

*Safe At Home:
The Dream Team's Study Of Housing Unit Takeovers In Toronto*

Executive Summary

This study investigates “Housing Unit Takeovers,” or HUTs: situations in which vulnerable tenants are forced to accommodate unwanted guests in their homes. During HUTs, vulnerable tenants allow people into their homes to fulfill unmet social, economic and personal needs. In the process, the tenant is threatened physically, financially, or psychologically. HUTs are perpetrated by people of all genders, races, and age groups, but these predators tend to be manipulative family members or drug dealers. Often, these predators exploit the tenant’s vulnerabilities, such as addiction, isolation, disability, or poor health. The ultimate outcome is that the targeted tenant’s housing is jeopardized, and they are made to feel uncomfortable and unsafe in their own homes. In some cases, HUTs can leave the target homeless.

HUTs are currently under-explored in scholarly research and the mainstream media alike. The exceptions are 1) press coverage in the United Kingdom, where HUTs are known as “cuckooing,” in reference to the cuckoo bird’s tendency to steal other birds’ nests, and 2) research conducted by Crime Prevention Ottawa (Butera, CPO 2013). Although they do indeed acknowledge systemic issues, these two bodies of work tend to reinforce a victim-blaming mentality by focusing on tenants’ “failure” or “inability” to protect themselves from housing predators. For example, CPO introduces the notion of a “complicit victim,” proposing that tenants who endure HUTs at the hands of their drug dealers are, to some degree, at fault for that takeover by virtue of the choice they make to let people into their home (Butera 2013:7).

We believe these assertions need to be rethought. Our findings suggest that many tenants do not even recognize how some of their characteristics — including the aforementioned issues of addiction, isolation, and poor health — make them more vulnerable to a HUT. They also lack the supports and resources that might help them avoid or escape a housing predator. Moreover, by focusing on the role tenants play in facilitating predators’ behaviour, existing press coverage and research has yet to explore the many other variables that contribute to HUTs. As a result, this existing work has also yet to develop practical means of preventing and addressing systemic influences on HUTs.

This study recognizes that HUTs are underpinned by a far more complex system of players. Namely, tenants, housing providers, law enforcement officials, lawmakers, policy designers and many others are all just individual parts of a broken system that facilitates HUTs. As the first study of HUTs in Toronto, Safe At Home aims to problematize the notion of a complicit victim. We argue for a paradigm shift that refocuses attention on the HUT itself, rather than blaming tenants for their own mistreatment. By exploring the patterns and trends

that tend to characterize HUTs in Toronto, Safe At Home ultimately aims to provide the foundations for strategies that will reduce and prevent them.

About the Dream Team

Safe At Home was written by the Dream Team: a peer based non-profit organization dedicated to advocacy, education, and research in the areas of supportive housing, mental health, discrimination, and stigma. Some Dream Team members have lived in supportive and public/social housing where they experienced HUTs themselves. Having survived a predator's use of drugs and money to infiltrate and eventually take over their households, the Dream Team is uniquely situated to give voice to the lived realities of Torontonians enduring HUTs today.

Method

Supported by a grant from the City of Toronto, the Dream Team began work on the Safe At Home project in April of 2016 using a community-based participatory research model. We began conceptualizing our project using some of the key terms and ideas put forward by CPO, and acknowledge their ongoing advisory support of our project.

Our findings are based on the results of 56 resident surveys, 24 resident interviews, 146 non-resident surveys, 2 staff interviews, and focus group discussions. We also conducted two roundtable discussions and an open dialogue through the City of Toronto's Specialized Interdivisional Enhanced Response (SPIDER) program. Most importantly, however, Safe At Home prioritizes the voices of those who have lived through HUTs themselves. Thus, the findings, themes, analysis, and recommendations made here aim to bridge the classic divides between systemic actors like law enforcement officials and institutional housing providers on the one hand, and vulnerable individuals with lived experiences in these settings.

Summary of Findings

The following findings are based on survey data from residents (R) who are or were tenants in supportive and public/social housing, and from non-residents (NONR), who consist of any other stakeholders, from frontline workers to law enforcement officials, who have encountered HUTs in any capacity. The sheer volume of both R and NONR who indicated experience with HUTs indicates the magnitude of this social problem in Toronto.

Prevalence

Due to a lack of data collection, we do not currently have reliable information regarding the actual number of HUTs in Toronto. Our survey data revealed that almost 100% of NONR have had direct or indirect experience with HUTs. 58% of R had experienced a HUT, and 20%

reported they were currently experiencing one. However, several respondents remarked that they had never heard the phrase “housing unit takeover” before. Upon explaining it to them, many said they had indeed experienced such a situation. Therefore, prevalence rates are likely even higher than our survey data acknowledges.

Distribution

R indicated that HUTs occur across the Greater Toronto Area, with significant takeovers reported in North York (23.5%), Etobicoke (17.6%), York (17.6%), Toronto (88.2%), East York (17.6%) and Scarborough (26.5%). Likely, the seeming concentration of HUTs in the city core is due to the concentration of our outreach in this area. Anecdotal evidence suggests the rates are much higher throughout the Golden Horseshoe: the region encircling Toronto from roughly Hamilton to Durham. Indeed, NONR reported higher rates of HUTs in each region: 32.6% in North York, 31.9% in Etobicoke, 24.6% in York, 91.3% in Toronto, 27.7% in East York, and 44.9% in Scarborough. We consider these latter rates to be more accurate, given that frontline workers and other NONR service a wider variety of tenants and locations.

Type of Housing

HUTs occur in both private and public/social housing alike. R reported having experienced HUTs in 58.8% of private and 67.6% of public/social housing. Anecdotally, we discovered that some residents had considered their rent-geared-to-income (RGI) housing to be private, even though it is sometimes categorized as public/social. Thus, rates indicated by R likely underestimate the prevalence of HUTs in public/social housing. Indeed, NONR reported HUTs in 50% of private and 84.1% of public/social housing.

In terms of building type, HUTs were found to occur in high-rise apartments (R: 70.6%, NONR: 82%), low-rise apartments (R: 41.2%, NONR: 68.4%), single-family homes (R: 35.3%, NONR: 22.1%), and row housing (R: 23.5%, NONR: 25%).

Vulnerabilities

NONR reported four main features that render people vulnerable to HUTs: addiction (95%), physical and mental health conditions (87%), being a low-income woman with children (47%), and being an older adult (31.9%). We did not require residents to rank their own personal vulnerabilities, but those who chose to disclose on surveys or in interviews ranked addiction and health conditions roughly equally. Anecdotal evidence confirmed that R who exhibited these vulnerabilities were significantly more likely to experience HUTs. Far from making the takeover their fault, these vulnerabilities speak to the lack of supports and resources available to R, and the inadequacy of efforts to prevent HUTs.

Identifying HUTs

We asked NONR to indicate how they knew HUTs were unfolding. Most frontline workers said they learned of HUTs from tenants (67.4%), neighbours (60.4%), or law enforcement (29.2%). 25.4% reported they heard rumours from colleagues or tenants. Of course, R could identify HUTs more directly, based on their own perceptions of safety and security, so we explored their responses to these situations. 72% of R indicated they trusted the NONR support staff employed in their buildings, and would report the HUT to them before turning to the police or security. Although 94% of R said they would want someone to intervene in a HUT, close to 35% reported they did not trust the police enough to report a HUT directly.

Key Behavioural Signs

Frontline workers should, in theory, be best situated to observe the signs of a HUT and intervene to prevent or disrupt it. However, only 55% of NONR could distinguish between HUTs and excessive partying in a household. Anecdotally, NONR reported that this “grey zone” — the inability to identify unwanted persons or behaviour — is one of the primary barriers to preventing or dissipating HUTs.

However, both NONR and R reported a number of resident behaviours that were often “warning signs” a HUT was occurring. In descending order of importance, NONR mentioned isolation, fear, less engagement with supports, drug addiction, spending less time at home, mental health issues, lack of sleep, loneliness, and financial need. R suggested that lying, not showing up to family and community activities, rude language, and recurring illness were also key signs.

Consequences

According to NONR, the main consequences of HUTs are eviction (25%), loss of housing due to the need to abandon one’s home (21%), criminal charges (12%), loss of money (11%), safety issues (11%), theft (10%), violence (9%), physical abuse (8%), loss of control of domestic unit, and various abuses (7%). R confirmed these outcomes, but they also spoke about more personal consequences, such as the loss of their dignity, self-esteem, self-control, and power. Often, these material and emotional consequences are cyclical and mutually reinforcing: for example, a HUT can rob R of their autonomy and control, forcing them to forfeit their housing, which in turn, can erode their dignity further still as they slip into homelessness.

Intervention and Law Enforcement

While 88% of NONR suggested that HUTs could be resolved, our interviews and roundtables with R revealed a far more pessimistic outlook. Although roughly 65% of residents said they would call police or security for help during a HUT, they described this as a last resort.

An overall lack of trust in the police prompted many R to try other solutions first. These alternatives included telling a support worker or friend about the HUT, or asking the unwanted guest to leave. Although we are unable to measure the efficacy of these tactics in comparison to those used by law enforcement, police involvement may have other negative implications for R. At our roundtable with Toronto Police Service (TPS) and Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) stakeholders, we learned that police are obligated to work within the law while intervening in HUT; often, this means criminalizing both the dealer *and* the exploited R alike. Moreover, 94% of NONR and almost 100% of R reported feeling as though law enforcement officials lacked the tools and skills required to manage HUTs effectively. Fortunately, law enforcement respondents indicated they were open to discussing changes to their policies practices in the field while handling HUTs.

Interagency Cooperation

When asked about an interagency council of peers and stakeholders devoted to addressing HUTs, 100% of R and NONR agreed that such a group would absolutely help. However, many voiced concerns about its feasibility, given that the system precludes this kind of cooperation: competition for funding, negative press, and resistant institutional cultures do indeed tend to stifle interagency collaboration. Despite this skepticism, the Safe At Home project itself demonstrates that cooperation is possible. CPO has provided ongoing guidance and support for this project, while the City of Toronto has coordinated and facilitated the broad transfer of knowledge through its SPIDER program. Further efforts must be made to support such partnerships so that we might develop a comprehensive strategy to address HUTs, grounded in the knowledge and experience of as wide a range of organizations as possible.

Future Research: A Paradigm Shift

As always, future research would benefit from more robust data. A centralized, systematic data collection process would shed light on the true extent of HUTs in different types of housing and locations. But more importantly, future research must examine the causes of HUTs from a different angle. HUTs are only just starting to receive scholarly and mainstream attention, but much of that attention is being paid to the character of exploited tenants, and the degree to which they might be culpable in their own mistreatment. In turn, the few recommendations that have been made for preventing and addressing HUTs frame tenants' behaviours as the central "problem" to be solved. Yet, as participants in Safe At Home have demonstrated, tenants are just one of many factors that contribute to HUTs. A number of actors and institutions fail to deliver services or carry out their roles effectively, making them complicit in sustaining HUTs. Thus, a paradigm shift should underpin future research, particularly when it comes to what we call the "axis of intervention." Rather than aiming to intervene in the life of the tenant to prevent HUTs, we propose that future research considers how tenants, laws,

supports, and spaces (to name just a few variables) interact in problematic ways to set the stage for HUTs. In other words, we must research HUTs and their complex web of facilitating factors; not only the tenants who endure them.

Key Themes

The following overarching themes emerged from our research:

1. Trust and Rapport

The building blocks of change will be trusting relationships between funding agencies and providers; between tenants and police/security; and between providers and tenants.

2. Education

Although information gathering and knowledge sharing is currently weak, these processes are essential to improve the relationships between stakeholders outlined above. In particular, we must educate residents about the link between their vulnerabilities and the predatory behavior of others. We must also educate the public about HUTs and the ways they can lead to eviction and homelessness. Trained teams of HUT peers would be best equipped to perform this outreach to tenants and community members.

3. Funding

The supportive and social housing sectors in general, and HUT research and programs in particular, are in urgent need of funding. Data sharing and more cooperative research efforts are two effective ways to avoid repetitive funding and distribute available dollars more effectively across different research groups and providers.

4. Community Spaces vs. Community in Spaces

A sense of community is a key factor underpinning good health. We must disrupt behaviours that hinder community building, and support those that promote the development of strong social ties. More concretely, we must build more supportive housing that, by design, encourages shared, cooperative use of common spaces.

5. Intake Processes

NONR felt that screenings and other intake processes could effectively prevent HUTs by weeding out potential predators. In addition to the assessment tools already being used to evaluate tenants' eligibility for housing, we should develop an evaluation that helps tenants identify their vulnerability to HUTs. While there are significant ethical questions about gathering personal data, R in our study seemed open to exploring the possibility of a test if it was safe and helped them avoid HUTs.

6. Structural Violence and System Failures

The main thrust of our study is that HUTs are currently flourishing in the midst of a broken system — not due to the shortcomings of any one stakeholder. Indeed, dominant groups including the government and land developers play an indirect role in facilitating HUTs by marginalizing vulnerable residents. By failing to provide sufficient affordable housing, coordinated services, supports, and resources, these dominant groups leave residents open to exploitation by housing predators.

7. Landlords

In both private and public/social housing, R indicate being fearful of their landlords, who they viewed as wielding significant power. Landlords, for their part, often indicate a desire for stricter screening of prospective tenants. A great deal of work remains to be done to foster healthier, more equitable relationships between landlords and tenants. Key in this process will be helping landlords recognize that they have a central role to play in maintaining safe, community-friendly spaces and advocating for tenants.

8. Stigma

R who have experienced HUTs report fearing their reputation will be unfairly tarnished; that their predator will retaliate if they attempt to report the HUT; that they will lose their housing; and that they will be blacklisted by landlords, rendering them unable to escape their predators.

9. Support and Follow Ups

These are the services tenants said would be most helpful in preventing HUTs, yet they are the most difficult to access. Medical, social and psychological supports should be made more widely available, preferably on-site in housing communities on a 24/7 basis. Providers with experience managing HUTs should also collaborate to create reference material for service providers, so they may have a reliable guide to turn to for best practices.

10. Peer Engagement

Comprehensive solutions to HUTs will only be possible if we consider the problem from the perspective of everyone involved. Thus, predators, tenants, relatives, children, support workers, and all other stakeholders should be consulted. The added benefit of engaging all members of a community is that tenants typically report being less afraid when their peers discuss HUTs with them than when “officials” do.

11. The Anatomy of a HUT

Our findings highlight that HUTs are not isolated points in time; they are more like extended narratives, with precursors, beginnings, middles, and (often messy, drawn-out) ends. Each stage presents different challenges and opportunities for prevention and intervention.

12. The Continuum of Complicity

Some victims are more complicit than others, and the degree of complicity can shift throughout the HUT.

13. Housing Predators

Some researchers and service providers suggest that housing predators are also victims of structural violence: their abusive behaviour is a product of their own vulnerabilities. Thus, rather than focusing our attention on the complicity of tenants in HUTs, we should aim to prevent predators from perpetrating those HUTs in the first place.

14. The Interplay of Tenant and System Factors

Tenant vulnerabilities alone are insufficient to predict HUTs. Rather, the combination of these vulnerabilities with systemic factors, including a lack of services, protection, and high-quality housing, puts tenants at a high risk for HUTs.

Summary of Recommendations

1. A larger study of all housing stock in Toronto

We currently lack reliable data on where and when HUTs take place in Toronto. A systematic city-wide study would allow us to map prior and ongoing HUTs, identify hotspots, and designate priority areas.

2. Share existing data

Housing providers and law enforcement have data on HUT related activities, which should be made accessible for use by public policy makers.

3. Expand definitions of community and home

Future research should explore how people of varying ethnicities, ages, genders, and sexualities think about “home,” the “household,” and “community.” The need for such research is especially strong for Indigenous persons.

4. Engage predators

In line with our proposed paradigm shift, greater attention should be paid to housing predators and their vulnerabilities. Policies designed to prevent HUTs must take predators' motivations and strategies into account.

5. Implement proactive community measures

Steps that should be taken to help mitigate the impact of HUTs include the creation of councils to monitor and provide support in each housing building; an increase in the number of Community TPS Officers; and the building of more community-friendly housing, as well as the development of more designated community spaces within existing housing.

6. Explore alternative guest and visitor policies in social and supportive housing

Unwanted guests are a major cause of HUTs, but there are limitations and frustrations about how best to prevent their access. Both R and NONR in our study held strong views about restrictions on guests, making this an area that requires further study. One option that should be explored is the creation of a pilot project where tenants would voluntarily reside in a building with a "zero or limited guests" policy to determine whether the complete absence of unwanted guests would eliminate the risk for HUTs.

7. Help at-risk tenants better understand their options

Housing providers should aim to adapt existing vulnerability assessment tools so that they may be used to screen prospective tenants for their risk of HUTs specifically.

8. Enforce a culturally sensitive treatment of households

Law enforcement and other officials should be required to undergo training to sensitize them to culturally different understandings of kin.

9. Develop an ambitious education campaign to inform and protect tenants

Peers and existing service networks should be mobilized to inform tenants of their rights and responsibilities regarding HUTs, and resources they can use to protect themselves.

10. Consult police and security forces regarding barriers to fighting HUTs

Law enforcement officials should be surveyed to gain a better understanding of the barriers they feel are preventing them from adequately addressing HUTs. Peers and people with lived experiences should then be recruited to train police and other law enforcement officials to recognize and properly address HUTs.

11. Develop an interagency advocacy council

An ongoing collaborative stakeholder council on HUTs should be implemented immediately.

12. Create a dedicated helpline

Most people are not comfortable calling Crime Stoppers. They doubt its privacy and fear its link to law enforcement. A helpline devoted exclusively to targets of HUTs would alleviate these reservations and encourage more targets to seek support.

13. Incorporate a design-thinking protocol into service planning and provisions

The standpoints of all stakeholders — tenants, predators, providers, support workers, and so on — should be incorporated into the analysis, evaluation, design and assessment of new practices aimed at managing and preventing HUTs.

Conclusions

Safe At Home revealed that HUTs are widespread in both private and public/social housing across Toronto. HUTs in supportive housing are most often executed to facilitate drug dealing. The takeover itself is a complex process that often hinges on disadvantages including mental illness, addiction, physical disability, social isolation, and poverty, all of which render tenants vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of a (typically drug-dealing) housing predator. Far from making the takeover the tenant's fault, the exploitation of these vulnerabilities points to the failure of our housing system to protect its most at-risk members. Indeed, housing staff, policy makers, security organizations and, most importantly, tenants themselves are at a loss when it comes to addressing HUTs. Safe At Home aims to fill this gap by calling for the paradigm shift that will move us away from our current victim-blaming mentality, toward a more productive exploration of the complex interplay of variables that underpin HUTs. Our practical recommendations for preventing HUTs include instilling stronger community sensibilities in public/social housing; supporting cooperative interagency councils that might design and implement potential solutions; and engaging tenants, predators, and other stakeholders in the prevention process.

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DUST TO DUST

*Dust lies upon my skin
Weighing me down
Unkempt and alone
Passersby step over me
I am just a dusty old thing
No one wants to dirty their hands
Or be like me
They shine bright
Cared for by friends
Fresh clean skin
Glowing in the dark
The cards were dealt
My hand was rotten
To the core
Dirt and grit
My life long companions
Every day and night
I walk in fright
Hiding from the lights
Too bright for my old
Dusty
Eyes
I just see the glow
As they step over
The dusty grimy thing
Lying on the ground*

Veronica Snooks

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