



National Occupancy Standards Study FINDING ROOMS FOR FAMILIES

In 2021, the BC Society of Transition Houses (BCSTH) and researchers from the University of British Columbia (UBC) partnered on a research project to learn more about the impacts of National Occupancy Standards on women who had experienced gender-based violence and their families.

Background

In British Columbia many public and private housing providers use National Occupancy Standards (NOS). According to NOS:

- Two adults can only share a room if they are married or living in a common-law relationship
- Children of the same gender can share a room up to the age of eighteen years old
- Children of different genders can only share a bedroom until they are 5 years old
- Household members aged eighteen or older must have separate bedrooms

In 2019 BCSTH conducted a province-wide community needs assessment and found that NOS were a key barrier to housing for women who had experienced gender-based violence. Due to a lack of research in this area BCSTH partnered with UBC researchers to better understand the issue.

According to NOS, 2 people can share a room if:



adults living common-law or married



Under 18 years old and the same gender



Under 5 years-old and different genders

Methods

Eleven women were interviewed in July of 2021. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were coded using the qualitative software MAXQDA.

Findings



6 of the 11 families lived in market rental housing



All families living in market rental housing faced extreme un-affordability



More than half (6/11) were underhoused according to NOS

8 out of 11 women identified as a visible minority



Of the eleven women interviewed, two were living in transition or second-stage housing, three were living in subsidized housing, and six lived in market rental housing. Of the six families living in market housing all of them sent 50% or more of their income on their rent. Six of the eleven families were under-housed according to National Occupancy Standards (i.e. needed more bedrooms based on the size and composition of their family). Eight of the eleven women (73%) identified as a visible minority.

National Occupancy Standards are a Barrier to Housing

Two key themes were identified in the interviews.

1

When women filled out their application for subsidized housing there was no flexibility in how many rooms they could apply for. The lack of flexibility prevented women from being able to voice what size unit could work for their family and increased the amount of time that families lived in precarious housing or were homeless.

What women said:

"All I know is that if someone hadn't broken those rules (NOS), I would certainly be dead, and my children would certainly not be okay. [...] It begs the question: why does someone have to break the rules to save a life and family, you know, and this amount of poverty?"



"I just need affordable housing I (can) take care of just by myself. And even though, you know, (I just have a) small income from (my) part-time job, if I can take care of it, you know, life is much more stable. [...] I don't need three bedrooms"

2

For women living in subsidized housing, being under housed (i.e., having too few rooms, or too small a space) placed incredible stress on families and often happened because women took the first housing option they were provided with out of desperation.

"Because I was fleeing from abuse, [...] I went to the Head Office myself [...] and I just told her about my dire situation [...] - I said I'll even take something that has mold and I'll clean it all myself, I just need a safe place."



"I couldn't stand the subsidized housing, because (there was no) space for the boys, one of the boys was sleeping with me [...] there are some difficulties with the boys, and they are still fighting and arguing."

"In the moment of need (I said) yes but once the family is there then (I) realized (I) made a big mistake to have said yes. But desperation sometimes does that."



Two Related Solutions



Provide families with more flexibility in housing choices

Currently, the subsidized housing application doesn't allow women to identify the number of rooms THEY believe will work best for their family. This creates problems both for women who are comfortable living in closer quarters, and for women who need additional space.

A lack of flexibility in housing choices increases the amount of time that women and their children face homelessness and precarious housing. New standards need to be put in place that recognize the diversity found within families.

Increase the supply of affordable housing and rent supplements for families

The Build BC: Women's Transition Housing Fund is an investment of \$735 million dollars over the next ten years to build 1,500 additional spaces for women who have experienced gender-based violence. In the interim rent supplements could help keep many women and their families out of crisis.

Rental assistance programs like the Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP) still fall well below levels that would make housing affordable for families. Increasing these supplements would help many families make ends meet.