

# NEIGHBOURHOOD CHANGE AND THE FATE OF ROOMING HOUSES

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## ABSTRACT

The paper examines changes in the number and geography of rooming houses in Halifax, Canada. Several factors contributed to the near extinction of private single-room accommodations for hard-to-house, low-income adults between 1995 and 2016, while student-oriented rooming properties increased. Economic and population growth created strong housing demand as low borrowing costs facilitated property investment in central neighbourhoods. Planning policies encouraged greater densities and heights in areas formerly accommodating low-rent rooming houses, while regulations held rooming houses to new standards. Cultural preferences for urban living accelerated demand for, and costs in central areas. Together these factors contributed to an apparent rent gap that made many rooming house properties ripe for transformation, contributing to diminished shelter opportunities for disadvantaged low-income residents. The case illustrates how gentrification extinguishes some market-provided low-income housing options.

**Key words:** Affordable housing, rooming house, mixed methods, Canada, neighbourhood change, regulation

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## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary context of rapid urban growth and increasing social inequality and polarisation (van Kempen 2007; Walks & Maaranen 2008; Walks 2011), affordable housing in urban cores is vulnerable to displacement through gentrification (Slater 2004; Smith 2003). Thousands of social housing units have been lost through revitalisation projects and privatisation programmes (Goetz 2013; Ravetz 2001). A commonly maligned form of housing, single-room occupancy units or the rooming house, may be particularly at

risk (Alfaro 2010; Freeman 2013). Known variously as lodging houses, boarding houses, residential hotels, or houses-in-multiple-occupancy, rooming houses provide residents with furnished sleeping rooms with access to shared kitchen and/or bathroom facilities (Campsie 1994; CMHC 2006; Durning 2012). Tenants typically rent by the week or month. Rooming houses usually accommodate low-income persons – primarily single men or the elderly – who otherwise face homelessness (Crystal & Beck 1992; CMHC 2006; Pedersen & Swanson 2010). Many residents deal with addictions, disabilities, mental-health issues,

or de-institutionalisation (CMHC 2006; Gaetz *et al.* 2013). Unfortunately for residents who desperately need simple and affordable shelter, conditions in low-rent rooming houses may be poor, with problems such as vermin, crowding, and risks of fire (Charlebois *et al.* 1996; Freeman 2013). Clean, well-managed, and affordable rooming houses are rare, although the need for such units is growing (CMHC 2002; SHS 2015).

Municipalities frequently apply zoning and licensing regulations that affect location, numbers, and viability (Wyly & Hammel 1999; Slater 2004; Freeman 2017). They have adopted revitalisation policies that promote economic upgrading in areas where low-rent rooming houses once flourished (Smith 2002; Davidson 2007). Living alone is increasingly popular in Western societies (Klinenberg 2012), and diverse housing options for affluent singles are increasing in urban cores (Rosen & Walks 2015). In recent decades, some private landlords have created rooming houses for university students in converted homes or purpose-built structures, leading to a process sometimes called ‘studentification’ (Sage *et al.* 2012). As central areas redevelop, and gentrification becomes common, however, the supply of affordable rooms for disadvantaged single adults is diminishing (Mifflin & Wilton 2005; Mazer & Rankin 2011). As gentrification transforms neighbourhoods, the private housing market is changing rapidly in ways that price or regulate out options for the hardest-to-house (Newman & Wyly 2006).

In a seminal paper on gentrification, Neil Smith (1979) suggested that the decline of older neighbourhoods and the rise of potential ground rents creates a ‘rent gap’ that capital rushes to fill with higher-value uses. Ley (1986) countered that demographic factors (such as smaller household size) and cultural preferences (as for shorter commutes to work) played important roles in accounting for neighbourhood change. Other studies noted the influence of government policies – promoting urban redevelopment and intensification – in driving change (Wyly & Hammel 1999; Lees 2000; Hackworth & Smith 2001). Recently, Slater (2017, p. 125) challenged researchers to show how ‘the opening and closing of rent gaps leads to the agony of people losing their homes’. In this paper we argue that the combined effect of

cultural preferences for urban living, economic factors facilitating profit-taking, and policy decisions regulating land use and development potential created conditions that undermined conventional rooming houses as a viable option for low-income singles with few affordable housing choices. We find that an entire class of private-market housing serving the hardest-to-house is rapidly becoming extinct in gentrifying neighbourhoods in Halifax.

Here we examine changes in the supply and geography of rooming houses in a mid-sized Canadian city between 1995 and 2016. Halifax, Nova Scotia, is the provincial capital and economic hub of Atlantic Canada. Created as a regional municipality when the province amalgamated Halifax with Dartmouth, Bedford, and the County in 1996, Halifax had a population over 400,000 by 2016 (Statistics Canada 2017). Halifax neighbourhoods are changing rapidly. Using mixed-methods, including interviews and field surveys, we profile how the availability of rooming houses changed over two decades, and identify key processes responsible for reducing the city’s most affordable market-housing option. We thus provide insight into the ways that contemporary economic, cultural, and regulatory processes are undermining market-housing options for society’s poorest residents.

We begin by briefly reviewing the literature on rooming houses and on the loss of affordable housing in an era of rapid neighbourhood change and gentrification. We then present a case study of Halifax, explaining the methods used and our study findings. After identifying the economic, cultural, and regulatory processes that explain the rapid loss of an affordable housing option, we consider some implications of our results.

## THE ROOMING HOUSE AND NEIGHBOURHOOD CHANGE

During the nineteenth century, rooming houses provided respectable accommodations for single persons and families in industrial cities (Wolfe 1906; Freeman 2013). After the Second World War, however, the number and quality of rooming houses generally deteriorated (Harris 1992; Groth 1994)

as governments stimulated suburban private housing markets for the middle classes and built social housing units for low-income families and the elderly (Bacher 1993; Ravetz 2001; Harris 2004). Inner-city neighbourhoods declined through the mid-twentieth century, with landlords often sub-dividing large homes into individual rooms (Freeman 2013). During urban renewal in the 1950s, planning experts viewed rooming houses as markers and producers of neighbourhood decay (Arrighi 1997). For instance, in his study preparatory to urban renewal in Halifax, Stephenson (1957) commented on the negative effects of crowding, transience, and sharing of bathroom facilities on health and social behaviour. In Halifax, as in other cities, urban renewal cleared centrally-located neighbourhoods containing many rooming houses and set the stage for gentrification in nearby areas.

Gentrification, a term coined by Ruth Glass (1964), denotes a process of neighbourhood change that transforms working class or vacant industrial lands into middle-class areas, displacing poorer residents (Newman & Wyly 2006; Butler 2007; Lees *et al.* 2010) and stigmatised uses such as rooming houses (Slater 2004; Mazer & Rankin 2011). Smith (1979) held that gentrification revealed the return of investment capital to areas where increasing potential land values exceeded current-use values. Based on Canadian data, Ley (1986) suggested that households drove gentrification by choosing to move into inner-city areas to purchase affordable older homes. These theories are not mutually exclusive, as gentrification requires both the potential for increased value and consumers to take advantage of the opportunities created (Hamnett 1991; Slater 2017). Moreover, the rising influence of neo-liberal political philosophies (Davidson 2008; Tochtermann 2012) in planning policies in the 1990s encouraged urban revitalisation and intensification, super-charging gentrification processes (Lees 2000; Smith 2002). State-sponsored gentrification, as in HOPE VI in the US, proved especially threatening to inner-city social housing, as units were demolished, replaced with mixed-income housing (Goetz 2013). Neighbourhood change similarly reduced the supply of market-provided

affordable housing in some locations: for instance, growth pressures, transit availability, and government initiatives to increase urban densities contributed to the loss of low-end market apartments in Vancouver (Jones & Ley 2016).

Documenting the displacement that results from gentrification proves challenging because of the difficulty of tracking those who left (Atkinson 2000; Davidson 2008). Focusing on private-market housing targeting low-income residents offers one measure of the loss of units, if not people. Inner-city rooming houses for low-income residents have been disappearing in recent decades (Archer 2009; Kaufman & Distasio 2014; Brandon & Silver 2015), although suburban and student-oriented rooming houses increased in cities with high housing costs (Dalton *et al.* 2015; Sage *et al.* 2012). Many municipalities began licensing rooming houses in the 1990s, not only to ensure health and safety standards but to control locations, sizes, numbers, and amenities. The Ontario Municipal Board (2010, p. 17) found a City of Kitchener bylaw discriminatory for banning new rooming houses in a neighbourhood with an 'over-concentration of single person, low income households'; the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2017) challenged questionable requirements in the City of Waterloo's rental housing bylaw. Scarborough bans rooming houses outright (PISC 2015). Municipalities rarely welcome rooming houses: they often use policies and regulations to restrict or close them, increasing the risk of displacement as neighbourhoods gentrify.

### **NEIGHBOURHOOD CHANGE IN HALIFAX: A CASE STUDY OF ROOMING HOUSES**

Halifax experienced waves of gentrification in the 1970s and 1980s, as older houses within walking distance of the city centre were renovated by young professionals (Ley 1986, 1988). Gentrification resumed in the late 1990s as the economy prospered and consumers and investors took renewed interest in central neighbourhoods (Grant & Gregory 2016; Rutland 2010).

In situations where revised planning policies and regulations increase potential density and height – as seen in parts of Halifax following downtown zoning changes in 2009 (Rutland 2010) – the rent gap between current and potential use can increase significantly, in which case developers may tear down old structures and rebuild. Given the low costs of borrowing over the last decade (Walks 2014), developers are well-placed to take advantage of growing demand for middle-class urban living, thus putting lower-status uses, such as rooming houses, in jeopardy.

Although Halifax has not demolished social housing, reduced federal funding transfers to the province and to non-profit and cooperative housing providers are already removing affordable units that managers cannot afford to maintain (Donovan 2016). A recent housing needs assessment flagged concerns about the loss of rooming houses for low-income single adults while homelessness increased (SHS 2015). After residents in neighbourhoods near local universities complained about the proliferation of student-oriented rooming houses, the city adopted bylaws to regulate and license structures (Dunphy 2005). Critics see rooming houses as a disreputable segment of the housing market, yet well-managed rooming houses offer an affordable form of communal living that can prevent social isolation and homelessness (Campsie 1994; Chaplin 2015). A comprehensive assessment of the fate of rooming houses, which play a vital role in accommodating hard-to-house individuals, can offer valuable insights into the displacement that can accompany gentrification.

Charlebois *et al.* (1996) published a study of rooming-house conditions in Halifax that provided a useful reference point for beginning our study: they found 146 in 1995. In late 2015 and early 2016 we began compiling an inventory of the rooming houses known to operate between 1995 and 2016, to update the earlier study. City staff reported 200 rooming houses around the year 2000 as they prepared the city's residential licensing bylaw (McGillicuddy 2007), but by 2015 staff listed 17 addresses of licensed rooming houses. For purposes of counting, we used the Halifax rooming-house definition: any property where landlords rent three or more individual rooms

without private kitchens and/or bathrooms. We included properties regardless of licensing status.

Building an inventory involved examining city directories, reports, council minutes, fire and police reports, news coverage, and the city's rooming house registry. For 12 months, a member of the research team tracked an on-line housing advertising service, Kijiji: ads there specified when landlords were targeting students, often noting proximity to the universities. The search yielded 208 unique addresses: 151 conventional rooming houses aimed at the general market and 57 quasi-rooming houses (a term used by city staff) targeting university students (but where landlords avoid using the term 'rooming house'). Conventional rooming houses typically rent rooms by the month, do not require references or damage deposits, and attract single men (or sometimes women) on very low incomes. Quasi-rooming houses are in homes or apartments leased annually, require rent and damage deposits, and specifically advertise to university students. Licensed rooming houses undergo annual inspections to ensure that they follow requirements in the city's bylaws. Rooming houses that are not licensed are sometimes called 'illegal', but the city makes no effort to shut them down unless complaints about fire risks or illegal activities warrant action. We truth-checked addresses through field surveys and by using Google Street View histories (2009 to present). While our list of rooming houses is not likely comprehensive, the numbers echo earlier estimates.

Plotting the addresses revealed four clusters of rooming houses operating sometime during the period, as Figure 1 shows. Most were within a 15-minute walk or ferry ride of the central business district. Figure 2 indicates that two of the clusters – in North End Halifax and Downtown Dartmouth – had disappeared by 2015, when only the clusters with student-oriented quasi-rooming houses in the city's South End remained evident.

Conventional rooming houses largely disappeared from areas experiencing gentrification since 1995 (Baker). During the twentieth century, Halifax's North End became a low-income area, with large social housing projects,

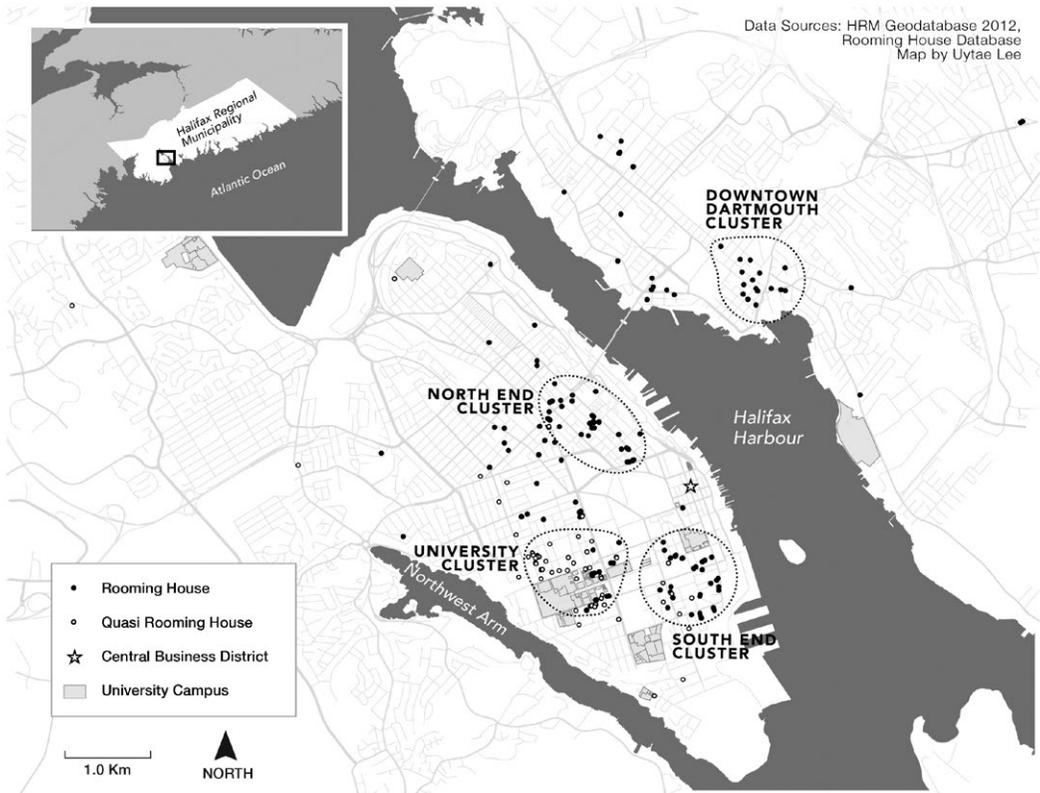


Figure 1. Map of Halifax showing clusters of all rooming house addresses identified for the 1995 to 2015 period.

non-profit and coop housing groups, and many social-service agencies. The neighbourhood experienced limited upgrading in the 1970s (Millward & Davis 1986). Despite concerns about crime and drugs in the 1980s and 1990s, the area attracted low-income cultural workers and college students interested in being near the city centre (Roth & Grant 2015). By the 2000s, however, the area was showing signs of new investment. Trendy condos, apartments, and mixed-use buildings attracted new residents (Grant & Gregory 2016). Some former rooming houses burned down; some closed under orders from health or fire officials. With up-market cafés and boutiques lining business streets, most conventional rooming houses in the North End ceased operations, replaced with apartments. Although service agencies built some affordable accommodation for displaced tenants, many low-income singles who need access to

centrally-located services can no longer find rooms in the neighbourhood.

The cluster of conventional rooming houses in Downtown Dartmouth, an old urban core, similarly disappeared. The area experienced some gentrification in the 1980s, but felt rapid change only in the 2000s with the building of luxury condominiums and apartments with spectacular harbour views. The local business commission lobbied the city to close notorious rooming houses: some properties were renovated as private homes while others were cleared for redevelopment.

The South End of the city was traditionally a wealthy area of stately homes. After the 1950s, parts of the area saw intensification with renovations and new apartment buildings as developers moved to meet the demand for accommodation near universities and hospitals (Grant & Gregory 2016). Conventional rooming houses were once common in the

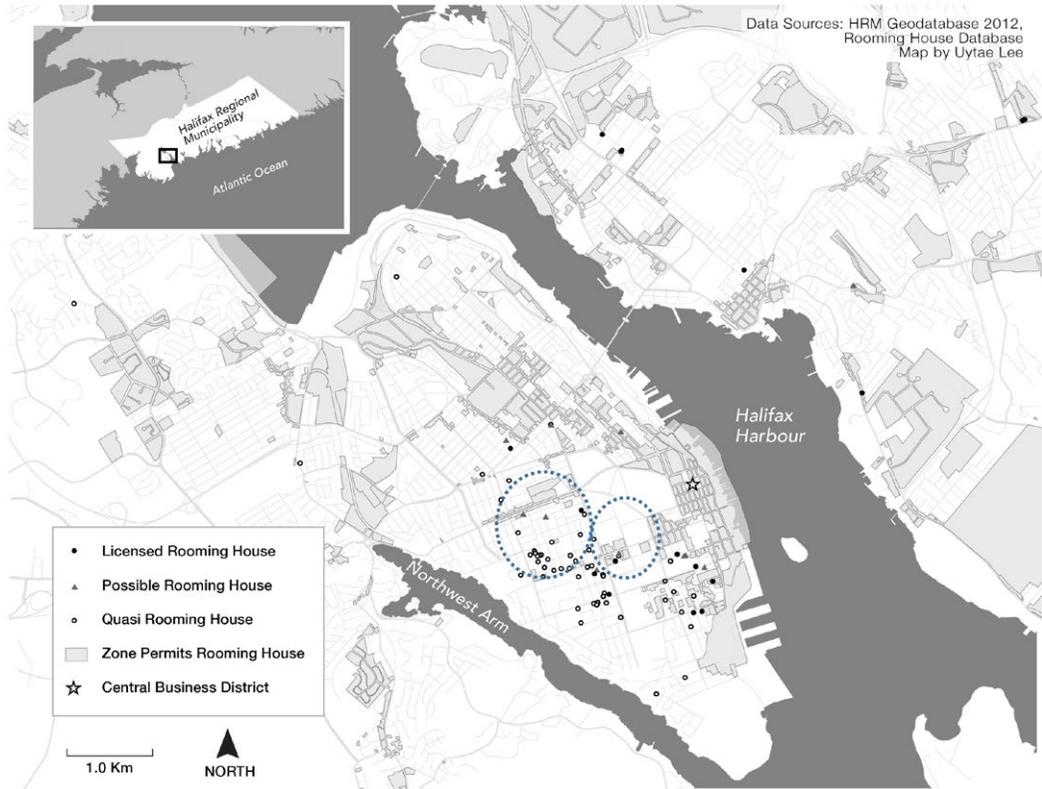


Figure 2. Map of Halifax showing rooming house addresses still operating in 2015. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

eastern South End, but most have closed. In the 1990s, as the universities expanded enrolment, private developers began to purchase and subdivide large nearby houses in low-density zones. The rapid transformation of what had been single homes into multi-tenanted student properties created consternation among neighbours. The city responded to concerns in the early 2000s by drafting a bylaw that required the licensing of rooming houses (Derksen 2016). By the time the city had regulatory mechanisms in place and updated zoning to limit the number of bedrooms permitted, many conversions had already taken place, with living and dining rooms carved into sleeping rooms, increasing density without changing zoning. In the university district, landlords circumvent the requirement for licensing rooming houses through strategic practices, such as leasing a house to one

student who then becomes responsible for recruiting and managing others.

Our assessment of the use of properties indicated that only 28 conventional rooming houses remained in 2015: 17 licensed and 11 operating without a license. We estimate that 700–1000 low-income people were displaced. All 57 student-oriented quasi-rooming houses that opened during the period were operating in 2015. We could not determine the current use of some former rooming houses, but media sources reported nine had closed, and in another 17 cases lots stood empty. Some 58 rooming houses became apartments (see Figure 3), either through conversion into flats, or through new construction. Three became condominiums. One was modernised as short-term executive suites, and two operated as fraternity houses. The only positive note was that three structures converted to social housing. In

Conventional rooming house before redevelopment (2009) and under re-construction as mid-rise luxury apartments (2017) (Google street view)

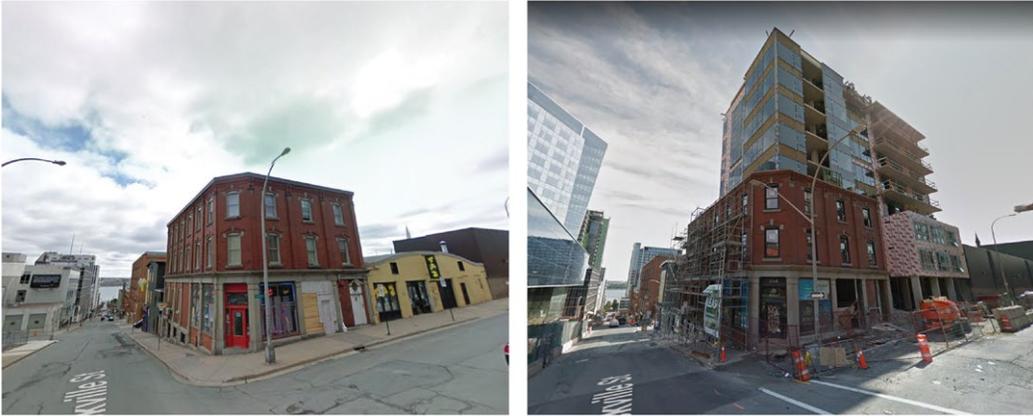


Figure 3. Rooming house in central Halifax under redevelopment as apartments, beside the new convention centre (Google Street View 2009 and 2017). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

a period when affordable housing became increasingly difficult to find, the numbers reveal the overwhelming loss of rooms available to vulnerable people living on extremely low incomes.

In 2016, with the inventory completed, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 37 people knowledgeable about rooming-house issues in Halifax, including housing providers, tenants, housing advocates, neighbours of rooming-house properties, and municipal officials. We recorded and transcribed interviews for thematic analysis to understand factors that may explain the changes we identified.

### FORCES AFFECTING THE NUMBER AND TYPE OF ROOMING HOUSE

Our analysis of interview data suggests that several forces explain the loss of conventional rooming house units and the proliferation of new quasi-rooming houses targeting university students. Cultural preferences, economic factors, and government regulations and policies worked together to generate a rent gap that encouraged transformation of properties into new uses (Figure 4).

**Cultural preferences** – Socially-constructed attitudes and beliefs affect the choices that residents, landlords, lenders, and city officials

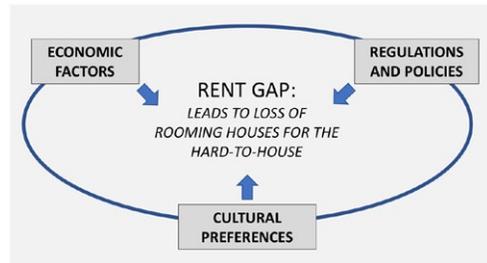


Figure 4. Factors influencing the loss of rooming houses. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

make in regulating and developing the city (Perin 1977). Rooming houses have long been a disdained housing form with a history of negative media attention (Grant *et al.* 2018a; 2018b). Even those arguing to retain the rooming house for disadvantaged residents who prefer the single-room option recognised that conventional rooming houses too often are dirty and unsafe. One housing advocate [01HA01f]<sup>1</sup> explained:

City council and others recognise ... that it is really an important form of tenure ... It can be for all ages. ... [but now] it's almost extinct ... You know that this will end within, I would say, the next three years ... Let's look at the illegal ones: ... there's

bedbugs. And it's so horrific, [tenants] just want to get out ... One has 30 rooms, but only 15 are occupied, so the end is near.

Pressure from neighbours and political leaders to police rooming houses can be strong. Even rooming house residents were happy to see some close. For instance, one [14RR03m] said about a Dartmouth property, 'It was so bad ... it's good to see it's torn down, and hopefully whatever they build there will be an improvement'.

Changes in consumer social preferences were described as equally influential. The demand for apartment and condominium living has increased dramatically (Rosen & Walks, 2013), providing a strong market for central neighbourhoods (Previl 2016). Halifax has a low average household size of 2.3 people (Statistics Canada 2017), with small, affluent households especially common in central neighbourhoods (Grant & Gregory 2016). Large numbers of students looking for housing near the universities significantly shifted the market by the year 2000. As demand increased, rents rose, making conversion (whether from rooming house to apartment or single house to student rooming house) increasingly attractive to developers.

Landlords' preferences similarly affected the fate of rooming houses. Housing providers interviewed noted that the tenants of conventional rooming houses prove challenging to manage because of addictions, extreme poverty, and mental-health issues. In conventional rooming houses, tenants rent month-to-month because they lack resources for deposits: their shelter allowances have not increased for years and may not meet rental costs. By contrast, student rooming houses are leased annually, backed by references and parental guarantees. One housing provider managing conventional rooming houses explained the motivation to switch to student tenants:

My boss] says that [students] won't create the same kind of damage ... I've got lots of students that live in apartments, and I don't see them unless there's a problem with the building. These [conventional] rooming houses, I'm there every day ... My first-thing-in-the-morning when I come into my office, is to drive by ... [our rooming houses]

to see if there's any visible damage. I mean I caught one of my tenants breaking into another person's window, just by a drive-by! ... I wouldn't have to be there every day if they were students, and the damage cost wouldn't be as high. [33HP05f]

**Economic factors** – Several economic factors undermine conditions for conventional rooming houses. Halifax experienced strong economic and population growth over recent decades (Bundale 2017). A municipal official [05MU01m] noted, 'The economy here is more diverse and stronger than it's ever been ... We're in this weird development bubble where things are getting built at light-speed'. In 2012, Irving Shipyards won a multi-billion-dollar contract with the Canadian Navy, increasing housing demand. Housing costs that remain below average for larger cities, and growing numbers of high-tech jobs, have made the city attractive to millennials (d'Entremont 2018). As a housing advocate [18HA08f] noted, 'The rents are rising everywhere ... We're pushing out all the low-income neighbourhoods'. Income inequality and socio-spatial polarisation increased markedly in recent decades (Prouse *et al.* 2014).

As the Halifax economy was growing, conditions for those needing social assistance deteriorated. In 1996 the Province, which previously provided welfare only for families, seniors, and the disabled, took over responsibility for supporting single employable persons (often those dealing with or recovering from substance abuse) from the city. Tightened eligibility rules and reduced shelter allowances meant that the number of individuals receiving social assistance declined, and single employable persons received diminished resources on which to subsist (Caledon Institute 2015). Income assistance rates have not tracked inflation (Silva 2017): indeed, in Halifax the ratio of assistance-income-to-rent is 1.03, leaving nothing for other costs (Kneebone & Wilkins 2016). While the rent of the average bachelor apartment rose 78 per cent (to \$780) between 1996 and 2017 (CMHC 2017), income assistance available to an employable adult increased only 56 per cent (to a total of \$575 a month): market-rate apartments are out of reach for the poor. Individuals receiving the

standard shelter allowance of \$300 may not even find a rooming house to take them. Only those acknowledged to have special needs may be eligible for a larger shelter allowance of \$535 a month. Not surprisingly, rates of homelessness and doubling up have increased (CBC News 2013). The city's Housing and Homelessness Partnership has been pushing for action, but almost 1,300 people are on the waitlist for one of the 4,180 social housing units in Halifax, facing waits of six months to five years (Donovan 2016): single persons aged 18 to 58 wait the longest (Campbell 2017). The city's Housing Needs Assessment reported that 19,570 households (11.8% of the total) spent 50 per cent or more of their income on housing in 2011 (SHS 2015). Several housing advocates and municipal officials interviewed argued that the state needs to provide more affordable housing units to remedy the situation, but no immediate aid is in sight.

The lucrative economic returns from rooming houses can make them attractive to owners willing to invest the necessary management time (Biko 2013). A housing provider explained:

Rooming houses can be very profitable. You get a decent amount of money for a single room ... The only thing you have to provide is a washroom and kitchen area ... I have a cleaner that goes in once a week to each of these properties ... not really a big expense. However, we also provide water, power, heat. Those types of things can be expensive ... But when you're talking about ... let's just say 10 rooms at approximately \$535 per room, it's easy money that way ... The downfall is it's usually expensive to fix once they leave. Most tenants damage, destroy – leave a lot of junk behind. We have bedbug issues ... They lose their keys all the time, so you're changing locks; ... they steal light bulbs ... [33HP05f]

Several people interviewed suggested that as older landlords retired or died, properties transitioned in use. New owners made different economic choices. For instance, a rooming house resident [03RR01f] noted, 'places like the W-Inn ... and the G-Hotel ... were notorious. But those places, the owners have died, and they have been gentrified. There's

no transient people living there anymore. They're considered bed and breakfasts now'. The death of elderly owners was cited to explain the development of student-oriented rooming houses. A neighbour of a quasi-rooming house [29RA02f] noted, 'as ... older people were left alone, many of them have sold the houses or they've died. And in a lot of cases, the homes have [changed]' The development of a market for university students in the late 1990s and early 2000s provided landlords interested in renting individual rooms with the opportunity to switch capital from one part of the city to another, and thereby recruit a different type of tenant. Houses in south Halifax could readily be subdivided: for instance, one former three-bedroom house was carved into 10 bedrooms (Luck 2016).

Rutland (2010) suggested that processes related to financialisation have influenced development in Halifax. Institutional investors such as pension funds and real-estate-investment trusts entered the Halifax property market, transforming growth. Low borrowing costs for mortgages stimulated demand. Housing values and rents have been increasing (CMHC 2017). Head and Lloyd-Ellis (2016) identified a rise in the ratio of average-house-price-to-average-income in Halifax since the 1990s, indicating decreasing affordability. The increased potential for returns on modernised or upgraded properties puts pressure on conventional rooming houses that may have become run-down through disinvestment. A rooming-house resident [03RR01f] noted that one property 'had been a crack house just three years ago, and now it got purchased and turned into condos'. A housing advocate described the transition.

A lot of the rooming house owners will buy rooming houses, play the system for years, and now 10 years later, they're condo developers ... They make their fortune on rooming houses, and then when they start getting caught with [infractions], they'll put their money somewhere else. [18HA08f]

**Government regulations and policies** – The final, but critical, set of processes enhancing the rent gap that has pushed conventional rooming houses out of the Halifax market derives from government decisions. For the last

several decades, federal and provincial governments failed to invest in public housing and withdrew supports for non-profit housing and cooperatives. A municipal official [05MU01m] explained that social housing units in Halifax sit empty, desperately needing repair, while people wait for housing. Affordable housing for working-aged single persons proves rarer still.

The provincial government took several actions that affected affordability. It ended rent controls in 1993, then around 1999 terminated its land development programme that previously moderated housing costs in the region by creating low-cost building lots. In 2006, it passed the Safer Communities and Neighbourhoods Act (Nova Scotia 2006), empowering authorities to close properties used for illegal activities: the city invoked the Act in shutting several Dartmouth rooming houses (Hoare 2012).

Municipal authorities have regulated and developed planning policies in ways that affected the fate of rooming houses. Policies for central areas have encouraged greater densities since the 1970s (Grant & Gregory 2016), but the adoption of the Downtown Plan (Halifax 2009) significantly increased allowable heights and triggered a building boom (Rutland 2010; Grant *et al.* 2018a). Low-rise rooming houses in districts with new height limits have been subject to redevelopment (see Figure 3). For the last half-dozen years, work on developing a Centre Plan (Halifax 2018) to cover major corridors and retail nodes in Halifax and Dartmouth put pressure on the conventional rooming houses that remain, because many are on streets that will see densities and heights rise if the plan is adopted.

Several policy and regulatory initiatives specifically responded to issues around rooming houses. By 2000, residents of the South End raised concerns about the conversion of older homes to student-oriented rooming houses. In response, the city developed a bylaw setting out minimum standards and requiring licensing of rooming houses (Halifax 2003, 2016). In 2005, the city changed zoning rules on the Halifax peninsula to limit the number of bedrooms to a maximum of five, with the express purpose of dealing with ‘what can be termed “quasi-rooming houses”’ (Dunphy 2005, p. 2).

A councillor suggested that bylaws requiring licensing of rooming houses exacerbated the loss of units.

[The bylaw] made it really hard to run a rooming house ... And that’s part of what’s created the super-problem for the hard-to-house. Not saying that’s wrong because ... part of why they did the bylaw was because the conditions those guys were living in were disgusting and unacceptable. But ... we should have said ‘We’ll give you money to fix up your places and maintain them to a standard, but you have to [let] ... us come in and inspect them regularly and deliver social services in the rooming house’, like they do ... in Vancouver. Instead, we shut them all down. [05MU01m]

As city staff realised that enforcing the licensing bylaw often meant closing rooming houses, some developed reservations about enforcement. Several housing advocates, providers, and municipal officials suggested that the city increasingly turns a ‘blind eye’ toward rooming houses and other sub-standard accommodations. One municipal official, who asked not to be identified, said, ‘maybe we are a little bit lax on enforcement unless there’s an imminent danger to life. Because we know that if ... the city goes in guns blazing, that it will create a social crisis that the province has no ability to respond to’. Some respondents talked about the disastrous effect of evictions on residents, with tenants given little time to retrieve their belongings and no assistance to find replacement rooms. Through the Housing and Homelessness Partnership, staff have been working with charitable groups to try to develop housing options for the most disadvantaged, but demand continues to exceed supply: hence the reluctance to enforce assiduously. A private-market housing provider [32HP03m] suggested, however, that ‘when the government is enabling illegal activity, it’s ... bad for society’, and argued that greater enforcement was appropriate. Rooming-house residents and the neighbours of rooming-house properties often indicated that they expected the city to enforce bylaws to ensure compliance with standards: they expressed frustration with inaction. No one seemed comfortable with the status quo.

The land-use regime either in play or proposed through current planning processes has influenced the trajectories of rooming houses in different parts of the city. In areas that recently permitted greater density or height than the rooming house used, properties have been torn down and rebuilt to the new maximum. In a few instances where increases in density and height are anticipated through the Centre Plan, landlords opened rooming houses as 'place-holders' until new policies enable redevelopment.

### THE FUTURE OF ROOMING HOUSES

The combination of cultural preferences for downtown housing options, economic conditions facilitating transformation of central neighbourhoods, and policies and regulations that incentivise revitalisation have transformed rooming houses in Halifax as elsewhere. While student-oriented rooming houses increased in number, conventional rooming houses that accommodate hard-to-house individuals are disappearing. Those living with extreme poverty find their housing choices more restricted each year as both market and social housing options diminish. Homelessness is a real threat.

Although we do not have quantitative data to analyse the influence of a rent gap, our qualitative data generally support the theory that a gap between current value and potential value played a role in triggering changes in rooming houses, engendered by changing cultural preferences, economic conditions, and municipal policies and regulations. The data demonstrate the significance of cultural preferences that create markets either for student-oriented rooming houses (in university districts) or for alternative residential uses (in the case of conventional rooming houses in gentrifying neighbourhoods). As Hackworth and Smith (2001) noted, neighbourhood changes reflect broad processes of economic and political restructuring and state interventions. In the context of a strong economy promoting growth, low interest rates encouraging the deployment of capital, inflation in housing values, and a regulatory context facilitating increasing potential land rents through

property redevelopment, Halifax's conventional rooming houses occupied by single men on very low incomes largely disappeared while quasi-rooming houses for students developed. Given that many quasi-rooming houses opened as conventional rooming houses elsewhere were closing, it seems possible that landlords redeployed capital as better opportunities appeared in other neighbourhoods: further research could investigate this. Certainly, the housing providers we interviewed described students as easier tenants to manage than the residents of conventional rooming houses, making student housing more lucrative even when room rents are comparable.

Some may argue that, given the abysmal living conditions in many conventional rooming houses and the small number to begin with, we should not mourn the loss. Our analysis of media reporting about Halifax rooming houses (Grant *et al.* 2018b) and our interviews reiterated primal fears that link bedbugs, dirt, addiction, lack of privacy, crowding, violence, and mental illness to the form. A large proportion of conventional rooming-house residents are single men dealing with addiction and mental health issues who sometimes generate fears in passersby (Sommers 1998). The student residents of the quasi-rooming houses trouble their neighbours with noise, garbage, rowdy behaviour, vandalism, and frequent turnover of tenants. Yet those knowledgeable about the need for affordable housing believe that single-room occupancies fill an important niche for the hard-to-house. Well-managed options need to be available in the market. A housing advocate [18HA08f] providing housing support for the clients of homeless shelters explained the continuing need for good quality rooming houses near the city centre, where tenants can access services they need.

[Most] of my clients ... were single men, many of them older. They just wanted a rooming house: they preferred that over an apartment. Certainly, starting afresh, having an empty apartment with very little furniture is not confidence-building. And a lot of them didn't necessarily want to cook, but were happy with a microwave, a sink: the bare minimum. A lot of the people have different barriers: mental health, addictions,

physical health, cognitive abilities ... they can't maintain an apartment.

Our analysis reveals the critical role that government actions and inactions play in the ability of vulnerable people to meet their housing needs. The loss of rooming houses as an option for some is a by-product not only of market decisions and cultural preferences but of policies and regulations that reflect and influence those decisions and preferences. For instance, the federal government's decision in the 1990s to reduce social transfers to the provinces, and to set low interest rates to stimulate the economy, influenced the Province's ability to increase social benefits to meet inflation and the attractiveness of certain investments. Provincial choices to end rent controls and land development programmes allowed housing costs to rise rapidly, shaping investor decisions. Municipal planning policies that implemented smart growth ideas of increasing densities and heights in central neighbourhoods and along key corridors undermined conventional rooming houses for low-income tenants: such uses persisted only in stable or declining districts where investors had few other options for properties. Municipal policies and regulations played a key role in creating conditions that meant the demise of the rooming house as an option for the most disadvantaged single persons while the student-oriented rooming house thrived despite efforts to restrict it. If local government hopes to avoid displacement and address the housing needs of individuals for whom a rooming house may be a suitable choice, it must re-examine its practices, coordinate effectively with other governments, identify policies to protect and improve affordable housing stock, and find ways to facilitate investment in good-quality but affordable options such as single-room occupancies.

In an era when the number of people living alone is growing, and when the population is increasingly economically polarised, securing decent housing options will become increasingly important. Developers in some cities are already experimenting with co-living for affluent millennials (Kussin 2016); the rooming house, like other small options, offers an important niche in the ecology of housing

choices for those who can't afford or manage larger units. Local authorities should evaluate and encourage opportunities for rooming houses to play a role in cost-effective solutions for affordable accommodation for low-income singles threatened by neighbourhood change and displacement.

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### Note

1. Those interviewed are identified here with codes. HA = housing advocate, f = female, RR = rooming resident, MU = municipal official, HP = housing provider.

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