

Women's Safety in Atira *Managed Single Room Occupancy Buildings*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report was produced as part of the UBC Sustainability Scholars Program, a partnership between the University of British Columbia and various local governments and organisations in support of providing graduate students with opportunities to do applied research on projects that advance sustainability across the region.

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Introduction

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) has been dubbed 'Canada's poorest postal code' (Lazarus, 2011). Rising rents and long waiting lists for social housing have led more individuals in the DTES into homelessness or supportive housing such as Single Room Occupancy (SRO) units, notoriously known for substandard living conditions. Despite their reputation, SROs play a critical role in the housing spectrum by offering an option that directly addresses homelessness. Atira Properties owns or manages 38 Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Atira seeks to enhance the safety and health of tenants and staff to the best of their abilities, in a community plagued by the homelessness crisis, toxic drug crisis and gender-based violence. Women and those who identify as women residing in SROs are at increased risk of violence, sex trafficking and toxic drug-related violence. Moreover, women who identify as Black, Indigenous or People of Color (BIPOC) are at an even higher risk of experiencing gender and ethnic based hate crimes and violence. The most recent City of Vancouver Street count conducted in 2020 noted that systemic racism and colonization are among the top reasons that led people into homelessness. For instance, Indigenous and Aboriginal individuals make up 2% of Vancouver's general population and 38% of Vancouver's homeless population (Mauboules, 2020). Similarly, Black, Arab, and Hispanic individuals are respectively 3.7, 1.7 and 1.4 times more likely to experience homelessness when compared to those of Caucasian ethnicity. SROs are merely a symptom of a much larger problem in the DTES. Based on resident and employee feedback, the present report will focus on making recommendations that are within Atira's control to improve living conditions for women living in ATIRA managed SRO buildings. This will be done while also acknowledging the much larger structural issues that require interventions on municipal, provincial, and federal levels of government. The report will emphasize how women's gender and ethnicity intersect to create a much higher risk of exposure to violence and safety concerns. The main purpose is to assess the current state of safety and main concerns facing women living in SROs managed by Atira Properties. The secondary aim is to examine the current practices employed by Atira to ensure the health and safety of female SRO residents. While the third and final goal will be to make recommendations, based on evidence from staff, managers, and SRO residents, that Atira can implement to mitigate the risk of violence against female residents and better ensure their safety in Atira managed Single Room Occupancy buildings.

Background

Single Room Occupancy (SROs) in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) and Chinatown are typically small single rooms (about 100 square feet) with access to a shared bathroom on each floor. These accommodations were initially built at the start of 20th century to house seasonal

migrant workers, mostly males, in the manufacturing industry. Overtime, SRO buildings have become what is now known as ‘last resort housing’ before homelessness. Single room occupancy, also referred to as single room accommodations (SRA), hotels and buildings have made headlines for continuous safety concerns and poor living conditions. In fact, some residents of SROs prefer sleeping outdoors during the warmer weather months rather than returning to their SRO unit, reported Claire Fenton in the Dailyhive (2023). Recently BC Premier David Eby has been quoted saying “I haven’t seen it worse” referring to Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (Fenton, 2023). Premier Eby indicated that the BC government is committed to formulate a plan for replacing SROs, which he referred to as “not fit housing”, with dignified housing for individuals residing in the DTES.

The majority (up to 75%) of DTES homeless residents are male, creating a dominant male street culture that places women in powerless positions (Lazarus, 2011). In addition to the exposure of violence, women in the DTES are exposed to the toxic drug crisis and sexual exploitation. Women with illicit drug and alcohol use constitute a unique group that affects their exposure to male violence. Women with substance abuse problems have increased risk of male violence and sex exploitation (Cunradi, Caetano & Schafer, 2002). Perpetrators may use drug supply to coerce women into unwanted sex, and vulnerable situations with increased risk of violence. Women lack agency to demand safe sex or safe work conditions in these precarious situations.

Given the disproportionate representation of Indigenous people in Vancouver’s DTES and the disproportionate experience of violence by Indigenous women, there is great concern for the health, physical and emotional safety of Indigenous women residing in Atira managed SROs. CBC news reported that Indigenous women are three times more likely to be victims of violence or murder than non-Indigenous women (Ross, 2020). Unfortunately, there is an absence of data on the experience of violence by Black individuals and other racialized groups in homelessness or supportive housing. We do know that Black individuals and racialized minorities are more likely to experience homelessness in Vancouver as mentioned above. Hence, it is expected that race and gender intersect to create an increased risk of exposure to violence by Black and racialized women living in SROs.

Research Approach

Assessing the current climate of women’s health and safety in Atira managed single room occupancy buildings was identified as the main purpose of the project. This included identifying current practices implemented by Atira that are successful, in addition to identifying areas in need of resources to enhance the health and safety of women residing in the SRO buildings.

To achieve the goals of the project two research instruments were developed. The first was a series of 20 questions to be used in structured interviews conducted with Atira building managers, directors, and staff as well as Janice Abbott, the chief executive officer of Atira. A series of seven interviews were conducted. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify the main health and safety concerns specific to women residing in SRO buildings.

The second instrument was a survey questionnaire comprising of 25 questions completed by female residents of Atira managed SROs. Atira was interested in acquiring the direct voices of residents and their perception of safety living in the SRO buildings. Atira staff administered the resident survey, participation was completely voluntary, and one hundred participants completed this self-reported survey. The survey was anonymous and identifying information was not included in the data. The researcher was not involved in the administration of the survey instrument to reduce bias, and more importantly, to eliminate any potential risk of harm to the SRO residents of introducing an individual they do not have any previous rapport with. Descriptive quantitative analysis was performed to obtain frequencies and distributions of responses across options. Several questions asked participants for further feedback or clarification. For those, responses were analyzed, and the most common responses were identified and noted in the results.

Results Summary

Ten themes were identified during the structured interviews as it pertained to the health and safety of female SRO residents. Results showed that most violence against women in SROs is perpetrated by men, and that most violent altercations originated over possessions or illicit drugs. Women involved in sex work in the DTES are at increased risk of violence. A lack of community engagement or loyalty in SRO buildings was identified as a concern. Many violent crimes are unreported by women for fear of retaliation. Unfortunately, women-only floors did not appear to minimize safety risks. Atira staff noted the need for a reliable communication system between staff and residents, as well as secure entry door locks. Another concern is the amount of clutter in SRO units due to the small size. Additionally, interviewees noted the importance of regular in person care by mental and physical healthcare providers. Areas of success were the Women's Health and Safety Liaison Team's work with SRO residents, security cameras in buildings, as well as hiring staff with lived experience.

The main results of the survey analysis are presented in this document. All participants identified as female, and the majority (72%) were between 30 and 49 years old. The most common ethnic identification was Indigenous (50%), followed by White (40%) and other visible minority groups. Almost half (49%) of the women surveyed indicated they do not feel safe residing in the SRO.

Main reasons identified for lack of safety were inadequate locks on doors, shared washrooms, and guests in the building. In fact, most women indicated that if given the opportunity to move they would move to a non-SRO residence (63%), 27% of women would move anywhere and only 4% of women indicated they would stay in their current location. Friends and staff in the building, feeling comfortable, and location were the most important to women who reported feeling satisfied with living in their SRO. The majority (84%) of women reported that most arguments originate over illicit drugs. When asked if women would feel safer with more health and safety liaison team and/or staff presence, 91% of women reported that they would. Most women indicated interest in mental and physical health resources and peer support. Finally, women indicated that better locks, more services, and peer support would enhance their health and safety.

Recommendations

1. Advocate for safe drug dispensing programs in the DTES to support women's safe access to drugs and reduce risk of violence and exploitation. As well as increasing supervised spaces within buildings.
2. Atira management company is encouraged to consider replacing entry doors and/or installing secure locks with deadbolts on entry doors.
3. Atira is encouraged to explore the option of installing an intercom system to communicate with residents in instances of fire or other emergencies.
4. Increase the presence of the Women's Health and Safety Liaison Team within SRO buildings.
5. Enhance the capacities of the current peer support workers and ensure they work hand in hand with the Women's Health and Safety Liaison Team and amplify their support for women in SROs.
6. Continue to provide trauma-informed practice training. As well, ensure having it culturally sensitive to the different ethnicities, specifically including an Indigenous Trauma Informed approach, to all Atira building staff.
7. Increase communication between Health and Safety Liaison Team and SRO building staff to facilitate safety plans.
8. Implement a secure guest sign in system to minimize risk of violence and threat by building guests to female residents in SROs.

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