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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Centre for Collaborative Research on Hoarding

Department of Psychology

2136 West Mall

Vancouver, BC Canada V6T 1Z4

How Much of Too Much?

Inspections Data Provide a Window onto Residential Clutter as a Housing Problem

How big of a housing problem is residential clutter? Funded by the UBC Hampton fund and the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council, our team collaborated with the City of Vancouver Property Use Branch to discover the prevalence of problematic clutter in single-room occupancy (SRO) housing units in Vancouver. Severe clutter in residential units can present serious health and safety hazards. For example, firefighters responding to a 2010 fire in a Toronto social housing building were unable to access the unit where the fire started due to the extremely high volume of possessions in the unit. Ultimately, the fire caused over \$1 million in damages and displacement of 1,200 residents. Later inspection of the damaged building revealed 19 of the 712 units (2.7%) were “overcrowded with belongings”. Studies of hoarding (one reason for excessive clutter, but not the only reason) have estimated the population prevalence to be between 2% and 5.8%. Because SRO housing is very small (and thus quick to fill up with possessions), we wondered how many of these units would have excessive clutter.

In Vancouver, inspectors from the Property Use Branch inspect SRO units at least annually to ensure they are being maintained for rental and in compliance with the Standards of Maintenance By-law (No. 5462). We examined the inspection reports completed by housing inspectors to get a picture of the current state of the clutter problem in this segment of Vancouver’s housing stock. Over 8,000 room inspections were included in the research. Our inspectors judged clutter to be a problem when it blocked entry into and out of rooms, involved build-up of combustible items such as newspapers or clothing, interfered with the functioning of fire sprinklers, prevented effective pest management, or exceeded floor weight load recommendations.

Our first step was to look at 4,312 archived reports (representing 117 buildings) that inspectors had already completed between 2009 and 2011. Then we worked closely with the Property Use Branch inspections team to develop a new scale to measure clutter on their reports. Importantly, inspectors wanted a way to track excessive clutter without increasing the risk of eviction, as SRO units are often the only alternative to homelessness for many residents in Vancouver as well as in

many other cities. In this second wave of data collection, which occurred in 2012-2013, we examined 4,448 units across 109 buildings.

In Phase I of the study, 6.1% of units were noted as involving excessive clutter, as shown by issuance of written warnings or orders or notations of “clutter” or “hoarding” on the inspection report. When we included more ambiguous notations (such as “items blocking door”), the prevalence was 6.7% of units. In Phase II, inspectors were able to rate the severity of clutter, so the findings are potentially more informative. See the Table below for details of the prevalence estimates we found.

Phase II Clutter

Rating	Description	% of Units
Severe clutter	<i>Clutter is severe, navigation is difficult, use of the room is nearly impossible, serious hazards due to clutter</i>	2.4%
Problem clutter	<i>Clutter impedes free movement in the room, functional use of room is impaired, clutter creates moderate hazards</i>	4.6%
Notable clutter	<i>Manageable level of clutter, interferes with optimal use of room but no difficulty navigating, clutter creates mild/temporary hazards</i>	5.3%
No clutter	<i>Clutter within normal limits</i>	87.7%

Overall, 7% of the units had problematic or severe levels of clutter. We also found quite a bit of variance across buildings with regard to the number of cluttered rooms, with some buildings having no cluttered rooms and other buildings having problematic clutter in 1/3 of the rooms. The size of the building matters here; larger buildings were more likely to show high frequency of cluttered rooms. Looking at repeated inspections of the same buildings, we see that clutter tended to persist in problem buildings over time.

The estimate of 7% of Vancouver’s SRO units as problematically cluttered far exceeds the frequency of excessive clutter (2.7%) discovered in the aftermath of the Toronto fire and is larger than estimates of the prevalence of hoarding from public health studies. In our future research, we will continue working to better understand excessive residential clutter in Vancouver and the associated health and fire hazards.