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## Time to tackle the rooming-house paradox

*Jino Distasio*

On any given night, thousands of Winnipeggers languish in ramshackle housing, line up at shelters or sleep in our streets and alleyways.

This situation is not limited to Winnipeg. Homeless Hub estimates 30,000 Canadians are homeless every day. How can it be that in such a prosperous country we continue to struggle to house those most in need?

How, too, can we have a contest that sought to award the worst place to live in Winnipeg? A contest that not surprisingly found the "winners" to be rooming houses located in our inner city? The solution seems simple enough: Let's shut down as many of these godforsaken places as we can. As the Free Press is reporting in an ongoing series by reporter Mary Agnes Welch, doing so might cause more harm than good.

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

In addition, we allowed our affordable housing stock to spiral downward in two fundamental ways. First, the federal government significantly diminished its role in the provision of affordable housing, off-loading the majority of responsibility to the provinces, which have not built enough units. Second, we allowed what remained to decline, leaving many to scramble for the worst of the worst. A decade-long boom in the Winnipeg housing market, meanwhile, rewarded some, but it also meant that affordable housing became a commodity, leading to conversions and a decline in the rooming-house stock in Spence, Osborne Village and West Broadway districts.

To tackle the bigger problem of poor-quality housing, a practical solution would be to convene another task force, as was done in the 1990s, and undertake a quick and comprehensive sweep and inspection of all the rooming houses and hotels, with the mandate to enforce building codes, occupancy standards and licensing. With swift action, we could effectively close many of the worst offenders. In doing so, however, we would have to realize that for a heavy hand, a hefty price would be paid, as many would be plunged into crisis and end up on the streets, putting increased pressure on our limited shelters.

Herein lies a paradox. While we know it is critical to have all Canadians live in safe, affordable housing, closing hundreds, if not thousands of rooms would put a massive burden on an already strained system. Yet perhaps this course of action is exactly what is needed as the excuse that we have no alternatives is simply not good enough any longer.



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Perhaps such action would not only provoke a strong government reaction but they would be forced to find alternatives, including building more units.

Let us not be fooled, however, into thinking the problem is entirely related to marginal housing or the lack of supply. It is also about the lack of services and supports required for success.

In work by the At Home Chez Soi project over the last four years, we learned a lot about keeping those in need securely housed. The solution was never just about providing housing; it was about creating a strong network of supports to ensure the right resources were in place for keeping people in stable housing. Our work on the At Home project hammered home the point that providing shelter and resources is hard work. The outcome, however, can be astounding and remarkable change.

Across Winnipeg, work is continuing to find alternatives for those needing help, with places like the Bell Hotel, the Madison and the Red Road Lodge trying new models of housing with supports. There is much success from this work, but more is needed. In addition, the Housing First approach used in the At Home project provides additional evidence that supports and good housing can go a long way to changing lives and saving the system money.

As we move forward, we have to realize we need to invest in all our citizens. We have to work hard to make available the right types of resources and services to help those in need find their own pathway to success.

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## **ABOUT THE MENTAL HEALTH COMMISSION OF CANADA**

The Mental Health Commission of Canada is a catalyst for change. We are collaborating with hundreds of partners to change the attitudes of Canadians toward mental health problems and to improve services and support. Our goal is to help people who live with mental health problems and illnesses lead meaningful and productive lives. Together we create change.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada is funded by Health Canada.

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