

# Life in a Room: The Resident's View

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In October 2020, the Peninsula Community Legal Centre (PCLC) released a report entitled *Open the Door! The Resident's View of Life in a Rooming House*.

A key aim of the report is to give a voice to rooming house residents, who normally lead hidden lives on the margins of society, and to offer them a rare platform to communicate their experiences to the broader community. Here is some of what they had to say:

*'It's like living in hell... Rough sleeping is cheaper and safer... Help me to get out of here... Things are broken and they don't get fixed... The toilet is broken... and there's no hot water... The roof is falling apart... Mould is everywhere... The windows don't close... You can't afford to live here and eat... Put more services in — we need more support... This is inhumane — you lose your self-respect. You lose hope.'*

The report is based on a detailed survey of 50 residents of private rooming houses located across Melbourne's south east conducted from July to December 2019, and data from PCLC's rooming house outreach program (RHOP). Our RHOP conducts a visiting outreach service to residents of private rooming houses across 17 local government areas in the southeast region of Melbourne, where more than 800 private rooming houses are registered.

The research provides detailed information on residents' pathways into rooming houses and their hopes about future housing options; their experience of the 'system', including rooming house operators, regulatory agencies,

and community organisations; and their daily experience of living in rooming houses, including affordability, living conditions, security and health matters.

The report highlights that despite government reforms over the past decade aimed at cracking down on unscrupulous operators and better regulation of the sector, too many are still living in substandard, dangerous and overcrowded conditions. In our survey, 48 per cent of residents described their living conditions as 'very poor', 'bad' and 'unsafe'. According to data gathered by PCLC's outreach team, over 40 per cent of privately registered rooming houses visited under the program were filthy and in a state of significant disrepair.

In fact, many of the properties visited by our outreach program that are deemed compliant by regulators under the current prescribed minimum standards are in a similarly woeful state. The report concludes that the current minimum standards fall way short of community expectations of decency and amenity and are too low, particularly in the current Covid-19 environment. Toilets, showers, and bathrooms being shared by up to ten people in squalid overcrowded conditions are no longer sustainable. The minimum standards need to be raised.

Despite the fact that exploitation and profiteering by unscrupulous operators have been a target of recent legislative reforms — such as the introduction of a 'fit and proper person' licensing test — over half the residents surveyed in the report continue to struggle with unaffordable rents and are

paying as much as 60 per cent of their already low income on rent.

All of the residents in the survey receive Centrelink benefits, as do a high proportion of the people we see in our outreach program. Many report that rooming house operators set rental prices on the basis of residents' pension amount rather than the quality of the accommodation — the higher the pension, the higher the rent demanded. Not only do the rents not match the quality of the accommodation, they also force people to live below the poverty line. Forty-six per cent of survey respondents reported that they did not eat an adequate amount of food and that there were regular periods where they did not eat at all.

## Sally

Sally is 25 years old and has been in her current rooming house for six weeks. She is on Newstart and receives \$307 per week. She pays nearly 60 per cent of her income (\$175) in rent leaving \$132 to live on. She says that she eats adequate amounts of food but *'...can't afford to eat three meals a day.'*

## Richard

Richard is 32 and has been in his current rooming house for two months. He also spends 60 per cent of his Newstart Allowance (\$330) on rent (\$200) leaving \$130 per week to live on. He says that he doesn't eat adequately and that he only has one meal per day. He says, *'I get hungry.'*

## Maria

Maria is 63. She has been living at her current rooming house for four months. She receives the Disability Support Pension (\$500) and spends 42 per cent (\$210) on rent each week. She states that she doesn't eat adequate amounts of food and that in the off pension week *'I eat 2 Minute noodles and bread and get food from the Salvos.'*

## Angelo

Angelo grew up in Lalor and has significant mental health issues. After another admission to the mental health unit at a major public hospital, Angelo was discharged to a rooming house in East Brighton. Nobody was at home when he arrived.

For the first twenty-four hours of his residence, he had no belongings, no money and no idea of the street address of the property in which he found himself. His family also had no idea where he was, and he had no way to contact them. He slept on a dirty mattress on the floor with one blanket for warmth in the middle of winter.

The RHOP found him at home the next day, provided a food voucher and directed him to the local shops, advised him of his address and assisted him to contact his mother to let her know where he was living.

The current regulatory system relies heavily on residents reporting problems or regulatory breaches. However, in our survey less than one third said they had contacted the key regulatory agencies (the local council or Consumer Affairs Victoria (CAV)) in relation to concerns about their rooming house. Most knew little about their rights and had never seen the CAV guide<sup>1</sup> on rights and responsibilities which operators are obliged to provide them under the legislation. Most residents feel unable to advocate on their own behalf for improved living conditions and are reluctant to report breaches for fear of retaliatory action by the operator.

The report also reveals significant gaps in the support provided by community and other service organisations. Most individuals involved in the research were referred to rooming house accommodation by emergency housing providers. Seventy-four per cent reported that more assistance could have been provided at the time of referral. A considerable number were relocated from other parts of metropolitan Melbourne and almost half of residents surveyed had little or no knowledge of the local area or support services.

Emergency housing providers often refer people to rooming houses that they are aware are sub-standard and unsafe because there are no other options available. The report acknowledges that this is due to the significant and chronic undersupply of adequate and affordable transitional and long-term housing options. However, in the case of rooming houses which are well-known for their dire conditions, the report recommends that it would be better to avoid referrals and in some cases boycott rooming houses which are notorious in the industry.

The research found that rooming house residents require better access to social, legal and health support. Very few services visit rooming houses, despite the high number of residents with significant and complex needs. Many residents reported mental health issues and drug and alcohol dependence. Of particular concern were the significant proportion who said they had multiple or complex health issues but were not accessing appropriate treatment. Most are living lonely and isolated lives, staying within the confines of their room for much of the day, only emerging to take care of the most basic requirements of life. They do not participate in broader community activities or access additional support services.

The research also found that residents have a wide range of skills, experience and expertise. Most reported that they would prefer to be employed and earning an income, recognising this as one of the few pathways out of rooming house accommodation. However, over time, living in rooming houses impacts an individual's emotional, psychological and physical

wellbeing and people simply give up hope that life can be any different. Many lead lives of quiet desperation.

The report contains detailed practical, legislative and policy recommendations to government, rooming house operators and community organisations working in the sector. Many of these recommendations are made by residents in their own voices. Residents would like to see more stringent regulations in place to improve standards and increased enforcement action to ensure that better quality accommodation is provided. They also want better protection from excessive rents and exploitation. In short, they want safe, adequate and affordable housing

PCLC fully endorses the residents' recommendations. While there have been improvements in the regulatory framework over the past decade, we are still seeing many of the same problems that have existed in the rooming house sector for many years. Rooming house minimum standards are too low and the bar needs to be set far higher. The effectiveness of the rooming house regulatory and enforcement system also requires urgent review, and there still needs to be a much greater effort to hold unscrupulous operators to account.

To access the full report, go to: <https://pclc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Open-the-Door-The-Residents-View-of-life-in-a-Rooming-House.pdf>

*Peninsula Community Legal Centre Inc. has been providing specialist tenancy services for over two decades. The Centre's rooming house outreach program (RHOP) funded by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) conducts a visiting service to people living in registered and unregistered rooming houses in the South and East regions providing tenancy advice, identification and assistance of residents inappropriately housed and assisting residents to connect to health, housing, legal and support services.*

## Endnote

1. Consumer Affairs Victoria, 2019, *Rooming Houses: A guide for residents and operators*, Melbourne.