



INSTITUTE OF
URBAN STUDIES

AT HOME/CHEZ SOI FACT SHEETS

#6 - HOUSING QUALITY

The **At Home/Chez Soi Fact Sheets** comprises a series of brief reports highlighting key features and themes of the **At Home/Chez Soi Housing First** demonstration project in Winnipeg. As a collection, the fact sheets provide a broad overview of the project's structure, scope, methods, and outcomes to inform public understanding of the project. This fact sheet highlights the observed and perceived quality of housing experienced by **At Home/Chez Soi** participants.

Although an objective measure of housing quality is important, it is also necessary to understand participants' perceptions of housing. This information was collected using the **Perceived Housing Quality** (PHQL) instrument. During the study, the PHQL was used to record participants' satisfaction with their living space every six months based on their general impressions of safety, size, privacy, pleasantness, and overall qualityⁱⁱ. Together, the OHQS and PHQL provide insight into the observed and perceived housing quality experienced by **At Home/Chez Soi** participants.

WHY IS HOUSING QUALITY IMPORTANT

Finding housing for Intervention (INT) participants was a central component of the **At Home/Chez Soi** project. While it was important to find a place for participants to call home, it was also necessary to ensure the housing provided was of good quality since research discovering links between housing quality and mental health is accumulating.

HOUSING AVAILABILITY IN WINNIPEG

Housing quality must be understood in the context of Winnipeg's housing market during the project. During the study period, 2008 to 2013, Winnipeg's overall vacancy rate for rental accommodations hovered around 1%, hitting its lowest point in 2010 at 0.8%. However, this overall vacancy rate was for all units of rental housing across the market spectrum, including higher priced units. Affordable units had an even lower vacancy rate over this period, at times approaching 0%. This extremely low vacancy rate made sourcing units for participants very challenging at the **Winnipeg Site**. Furthermore, nearly 40% of the rental market accommodations in Winnipeg were located within the inner city, where the housing stock is typically older and in need of major repairs. Given the low vacancy rate and the spatial concentration of rental units, the majority of both Intervention (INT) (83%) and Treatment as Usual (TAU) (92%) participants lived in the inner city at the time of the 24-month interview. The limited availability of rental housing, and the inner city's aging housing stock influenced the housing quality ratings recorded in the OHQS and PHQL.

HOUSING QUALITY & AT HOME/CHEZ SOI

Housing quality was measured using the **Observer-Rated Housing Quality Scale** (OHQS) instrument, which was administered at the 24-month interview in the study. The OHQS, developed specifically for the **At Home/Chez Soi** projectⁱ, measures 27 characteristics of the observed physical quality of the built environment including the housing unit, building, and neighborhood. Utilizing an observer-rated measure of housing quality, the OHQS addresses the potential limitations of self-report by tenants who may be concerned about evictions.

HOUSING QUALITY

OBSERVATIONS OF HOUSING QUALITY – OHQS

The OHQS measured housing quality by requiring observers to record a value between 0.5 and 5 for 27 different indicators of housing quality (see Table 1). Each value corresponds to a different pre-defined category describing varying levels of quality for each variable; an example of this is shown for water utilities in Table 2). The lowest score possible for an indicator is 0.5, and the highest score is 5ⁱⁱⁱ.

Table 1. Indicators of housing quality measured by the OHQS

Neighbourhood Assessment		Unit Assessment			
1	Condition of Nearby Buildings	10	Heating/ Cooling	19	Kitchen/Food Prep Area
2	Condition of Nearby Streets	11	Structural Condition	20	Bedroom/ Sleeping Space
	Building/Property Assessment	12	Bathroom Facilities	21	Kitchen Appliances
3	Garbage Facilities	13	Power	22	Plumbing
4	Security/Safety	14	Artificial Light	23	Overall Design
5	Staff in Building	15	Natural Light	24	Safety/Security
6	Access/Visit-ability	16	Water	25	Noise
7	Inside Condition	17	Laundry	26	Pests
8	Outside Condition	18	Indoor Air/ Ventilation	27	Storage Space
9	Access to Nature				

The OHQS was developed in the final stages of the At Home/Chez Soi project, and as such it was administered for a limited number of units (83). Because of this, findings should not be extrapolated to describe larger trends, but should be understood as a snapshot of the housing situations experienced by At Home/Chez Soi participants. Although the OHQS was used to rate Single Room Occupancies (SROs), rooms in rooming houses, as well as private units, given the limited number of units sampled, only private units (both shared and single-occupancy) are used for this analysis. We now briefly describe the quality of some participants' residences based on the indicators measured in the OHQS.

KITCHEN & APPLIANCES

The quality of kitchens varied widely from unit to unit. Over one-third of all units (34%) had their own kitchen, but typically they had poor quality sinks/faucets, limited storage, and less than 3 feet of continuous counter space. Even in kitchens with adequate food-preparation areas, the quality of the appliances was often poor. Over one-quarter of all kitchens had appliances (fridges and stoves) that were smaller than basic sizes^{iv}, or experienced frequent problems. Only 6% of kitchen and food prep areas were considered adequate, meaning they had at least 5 feet of continuous counter space, a dedicated place to sit and eat, a good quality sink, and lots of storage.

PESTS

Pests were a major problem in housing during the project, as 58% of participants reported some form of major pest infestation over the previous three months. Major pest infestations included mice, rats, bedbugs, cockroaches, or pests in food. While the presence of pests was common, the degree of infestation and remediation attempts varied widely across units. In 16% of units with major pest problems, no efforts had been made in the previous 3 months to treat the problem. These 16% of units also reported frequent minor pest problems; these included termites, moths, flies, ants, or spiders. An additional 11% of units had major pest problems that were unsuccessfully treated.

BATHROOM FACILITIES

Bathroom facilities presented some of the most serious concerns related to housing quality. A total of 33% of units were rated as having very inadequate or inadequate bathroom facilities. Very inadequate bathrooms (6% of all units) include those shared by 3 or more people and characterized as having significant structural damage, frequent problems with fixtures, and a bathroom door that could not lock. Inadequate bathrooms (27%) had minor structural damage, frequent problems with fixtures, and poorly functioning doors.

HOUSING QUALITY

Table 2. Example Indicator and value categories from OHQS

Utilities - Water	.5	1	1.5	2	2.5	3	3.5	4	4.5	5
Turn on each faucet, check for hot and cold water and that water stops when turned off.	No water available		Cold water only; poor pressure, one or more faucets not working, and/or one or more faucets continuously dripping; very old faucets with structural problems		Hot water occasionally not available, pressure average, and one or more faucets have a bit of dripping; older faucets		Hot and cold water always available, pressure good, dripping rare; older faucets		Hot and cold water always available, pressure very good, no dripping. Very modern, high efficiency faucets.	

ACCESSIBILITY

More than half of the units sampled (58%) had no accessibility features, such as sloped sidewalks, ramps, or elevators. While not a concern for all participants, the lack of housing choices meant some participants had to settle for housing which did not meet their accessibility needs. One participant in a wheelchair lived in a multi-storied building with no elevator, reporting that it was “this place or nothing.”

Winnipeg, where the city-wide average monthly cost for a bachelor apartment during the project was \$578, well above the Manitoba shelter assistance rates of \$285 for single adults. The project did provide a rent supplement of \$200 to participants, but even with that higher budget, housing options remained extremely limited.

PERCEPTIONS OF HOUSING QUALITY – PHQL

Despite the observed concerns in housing quality, at the 24-month interview the majority of INT (66%) and TAU (67%) respondents were satisfied with their home’s overall quality. For participants with long histories of homelessness and precarious housing situations, stable housing of almost any quality was welcomed, and as one participant noted, their new housed situation was “way better than [a] shelter.” However, nearly one-third of all participants were unsatisfied with certain aspects of their housing at the 24-month interview. To better understand which factors contributed to overall levels of satisfaction, we now briefly explore a few of the responses to the PHQL instrument at the 24-month interview.

SAFETY

Responses to questions on safety indicated that most participants (67%) felt safe in their homes. However, safety was an area where a significant difference existed between INT and TAU participants, with 72% of INT participants stating they felt safe compared to only 60% of TAU participants. It should be noted that, given the low vacancy rate in Winnipeg, respondents had very little choice about where to live and may have been unable to find affordable housing in areas where they would feel safer. One participant, while generally happy with her housing, stated she was “attacked last week outside of her place,” leaving her to feel “unsafe and not ‘at home’ in her home.” Another participant “feared for his and his partner’s safety” because they lived in a “high crime area.”

AFFORDABILITY

Although the majority of INT and TAU residents were satisfied with the affordability of their housing (66%), more than a one-third (34%) were dissatisfied with the cost of rent. This may be related to the reality of the housing market in

FRIENDLINESS

Although not directly pertaining to the physical condition of a dwelling, perceptions of friendliness influence an individual’s feelings of inclusivity and well-being. Responses assessing friendliness of a residential area were largely positive, with 73% of INT and TAU respondents indicating they felt like they lived in a pleasant and welcoming place.

HOUSING QUALITY

CONCLUSION

Despite the overall level of satisfaction with housing, some participants experienced a number of problems associated with its quality. Information from the OHQS identifies some of the physical housing inadequacies participants endured, and participant responses to the PHQL point to factors, especially affordability and safety, that contributed to their dissatisfaction. Even for INT participants, for whom Housing First service teams secured housing, the housing did not always meet participant needs. While a tight rental market likely impacted the amount of quality housing available, the findings presented in this fact sheet demonstrate that additional work is needed to improve the quality of specific residences used for Housing First. This is particularly important given the link between housing quality and mental health.

ⁱ The OHQS was developed specifically for the At Home/Chez Soi project by the project research team.

ⁱⁱ In the PHQL instrument participants indicated their level of satisfaction with various aspects of their housing as either very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, neither, satisfied, or very satisfied. For the purposes of analysis here, very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, and neither were combined in the category “unsatisfied,” and the responses satisfied and very satisfied were considered “satisfied.”

ⁱⁱⁱ For the purposes of this analysis, scores below 2.5 were considered very inadequate, between 2.5 and 3.49 to be inadequate, 3.5 to 4.49 to be moderate, and 4.5 to 5 to be adequate.

^{iv} In the OHQS, basic sizes for fridges are considered 24” wide by 60” high, and for stoves/ranges 24” wide.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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Institute of Urban Studies

599 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg

P: 204 982-1140

F: 204 943-4695

E: ius@uwinnipeg.ca

Mailing Address:

515 Portage Avenue,

Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3B 2E9

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