



# Taking the Pulse...

## Beyond the Status Quo: Planning for a Vital Housing Resource through Research

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(An IUS-UMCP Collaborative Initiative)

# Case-in-Point

## Summary

A review of a research report on single room occupancy (SRO) hotels in Winnipeg that strives to determine whether practical solutions exist that could contribute to creating SRO hotels that are affordable and healthful.

## Key Words

Community-based  
Research  
Inner-city  
Single-room Occupancy  
Hotels

## Timeline

2005 – Present

## Outline

Context  
The Research  
Limitations & Challenges  
Lessons Learned  
Resources

As the affordable housing crisis continues to grow, communities all over North America more so than ever, have to confront the possibility of broadening the definition of appropriate housing. The history of city planning demonstrates that not only have city, regional and federal governments actively minimized housing options, they have also played a deliberate role in devastating crucial forms of low-income housing, namely that of single room occupancy (SRO) hotels. For many years, public policy has dictated that hotel living should preferably be eliminated or at least marginalized and limited to those at the lower-end of the social and economic spectrum. Often this is meant to include geographic isolation, substandard living conditions and neglect. The results of these efforts have been what many housing advocates call the “SRO Crisis”.

This case study investigates a Winnipeg-based research project called “*Beyond the Front Desk: The Residential Hotel as Home*”. Released by the Institute of Urban Studies in 2005, this research aimed to better understand the dynamics of single-room occupancy hotel life in Winnipeg. Through a comprehensive and community-based analysis of Winnipeg’s SRO hotels, the principal researchers sought to determine whether practical solutions exist that could contribute to creating SRO hotels that are affordable and healthful.

Planners and others interested in housing issues will find this report provides valuable insights by answering questions about SRO history, the resident base, the regulatory environment and the overall socio-economic impact of maintaining this alternative form of housing.

# Context

## What is a Single Room Occupancy Hotel?

SRO hotels are predominately located in the central areas of cities. Most persons live in these hotels on a month-to-month basis, and pay an average of \$250 (or less) for a room that may contain a bureau, bed and a few chairs. These rooms typically measure 10 feet by 10 feet and in most cases, bathrooms amenities are located down the hall and kitchen facilities are limited to a hot plate or a small bar fridge in the room. SRO hotel units are the most controversial, neglected and the least understood of all housing types. The closing of an SRO hotel is one of the leading causes of homelessness.

Today, SRO hotels are increasingly being viewed as a viable housing alternative to both the inadequate and insufficient supply of affordable housing and homeless shelters. Although models/approaches are still evolving, many governments and community organizations have begun investing in SRO hotels and the residents who choose to call them home.

### SROs: The Winnipeg Experience

SROs have a long tradition in Winnipeg. Dating back to the late 1800s to early 1900s, these buildings provided housing to young single males at a time of high growth and development within the city. By 1914, there were ninety-six SRO hotels, most of them located in and around the Higgins Avenue and Main Street area.

The decline of Winnipeg's SROs begins at the outset of World War I. A number of factors contributed to the downturn of the city's SROs such as the disinvestment in the central business district, a decrease in immigration and travel, and Prohibition. As a result of decentralization, business

activity in the downtown area greatly diminished throughout the decades of the 1960s to the 1980s. The consequence was a decline in the Main Street area, leading to the more common image of Winnipeg's SROs. Today, broad spectrums of individuals call SRO hotels home in Winnipeg. The majority of residents are men (68.3%) and just under a third are women (31.7%). Statistics show that most residents are over fifty years old.



Typical SRO Hotel Room

The regulatory environment for SRO hotels in Winnipeg is ambiguous at best. The Manitoba Liquor Control Commission (MLCC) has the most authority as their by-laws outlines that a Beverage Room License may be obtained only if there are forty guest rooms available to the public. These guest rooms must have adequate furnishings under the MLCC regulations, although it is unclear what adequate is defined as. The hotel owners are considered entrepreneurs; therefore, various financial grants for upgrading or maintaining these buildings are unavailable as they may be for non-profit housing organizations in Manitoba.

# The Research

## Impetus for Research

The impetus for the research report lies in the fieldwork of a local police officer, who worked for a number of years in the downtown area of Winnipeg. Through an innovative community-policing model, Constable Gerard Allard began to examine the role of Criminal Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) and SROs. After a review of the research on SROs it was discovered that there were no comprehensive studies in existence neither in Winnipeg nor across Canada. Soon after researchers at the IUS and Constable Allard began to strategize a research plan to address the gaps in the area of SROs research.

## Research Strategy

Through a community-based research effort, a comprehensive analysis of Winnipeg's SRO hotels was conducted via case studies (Los Angeles and Vancouver) surveys, interviews and a literature review. With the assistance of a local Advisory Group and a Steering Committee, IUS researchers ensured that the voices of residents, hotel owners and the surrounding community were heard by inviting them to write their own personal reflections. Observations were drawn from fifteen hotels that stretched from Broadway Boulevard to Selkirk Avenue (see map for locations of SRO hotels in Winnipeg where surveys were conducted).

***“Owners play a vital role in offering something that mainstream society has not: a place to stay. There are better places, but for some the SRO is their place.”*** (Disatsio & Mulligan, pp. 65)



Location of Winnipeg SROs  
Where Surveys were Completed

The report, serves as a useful guide to understanding the development of SRO hotels in Winnipeg, what conditions currently exist and the impact of SRO living on tenants, hotel management and the surrounding community. Through its inclusive and comprehensive research process this study challenges current professional planning knowledge and strives to promote a broader public vision of crucial housing options.

### Research Questions

1. What are the general characteristics of the SRO tenants?
2. What are the characteristics of the hotels and surrounding community?
3. Why do persons select this form of housing over others?
4. Does a sense of community exist within the SRO environment?
5. What is the regulatory environment that governs the operation of SROs and are there viable options for improving this form of shelter?
6. What would be the outcome of closing SROs or what options and alternatives exist elsewhere?

### Community-Based Research Effort

The research was approached from three perspectives- the residents, the physical characteristics of the hotels and the surrounding community. Over 80 surveys were completed via site visits to nearly 15 hotels. Demonstrating these perspectives was accomplished through field research with local SRO residents, exploring the viewpoints of community residents, the Winnipeg Police Services, community-based service providers and the local hotel owners and managers. In order to ensure that the research study was representative of a diverse range of persons, two committees' representative of community organizations, businesses, individuals and local government departments were created. Together, they helped to develop a framework to direct the research and make sure the interests of all concerned were addressed.

Surveys were completed at meetings held at Siloam Mission, a local organization which provides support services to individuals dealing with poverty and homelessness issues. With the help of two local SRO residents, the surveys were developed with the specific intent of shedding light on the stereotypes and myths surrounding hotel life.

### Members of the Advisory Group

City of Winnipeg  
The Salvation Army  
Winnipeg Regional Health Authority  
Winnipeg Police Department  
Exchange District Biz  
Siloam Mission  
Manitoba Hotel Association  
Manitoba Liquor Control Commission  
The Downtown Biz  
The Institute of Urban Studies

### Members of the Steering Group

The Bell Hotel  
The Main Street Project  
The Salvation Army  
The Winnipeg Police Department  
Community Researchers  
The Institute of Urban Studies  
The Manitoba Métis Federation

### Research Outcomes

#### SRO Living – Environment & Community

Through the completion of the survey research, site visits and documentation of viewpoints from several community stakeholders, a portrait of SRO hotel living in Winnipeg was revealed. The surveys and site visits provided a better understanding of the physical environment by examining amenities such as furnishings, washrooms, hotel facilities, and security. The study uncovered that although Winnipeg's SRO hotels house an estimated 1000 persons in 772 rooms, many hotels are at risk of closure given the high cost of maintenance.

The results also revealed that despite the often negative aspects of hotel living (e.g.: lack of cleanliness, security etc...) there exists a “sense of community” among residents. The information gathered indicated that many living within Winnipeg’s SRO hotels moved within a small network of hotels, street life and local missions.

**Best Practices from Other Communities**

Within the research study, case studies from Vancouver and Los Angeles provided valuable insights into other jurisdictions which have established new legislation and/or regulations to ensure the proper management of SROs. Such case studies reveal that programs can be created to secure the tenure of residents and improve the regulatory environment surrounding SROs. In particular Los Angeles provided insight into the creation of not-for-profit SROs, while the Vancouver case study demonstrated innovative legislative changes affecting SROs which benefit residents.



**Non-profit SRO Hotel  
Hallway - Los Angeles**



**For-profit SRO Hotel  
Hallway - Winnipeg**

**Recommendations**

A series of recommendations were one of the major results of the research study. The recommendations are directed at a number of key stakeholders who have the ability address concerns and range from the development of strategic partnerships to rethinking the regulatory environment of SRO hotels.

1. Work with hotel owners, Hotel Association and Residential Tenancies Branch (RTB) to extend to residents the same rights afforded to others under the existing RTB legislation.
2. Seek innovative and imaginative ways to allow hotel owners to access programs, incentives and other means to improve the quality of housing (such as extending Rooming House RRAP).
3. Find ways to link hotel owners and social agencies (Environmental Health, Employment Income Assistance etc...) in ways that provide better support to those most vulnerable by providing frontline support or delivery within hotels.
4. Create a single act of legislation that recognizes the “rooms” of hotels as being distinct and separate from other functions such as the beverage room and restaurant. This may include a designation as “Residential Hotel.”
5. Encourage hotel owners to seek ways to have monthly rents increased from Employment Income Assistance, especially for housing persons needing supportive care or additional services.
6. Immediately review occupancy standards to ensure that rooms are safe, healthful and afford residents with an acceptable level of furnishing and linen, mattresses bedding etc...

- Encourage and support residents in forming a “tenants association” to voice concerns or to have a venue from which issues can be addressed. This should include a community component to allow the community to voice issues and offer ideas.

### Partnerships

Aside from the formal partnerships created throughout the course of the research, there appears to be a number of community-based partnerships that have stemmed as a result. Such coalitions have begun to work collectively to address the needs of residents of SRO hotels and the surrounding area.

One such partnership that has resulted is the collaboration of local homeless shelter providers to advocate for higher per diem rates for individuals accessing homelessness services in the city.

Another partnership is that between one of the local hotels and an Aboriginal organization to transform one SRO hotel into a drug and alcohol free environment. Through the creation of healing programs both the hotel owner and The White Buffalo Spiritual Society were working towards finding innovative ways to maintain the hotel stock, assist residents and help to revitalize the downtown area. Unfortunately, this program failed and The White Buffalo Spiritual Society has relocated their operation. The hotel remains alcohol free and is now directing their business to the local arts community.

***...without anything to replace them, many people would fall into crises were the hotels to disappear.”***  
(Distasio & Mulligan :2005)

## Limitations & Challenges

Gaining access to the rooms of the residents proved to be challenging because of privacy issues. It was imperative that researchers respected the homes of the residents while portraying the true conditions of their rooms, good or bad.

Accessing information from organizations, such as the Manitoba Liquor Control Commission or the hotel owners was also difficult. With less than 1% rental vacancy rates within the City of Winnipeg, many stakeholders agreed that without access to these rooms, many residents would be without shelter. Unfortunately, this often meant that a “blind eye was turned “when issues arose such as safety or healthy environmental conditions.

Recommendations that safeguard this form of housing and ultimately the residents were also a challenge. For example, if IUS researchers had recommended that residents be afforded tenancy rights under the RTB, some hotel owners may feel that their business may prove to be too costly and decide to close their doors to the residents. Closing an SRO in Winnipeg is a direct cause of homelessness for the residents; therefore, ensuring that the residents’ tenure of housing was protected was of great importance.

Winnipeg Tribune  
1978  
Describing the  
Main Street Strip



# Lessons Learned

## Future of SROs in Winnipeg

In addition to several important outcomes, this research provided an opportunity to sort out some of the myths and misconceptions of hotel life.

Unraveling this phenomenon has revealed a number of key areas where further work is needed:

1. Examining alternate forms of affordable housing raises fundamental issues of policy. This will undoubtedly require revisiting if communities are too flexible, innovative and commit to maintaining the existing stock of SRO hotels.
2. The research demonstrates once again that when housing is involved- especially for low-income communities, there exists a complex array of competing issues, interests, regulation and legislation. At the highest level these competing interests need to be framed in such a way that positions residents in the centre.
3. SRO housing is an essential form of housing in Winnipeg. Given the current state of affordable housing in the city, maintaining the SRO hotels will be key if community leaders do not want to see increases in people accessing shelters and living on the streets.

## SROs: The Planning Role

Planners, design professionals and housing advocates alike all have a role to play in ensuring adequate and affordable housing for the communities they work with. The SRO hotel model of housing represents a “ready-made” and creative opportunity to strengthen and provide security to some of the most marginalized families and individuals in our cities. Whether through research, policy development or community development work, understanding the phenomenon of SRO hotels may provide us with a chance to strengthen our affordable housing stock and define and expand the role of planners in this area. Planners may learn that it is best to use caution in providing recommendations within a research report.

### A Reflection on SROs in Winnipeg

S. Mulligan

This research was both rewarding and challenging. SRO hotels have a rich history in Winnipeg and many buildings are at danger of being destroyed through conversion or demolition. In fact, close to ten SRO hotels have been lost within the past ten years in Winnipeg. There are many stakeholders that influence the “household” condition of the residents. As a researcher the main challenge was to report in such a way that protects this form of shelter while remaining optimistic that the recommendations will improve the safety and security of the tenants.

The good news is that there has been an enormous amount of interest stemming from this research. The future of these hotels and the living conditions for the residents looks promising.



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Skid Row Housing Trust Los Angeles:  
<http://www.skidrow.org/>

## **Susan Mulligan**

Susan Mulligan joined the IUS team in 2003 as a Research Associate. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree (Hons.) in Political Studies from the University of Winnipeg, and is completing her Master's of City Planning Degree from the Faculty of Architecture, University of Manitoba. Her research interests lie in the areas of urban poverty and homelessness, marginalized forms of housing, Aboriginal self governance and urban politics.

## **Suzanne Gessler**

Suzanne Gessler holds both a Bachelor of Arts (Sociology) and Bachelor of Social Work from the University of Manitoba. She is presently completing her studies in the Master of City Planning program in the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Manitoba. The focus of her Masters research is the creation of a framework for the development of emergency shelter standards for the city of Winnipeg.

## **Photos**

Susan Mulligan



## **About The Institute of Urban Studies**

Since its inception in 1969, the Institute of Urban Studies at the University of Winnipeg has acted as an innovative, non-partisan research and educational facility with an action-research orientation. Originally dedicated to addressing the problems and concerns of the inner city, the scope of the Institute's research mandate has developed considerably over the years, to now encompass the social, demographic, physical, economic and environmental well-being of Canadian communities and cities. Projects undertaken by the Institute may be on behalf of, or in partnership with, government, the private sector and community-based organizations. Research specialties include housing, neighbourhood change, urban aboriginal issues, sustainable urban development and urban poverty. With extensive experience in project design, implementation and analysis, the Institute is well positioned as a research centre.

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