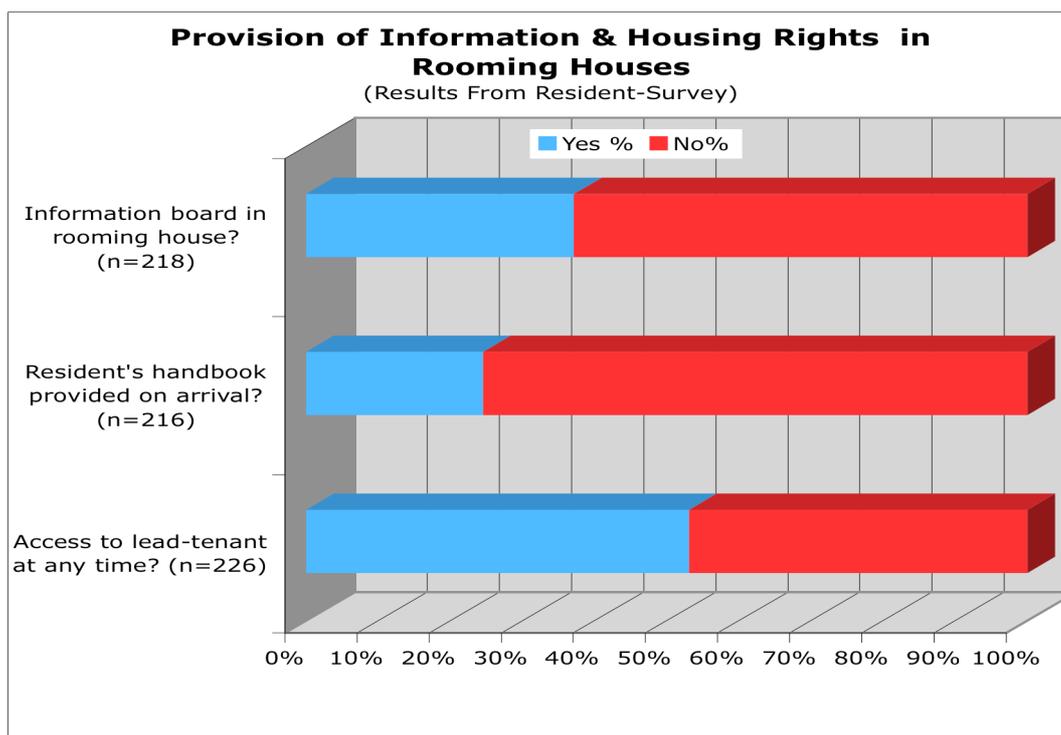
Resident comment: 'Disgusting hygiene in bathroom'.

To address these issues, rooming house standards should include maximum ratios of residents to bathrooms. There should also be requirements for regular cleaning of bathrooms and other communal areas.

6.5 Residents' rights and provision of information

The *Residential Tenancies Act* provides rooming house residents and tenants with a set of rights, including rights to due process in relation to eviction. The *Act* also requires that residents be provided with certain information on their rights and responsibilities.

The Resident Survey considered access to rooming house information – whether an information board was on display, for instance – in addition to other rights-based questions. This section also presents results on rooming house rules, in terms of legitimacy and enforceability.



Presence of information board

For new residents especially, notice boards are vital for finding information, about both the rooming house operations and the local community. The Resident Survey found 63% of respondents (137 people) didn't see an information board in their rooming house.

Resident comment: 'Information board ripped off'.

In cases where there was an information board, often it only displayed notes from the owner/manager on how to pay rent, and what would happen to residents' belongings if they failed to pay rent.

There were, however, constructive comments found on several information boards. A more 'user-friendly' information board might have directions to the nearest public transport hub, emergency phone numbers, and importantly, contact details of the owner/manager.

Provision of resident's handbook

Under s.124 of the *Act*, a rooming house owner must provide a resident's handbook – outlining the basic rights of both owner and resident – to people living under their roof, along with a copy of the house rules.

Consumer Affairs Victoria publish the accessible document, *Rooming Houses: A Guide for Residents and Owners*, which is free of legal jargon and a must-read for those who own, manage or live in a rooming house. Rooming house owners must give a copy of this guide to residents on or before the day they move in, or face a fine of up to \$500.¹⁶

Of those who responded to the Resident Survey, 75% (163 people) said they didn't receive a resident's handbook upon arrival.

Several of the 25% who said they did receive some form of handbook, apparently didn't receive a copy of the official Consumer Affairs publication, as the handbook often didn't contain information about services, or their legal rights as rooming house residents, but focused on house rules and how to pay rent.

The Worker Survey noted that in the 16 rooming houses visited, 'welcome packs' were not clearly evident once. In eight rooming houses there was nothing given to residents on arrival; in the other eight cases, welcome packs weren't openly distributed.

These results suggest that some rooming house owners/managers are regularly breaching the law in relation to mandatory provision of information to residents.

RECOMMENDATION: The Victorian Government, through Consumer Affairs Victoria, should investigate alleged breaches of s.124 of the Residential Tenancies Act (failure by rooming house owners to provide information to residents), and should act to enforce the law in this area.

Access to caretaker or lead tenant

The Resident Survey found 47% of respondents without 24-hour access to a caretaker or lead-tenant. With safety an overriding concern for many residents, lack of access to support in the case of emergencies is troubling.

Evictions

Although the surveys didn't specifically enquire about rooming house evictions, several comments from the Resident Survey alluded to breaches of rights in this area.

Resident comment: 'I was evicted when I complained about the terrible drainage in the bath and shower'.

Resident comment: 'Was assaulted by another resident and evicted for getting blood on the carpet. Go figure'.

One of the common themes emerging from resident comments, as well as anecdotal stories reported by housing workers, is that residents can either "shut up or get out". Residents who prove troublesome to rooming house managers may find themselves evicted without due process.

House rules

Each rooming house is expected to have a set of house rules that residents should follow. Resident Survey respondent comments suggest that these rules are at times not publicised or enforced.

Resident comment: 'Noise issues – tenants argue and play music in the wee small hours of the morning. Hard to sleep when this happens and they don't respond to reason'.

Refund of bond

When moving into a rooming house, many residents were required to pay a bond or a 'key deposit'. In some cases, this is paid by government-funded services (through Housing Establishment Fund brokerage), on behalf of residents.

Anecdotal evidence reported by Housing staff suggests that 'bonds' are rarely repaid. In many situations, residents may not be aware of their rights, or may not be assertive enough to pursue them. Housing services will not necessarily know when particular rooming house stays are ending, and may not have the information or time required to chase up outstanding bond monies. It can be difficult to prove that a resident is entitled to refund of her/his bond money, especially when the evidence comes down to the rooming house owner's word against the ex-resident's.

RECOMMENDATION: The Victorian Government, through Consumer Affairs Victoria, should investigate alleged practices of illegal retention of 'key deposits' and other bond monies by rooming house operators, and implement mechanisms to prevent these practices.

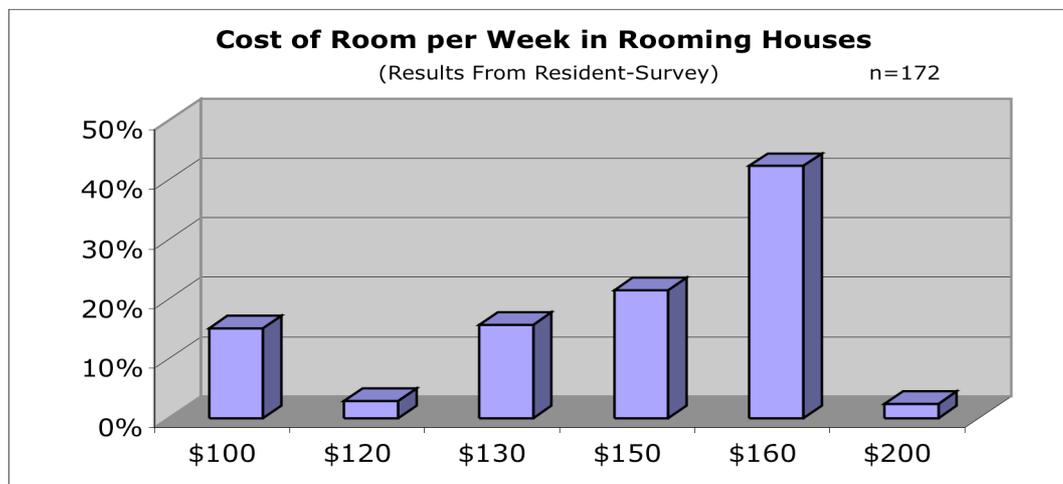
Discussion

This study provides preliminary evidence of significant breaches of the Residential Tenancies Act by some rooming house operators. In addition to seeking government action to investigate breaches and enforce the law, there is scope to further empower rooming house residents through provision of accurate information through other channels.

RECOMMENDATION: In conjunction with the PILCH Homeless Persons Legal Clinic, community-based services engaging with people living in rooming houses should prepare and distribute information to rooming house residents, outlining specific rights and avenues for redress under the law.

6.6 Cost

Cost of room per week



Sixty-six percent (66%) of Resident Survey respondents (114 people) were paying \$150 or more per week in rent.

The most common response was residents paying \$160 per week, making up 42% of respondents (73 people).

Resident comment: 'It is not the best place but it is something very overpriced for people in our situation'.

These prices increase as welfare payments increase. The average rate in 2009 for a single room in a rooming house is between \$175-\$195 per week. Couples may be placed in the same size room and charged upwards of \$350 per week.

In one female-only venue the current weekly rate is \$230, to share a room with up to 4 other women.

This level of rent is unsustainable for many single people on low incomes such as Centrelink payments. Almost half of the Resident Survey respondents were on NewStart¹⁷, with many more (72 people) on some form of disability support.

A single person receiving NewStart Allowance receives around \$225 per week.¹⁸ After paying rooming house rent of \$160 per week, that person would struggle to spread the remaining \$65 per week across expenses like food, medication, fines, travel and medication.

Resident comment: 'Stressful, unhygienic, expensive and sends you crazy'.

The contrast between private and community rooming house rents is stark – community rent is capped at 25% of household income. The high cost of

private rooming house accommodation effectively traps people in poverty and is a key barrier to obtaining more stable and secure accommodation. It also leads to repeated accommodation breakdowns and to 'churning' of people through poor quality accommodation options.

RECOMMENDATION: The Federal and Victorian governments should investigate mechanisms to increase affordability of privately-owned emergency accommodation options, such as reviewing the availability and extent of rent assistance for rooming house residents, or looking at ways to cap rooming house rents.

Bond required

In 60% of cases, residents were required to pay a bond. Usually this was one week's rent in advance or a key deposit of about \$50. This extra expense added to the financial burden of living in a rooming house, especially as bonds were rarely repaid.

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7. Discussion and conclusion

For many years, HomeGround Services, the Crisis Contact Centre and Melbourne Youth Support Service, along with other community agencies, have held concerns about living conditions in Melbourne's rooming houses. These concerns have been based on anecdotal evidence gained through service encounters with people residing in rooming houses.

Call This a Home? set out to test these anecdotal reports with quantitative and qualitative evidence gained both through resident questionnaires and worker observations. In all, 228 households responded to the Resident Survey, and the results relate to conditions across 48 separate rooming houses in Melbourne.

An unacceptable situation

The results of this study paint a bleak picture of living conditions within Melbourne's rooming houses. The quality of accommodation offered by the majority of the rooming houses surveyed was found to be unacceptable.

- 63% of Resident Survey respondents described the overall quality of their accommodation as either 'poor' or 'very poor'.
- Safety was seriously compromised for many residents. 57% of Resident Survey respondents didn't feel safe in their accommodation. There were broken locks on many doors – including bedroom, bathroom and external doors – with many more not having locks at all. Syringes were found in common areas, and fire safety and first aid measures were lacking in many rooming houses. Safety risks were especially high for women and children, even in some female-only rooming houses.
- Physical conditions and features of many rooms were very poor. Some residents lacked access to basic facilities including working lights, heating, and power points. Some rooms didn't have a window.
- Communal facilities were sometimes limited or non-existent. 14% of surveyed residents had no kitchen access. Almost half of the respondents shared a bathroom with ten or more people. When rooming houses did have communal areas, dirty and unhygienic conditions often prevailed.
- Residents' legal rights were regularly ignored. There were widespread breaches of the legal requirement to supply rooming house residents with information on their rights. Residents' bond money was rarely repaid. Several residents claimed they were unfairly and/or illegally evicted.
- Rooming house rents were relatively high in relation to residents' income, in some cases up to 70% of income. This was one factor leading to frequent accommodation breakdowns and 'churning' through the homelessness system.

The Resident and Worker Surveys didn't specifically enquire about the impact of rooming house accommodation on residents' physical and mental health.

However, respondents' comments, along with some of the quantitative data, suggest the likelihood of serious detriment to residents' wellbeing. Factors including physical and/or sexual assault, poor hygiene, prevalence of substance misuse, sleep disturbance, and living in fear, all have potential consequences for residents' health and mental health. General impoverishment further contributes to the overall decline in quality of health.

The combination of high rooming house rents and poor living conditions traps many already marginalised people in a cycle of poverty and abuse that further undermines their health and wellbeing. These exploitative rooming house operations are effectively being subsidised by the Victorian Government, as community agencies with few other accommodation options to offer continue to fund people into these properties.

It is unacceptable that this situation be allowed to continue.

Call for action

The partner agencies to this study call for swift and decisive action by the Victorian Government to improve living conditions in Melbourne's rooming houses. A key element of this action should be the introduction of a set of rooming house standards for Victoria, covering areas such as amenity, facilities, safety and access to support services.

To be effective, these standards must be accompanied by mechanisms to:

- identify rooming houses in operation and ensure that they are registered
- regularly monitor compliance with the standards – some form of audit process is suggested
- enforce the standards through penalties for non-compliance.

The recent legislative change to the definition of a rooming house – from a minimum of 6 rooms to a minimum of 4 – is a step in the right direction, as it extends legislative coverage to many small rooming houses. However, many rooming houses are still unregistered and 'slip under the radar' of authorities. Greater vigilance is needed to prevent avoidance of the law.

Any strategy to improve rooming houses must involve rooming house residents. These are the people who have the clearest first-hand experience of rooming house conditions and breaches of rights. However, they are often vulnerable and may be victimised if they complain. There is an urgent need for an accessible and confidential channel for complaints for rooming house residents.

Agencies working with rooming house residents already use a number of strategies to limit the damage caused by poor rooming house conditions. These include providing people with the most accurate information available on individual rooming houses, and avoiding the use of the worst properties. However, due to the severe shortage of other emergency accommodation options and the ad-hoc nature of these strategies, they have relatively little impact on the overall rooming house system. Greater information sharing and

coordination among community agencies in relation to these strategies would allow them to be used more effectively. There is also scope for greater regulation in this area – for example, prohibition of the use of government funds to place people in rooming houses that are unregistered or non-compliant with standards.

In addition to penalties for poor performance, a variety of strategies could be pursued to encourage and reward good rooming house management. For example, subsidies or tax incentives could be available to rooming houses following good practice. The Victorian Government could support a Socially Responsible Rooming House Owners Group which could provide positive peer feedback and support.

There is also an urgent need to review rooming house rents. With many homeless people paying 50-70% of their income on rent in private rooming houses, it is unsurprising that they experience frequent accommodation breakdowns and find it difficult to access more suitable housing. The Victorian and Federal Governments should explore ways to increase affordability of privately-owned emergency accommodation for people experiencing homelessness. Two options would be reviewing the availability and amount of rent assistance for rooming house residents, or looking at ways of capping rooming house rents.

Looking to the future

Ultimately, the partner agencies to this report would like to see people experiencing homelessness accommodated in good quality permanent housing as soon as possible. Research demonstrates that the longer people are homeless, the more difficult it becomes for them to exit homelessness. Whether it is public housing, community housing, supportive housing or affordable long-term private rental, people need to be supported to swiftly access appropriate permanent housing.

To achieve such a 'housing first' response for the majority of homeless people will require major investment in affordable housing and will take years. In the meantime, there continues to be a need for good quality crisis and interim accommodation. Even under a housing first approach, there is still a role for appropriate emergency accommodation for short periods while people await placement in long-term housing. Demand for government-funded crisis accommodation and transitional housing far exceeds supply. And for some people, well-managed congregate settings continue to be a viable or even preferred living arrangement.

These factors suggest that for the foreseeable future, there will continue to be scope for private rooming houses to play a role in responding to homelessness. However, it is essential that rooming houses are safe, affordable, offer reasonable amenity and access to support, and are managed in a way that respects the rights of residents. Otherwise, they cause further damage and entrench people in homelessness.

Currently, some of the most marginalised people in our society are being traumatised and exploited in private rooming houses. With committed action by the Victorian government and community agencies, change is possible. For the sake of rooming house residents, it is vital that this change occurs sooner rather than later.

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Endnotes

- ¹ HomeGround Services (2008) *Call This a Home? Private Rooming House Standards in Melbourne*. Available at: www.homeground.org.au/page-2-64-Publications.htm
- ² www.portphillip.vic.gov.au, accessed 15/2/2009 (paraphrased)
- ³ Consumer Affairs Victoria, *Rooming Houses: A Guide for Residents, Owners and Managers*, Consumer Affairs Victoria, Melbourne, 2006, p. viii.
- ⁴ Consumer Affairs Victoria, 'Rooming House Changes to the Law 20 September and 1 September 2005', Consumer Affairs Victoria, 2005.
- ⁵ The *Act* and *Rooming House* booklet, as well as many informative fact-sheets, can be downloaded from the Consumer Affairs Victoria website: www.consumer.vic.gov.au.
- ⁶ More resources on rooming houses can be found at the Tenants Union of Victoria website: www.tuv.org.au. Further information can also be obtained from your relevant local council.
- ⁷ *Rooming Houses: A Guide for Residents, Owners and Managers*, p. v.
- ⁸ D. Limbrick, 'Some Reflections on the SAAP and Homelessness in Australia', *Parity*, vol. 19, iss. 6, July 2006, pp. 6,7.
- ⁹ C. Chamberlain & D. MacKenzie, *Counting the Homeless 2006*, Australian Bureau of Statistics & Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1999, p. vii.
- ¹⁰ C. Chamberlain, G. Johnson, *Homelessness in Melbourne: Confronting the Challenge*, RMIT Publishing, Melbourne, 2006.
- ¹¹ Homelessness Australia, *Too Many Homeless on International Women's Day - Homelessness Australia*, found on: www.homelessnessinfo.net.au, accessed 20/3/2009.
- ¹² G. Johnson, H. Gronda & S. Coutts, *On the Outside: Pathways In and Out of Homelessness*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, North Melbourne, 2008, p.71.
- ¹³ Examples include 'Left with nowhere to go after years of living in squalor', *The Age*, 16/6/2006; 'Boarding house operators exploit homeless', *The Age*, 14/10/2006; 'Man stabbed in Melbourne boarding house', *ABC News*, 25/5/2007; 'Two held over boarding house killing', *The Age*, 28/9/2007; 'Suspicious fires in St Kilda boarding house', *Herald Sun*, 18/8/2008. For these and further examples, see www.homeground.org.au/page-2-38-Newsclippings.htm.
- ¹⁴ C. Chamberlain, G. Johnson, *Homelessness in Melbourne: Confronting the Challenge*, RMIT Publishing, Melbourne, 2006.
- ¹⁵ *Counting the Homeless 2006*, p. ix.
- ¹⁶ *Residential Tenancies Act 1997*, No. 109, 1997, Part 3 – S. 124, p. 81 & *Rooming Houses: A Guide for Residents, Owners and Managers*, Cover page.
- ¹⁷ Newstart is an Australian Government Centrelink payment targeted to job seekers.
- ¹⁸ Australian Government Centrelink Website, http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/payments/newstart_rates.htm, accessed 25/2/2009.

Appendix A: Worker survey

The proforma used for the Worker Survey appears on the following 2 pages. Note that the page layout of the original proforma varies slightly from that presented below.

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Collective Standards for Rooming Houses – Check List

Bedding / Beds:

Check to see if rooms have adequate beds for occupancy. Are the beds clean and not stained? Is there bedding provided that is warm and clean?

Lighting: Is there a working light in the room, on the corridor and communal areas? Check for security light outside entrance.

Heating and Airflow: does the building have adequate heating? Is there additional air con in the building?

Windows: check to see if there are windows in all bedrooms. Are they lockable and secure and do they open?

Welcome packs: are residents given information when they move in? If so, what are they and do they contain information about rights of tenants and also about tenants union and where to get help? Also check if information is provided on where to get cheap eats / food vouchers.

Communal areas: are there areas where residents can spend outside of there rooms. Check for kitchen – is there a working oven, microwave, pots and pans, fridge, locked cupboards for all tenants, cutlery, etc. is there a window in the kitchen? Check other communal areas such as a living area. Is there somewhere to relax outside the bedroom? TV? Is there a communal washing machine?

Security of room: is the room locked and secure? Is there a fridge in there and locked cupboards?

Security of building: check for main locked door, security lighting, security access points. Also check for access to a lead tenant and is this available 24h a day. What access to maintenance is there?

Fire standards: Is there an evacuation plan in place? Check for working smoke detectors? Fire blankets / extinguishers in the kitchen? Fire alarms on all floors. Check for blocked exists. Are there enough exits in place?

First Aid: is there any information on first aid and where to seek help. Are there first aid boxes present? Is there an information board in reception stating where nearest hospital / doctors are?

Further Observation Comments: Please include any information you observed that you might think is necessary. Include areas you did not see or were not allowed into.

Collective Standards for Rooming Houses

Rooming House:			
Manager/ Agency:			
Standard	Yes	No	Comments
Bedding/ Beds			
Lighting			
Heating & Airflow			
Windows			
Welcome Packs			
Sink & Power points			
Security of room (fridge & cupboard)			
Communal areas			
Security of building/ access to lead tenant			
Fire Standards (alarms, blankets, extinguishers)			
First Aid/ Health			
Rent : Single:		Bond:	
Double:		Rights booklet	
Family:		& House Rules:	
Further Observation Comments:			

Appendix B: Resident survey

The questionnaire used for the Resident Survey appears on the following 3 pages. Note that the page layout of the original questionnaire varies slightly from that presented below.

DRAFT

Rooming House Survey

We are conducting a survey to find out your views on rooming house accommodation in Melbourne. This survey will help us understand your experiences greater and help us in our work with improving the standards of all accommodation within Victoria.

We believe that everybody deserves a decent home, and that in a country as affluent as ours, this is entirely achievable.

Please fill out as much of the following questionnaire as you feel comfortable. The more information you provide the better the picture we will have and will be very much appreciated.

Age:	16-17	18-21	22-25	26-34	35-44	45-54	55+	M/F: _____
Income Type:	None	Youth Allowance	Disability Support	New Start				
	Parenting Payment	Wages	Other					
Country of Birth: _____	Preferred							
Language: _____								
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander _____								
Household Type:	single	couple	lone parent	family				

Number of rooming houses previously stayed in: **1** **2-4** **5-7** **8-10**
10+

Is this your first time been homeless? Yes No

If no, how long? **1 week** **1 month** **1-3 months** **3-6months** **6-12months** **1-2 Years**

This section will help us get a better picture of what your accommodation is like to live in.

Name of Rooming House:			
Room size:	Single	Double	Family
Cost of room per week:	\$ _____		
Did you have to pay a Bond or Key deposit:	Yes	No	If yes, how much? _____
Standard	Yes	No	Comments
Room: Is bedding provided?			If yes was it clean?
Room: Do the lights in your room work?			
Room: Does your room have			

Call This a Home? Living Conditions in Melbourne's Rooming Houses

heating?			
Room: Does your room have a window?			If yes, does it open?
Room: Does your room have a sink in it?			
Room: Are there any power points in your room?			If yes, how many?
Room: Is there a locked cupboard or area to protect your belongings?			If yes, please state what.
Room: can you lock your room door?			
Communal areas: Are there lights in the corridors and other areas?			
Communal areas: Can you use the common areas at any time?			If no, when?
Communal areas: Do you have access to a caretaker or lead tenant at any time?			
Communal areas: Is there a lock on all outside doors?			
Communal areas: Do you have use of a kitchen?			If yes, please state what is there and do you use it?
Communal areas: Is there a locked cupboard for your food?			
Communal areas: Is there a living area to relax in?			
Communal areas: Is there an information board on display?			If so, what is on it?
General: Were you given a tenants handbook on your arrival?			
General: Are there any Fire Standards (alarms, blankets, extinguishers, signs, smoke detectors)			
General: Is there a 1 st Aid kit available at all times?			
General: Do you feel safe in your accommodation?			
How many people do you share a bathroom with?			
(1) Own Bathroom (2) 2-4 (3) 5-9 (4) 10+ Is there a lock on the bathroom? Y			
N			

7.1... Further Comments

How would you rate your current accommodation?

(1) Excellent (2) Good (3) Just Ok (4) Poor (5) very poor

Thankyou for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire.

DRAFT

Appendix C: Full list of residents' comments

We invited all those who completed the Resident Survey to add any additional comments. Below is the full list of comments.

- Would like to move.
- Needs re-doing - carpets, painting, furniture and flooring all need re-doing. Flooring really dirty.
- Many people are bashed all the time.
- Feel unsafe in case somebody has another key to my door. Makes me sick when I see syringes lying down especially in the bathroom.
- Noise issues – tenants argue and play music in the wee small hours of the morning. Hard to sleep when this happens and they don't respond to reason. Upkeep of building another issue. Takes ages for anything to get mended – e.g., there is a great gaping hole in one of the bathroom roof where the extractor fan should be and has not been fixed since I moved in over a year ago.
- Would love to move out. Information board ripped of wall. Too many odd people around. Electrics in room blow the lights every time used.
- Scary place. Waiting to get stood over again. Oven is filthy. No standards. Threatened by other tenants.
- It is not the best place but it is something very overpriced for people in our situation.
- The room and house is great. A couple of tools live here but you get that anywhere. Was given the third degree about drugs but otherwise the landlord was reasonably pleasant.
- Stressful, unhygienic, expensive and sends you crazy.
- The same as all rooming houses. You get all the drug and alcohol addicted people together. It hasn't changed in years.
- Could only lock bedroom door if I paid an extra \$25.
- It was the lowest place I have ever stayed in my life, which includes 10 years jail.
- Don't send people to any of these properties. Very poor.
- I wouldn't live there long term. No way, not my type.
- [named rooming house operator] refuses to fix safety issues in the house when I asked them to. Very poor.
- Should be closed down.
- I was evicted when I complained about the terrible drainage in the bath /shower.
- Showers were outside and not clean.
- They shouldn't let people that take drugs and steal other people's things, clothes, money, cars and bash up people for money sleep at any house or hostel.
- I found the [named rooming house] to be very reasonable and id be happy to go back there if a room was available.
- Very poor security. Subjected to violence. Disgusting hygiene in bathroom.
- Was assaulted by another resident and evicted for getting blood on the carpet. Go figure.

- Did not feel safe as to many drug affected people.
- Threatened by other tenants. Bars on windows which were a fire risk.
- Its shit.
- Too many druggies make place unsafe.
- Filth and disease in bathroom and kitchen
- fuck this for a place to live.
- Doors hanging of hinges. Flooring was hole in the lino. Was in a dirty and shabby room. Bedding was not clean.
- This place was shit.
- Not clean, not safe. A lot of drugs and no help. Just a place to stay, no help.
- If people with the power to force the owner to fix these places they would be fantastic to live in. and if drug addicts were housed elsewhere, that would be great too.
- Felt very unsafe whole time.
- can't afford to live anywhere and public hosing taking to long. Needles, blood and bed bugs everywhere in this shit joint. Kitchen, what kitchen?
- sharing room with 4 drugies. Nothing safe. People keep coming in my room all night and trying to steel things. Woke up with one guy steeling my shoes. Wont cook in shit kitchen and can't afford to eat out after paying most of my benefits on this crap place.
- I would rather be back in prison than live here any longer. The place stunk of urine and mattress was bloodstained when I arrived. I saw 3 people beaten up in one night and nobody did a thing.