

# *It's No Palace*

Boarding Houses: *the sector, its clientele and its future*

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Funding for this study was provided by:

Department of Human Services Research and Innovation Program

Supported Housing Unit, Department of Human Services

Adelaide City Council.

This report was made possible by the assistance of those people living in boarding houses, and by boarding house owners and managers who agreed to be interviewed for this study. Thank you for sharing your experiences.

Thank you also to those representatives of various agencies and services who provide information and advice to the study.

The project was advised by a Reference Group comprising nominees of Divisions within the Department of Human Services. Those people participating were:

Paul Willey

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This report was written by Peter Anderson, Nancy Rogers and Tracey Stephenson. Field research was conducted by Peter Anderson. Data analysis was provided by Arthur Hume.

Peter Lee, of Spectrum Consulting, provided assistance and advice on ethical matters.

Alan Fairley and Anne Gale provided valuable support and advice in the early stages of development of the study.

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# **1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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## **1.1 The Study**

Boarding houses provide low-cost accommodation to some of the most marginal and disadvantaged members of our community. Residents occupy a precarious position in the private housing market, are generally of low income, and many also have physical, intellectual, social and psychological difficulties which affect their everyday functioning to varying degrees. In the continuum of housing security, living in a boarding house is an insecure and commonly inadequate option, and there is increasing acceptance nationally of a definition of homelessness which categorises residents of boarding houses as “tertiary homeless”.

Boarding houses are an important source of affordable accommodation. Indications are, however, that the sector is in decline, mostly attributed to issues of financial viability, ageing stock, and the difficulty of the client group. This contributes to the pressure on other forms of low cost and crisis accommodation, including public and community housing and homelessness services.

Although they provide less than optimal accommodation, boarding houses perform an important function, and their demise, unless matched by expansions in other forms of low-cost housing, will have considerable impact for individuals and the broader human services and housing systems.

This study has gathered information which can inform the policy and planning issues with regards to boarding houses. It has located and profiled the existing stock of boarding houses in metropolitan Adelaide; profiled the residents; sought their views on their accommodation; and made some assessments of the future viability of the sector and the appropriateness of facilities.

## **1.2 Overview of previous studies**

Overall two primary views emerge through the literature on Boarding Houses in Australia: that the sector is important for the continued housing of low income people; and at the same time there is concern about standards and conditions.

The literature documents the changing role of the boarding house sector in Australia, as well as the changing nature of the clientele and the decline in stock. Studies suggest residents are increasingly people ‘on the margins’, both physically and socially, and that ill health, poverty, and disability, as well as loneliness and a lack of significant relationships and support, characterise the lives of many residents. Residents have been found to have

low expectations of housing, and report both advantages and disadvantages with boarding house accommodation. Affordability, ease of access and flexibility are key benefits; the poor quality of stock and problems with other residents are the major drawbacks identified. Studies suggest most residents would prefer other, self-contained, accommodation.

The last metropolitan-wide study of boarding houses in South Australia, carried out in 1988, identified 125 establishments and 1543 boarding house beds. Since this study, there have been a number of more specific studies conducted but there has not been a comprehensive analysis of the sector. An analysis of the 1996 Census proposed that there were 1,299 persons living in boarding houses in South Australia on Census night in 1996.

### **1.3 The regulatory framework**

Regulation in the area of boarding houses in South Australia is complex. There is no single Act providing coverage, and regulation is spread across a number of Acts, namely:

- The Residential Tenancies Act (1995)
- The Local Government Act (1934)
- The Public and Environmental Health Act (1989)
- The Development Act (1993), and
- The Supported Residential Facilities Act (1992).

Consequently, regulation is inconsistent, and there are concerns about gaps, coverage, enforcement and effectiveness. Only six metropolitan LGAs currently have relevant by-laws, and these differ significantly in terms of their content.

### **1.4 Boarding Houses in South Australia**

The study identified 106 boarding houses in the metropolitan area, housing approximately 1,100 people. A further nine were identified in country areas, housing approximately 60. Thus, overall 115 boarding houses were located, with an estimated resident population of 1,160.

Approximately 30% of beds in the metropolitan area are in the City of Adelaide, more than double that of any other local government area, confirming the key role the city plays in the provision of boarding house stock. Other LGAs that are key providers of boarding house accommodation are Port Adelaide Enfield; Charles Sturt; West Torrens; and Salisbury.

Most boarding houses are private (for profit) operations. 19% of beds were publicly owned<sup>1</sup> – of these just under half were managed by Not For Profit organisations at the time of the study.

Most boarding houses are smaller premises accommodating between 3 and 8 residents. Most boarding houses in South Australia operate in older premises; this has implications for the standard of stock as well as the costs of maintenance and improvements.

Standards of boarding house premises vary across the sector. While the study was not able to carry out a formal assessment of properties, through the course of the field work it was observed that approximately one quarter were in poor condition. Properties owned by the Housing Trust and operated by community groups were of consistently good standard.

The main area of expansion in the sector is private operators buying up low cost properties in the inner suburbs as boarding facilities, often of a size to escape Local Government regulation (where it exists).

## **1.5 Resident perceptions of boarding house life**

Interviews were conducted with one hundred and forty residents of boarding houses, about 12% of the estimated resident population.

- Most respondents were male. Almost all were born in Australia or another English-speaking country. Ages ranged from 17 to 74 years, with an average age of 42 for men and 39 for women.
- Respondents were predominantly dependent on government income support. Almost a third received a Disability Support Pension, an indicator of vulnerability.
- Most (59%) of those interviewed had lived in boarding houses for 12 months or longer; however this was not matched by their current length of residency at their present location, suggesting a tendency for residents to move often between boarding houses. There was also a steady inflow of new residents to the sector.
- Older residents were more stable in their tenancy – 90% of those aged 55 or more had lived at their current location for over 12 months. This suggests that the population of boarding house residents is a combination of a more mobile younger population and an older, more stable group.
- The most common reason for leaving a previous boarding house was dissatisfaction with the standard of the premises and other residents. Conflict with other residents was frequently reported.

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<sup>1</sup> 'publicly-owned' refers to properties owned by state government housing authorities or Not For Profit organisations

- Housing histories indicated a high degree of housing vulnerability and the use of unstable and insecure options that equate with primary or secondary homelessness – most (58%) had either slept rough; stayed temporarily with friends; lived in a caravan or stayed in an emergency shelter.
- Relationship breakdown was often identified as a factor precipitating the loss of more secure housing and a decline across life domains.
- Similar to other studies, residents identified both advantages (affordability, location, proximity to services and transport, and the ‘easy to manage’ nature of boarding house accommodation) and disadvantages (problems with other residents, lack of privacy, low standards of accommodation and insecurity of tenure) to boarding house life.
- Only a small group (of older men) viewed the boarding house as their long term home. The remainder saw the boarding house as a temporary arrangement which suited them to a greater or lesser degree.
- Most residents would prefer to be living elsewhere. However their ability to secure other accommodation was impeded by a range of issues, notably poverty and housing availability, but also including age, relationship issues, ability to live independently, and personal and social factors.
- Different groups were identified amongst the residents. These were proposed as *‘poor and no choice’*; *‘poor but it suits for now’*; *‘poor and it’s home’*; *‘poor and not looking for stable accommodation’*, and *‘poor but they’ve got a home somewhere else’*.
- The research found poor compliance with, and knowledge of, the provisions relating to Boarding Houses under the Residential Tenancies Act.

## 1.6 Proprietor interviews

Boarding houses are predominantly operated by private individuals who operate a single boarding house, although a minority own and operate several properties. Unlike boarding house sectors interstate, boarding house in South Australia tend to be smaller properties located in the suburbs and run by an individual or family.

For most proprietors, the business is profitable, with vacancy rates generally low. Most proprietors had been in the industry long term and report that the nature of residents has changed, with residents increasingly being younger, more marginal, and more involved in drug use and with mental health issues. A significant proportion of current proprietors may not continue to operate in the future, given their age profile and those who reported an unprofitable business. Boarding houses will be increasingly seen by the private sector as an investment, rather than a career choice. The capacity of the not-for-profit

sector to expand to meet demand for this form of accommodation is dependent on government support.

## **1.7 National directions**

A review of national directions indicates common trends, including the loss of boarding house stock, changes to the regulatory regime to grant greater protection for tenants; and an increased and active role for public housing authorities and not-for-profit providers in the provision of boarding-houses.

## **1.8 Building the picture**

Key trends and issues to emerge from the research include:

1. Boarding houses are concentrated in *key locations*
2. Limited *availability and access*, particularly for certain groups
3. Concerns about the *standard of facilities*
4. Poor *compliance with the Residential Tenancies Act*
5. Potential risk in *fire safety*
6. An inconsistent, complex and arguably ineffective *regulatory regime*
7. A predicted decline in the *private sector* as providers
8. The vulnerability of *residents*, and the limited capacity of this form of accommodation to satisfactorily meet their housing needs. For particularly vulnerable or disabled people it is clearly not an appropriate option.

## **1.9 Conclusion**

The South Australian community, through government, has accepted responsibility to care for and protect vulnerable members, including through the provision of affordable, stable and appropriate accommodation and support. In this context, the needs of residents within the boarding house sector should be considered, and appropriate responses developed, including the active generation of a 'renewed', not-for-profit sector.



## 2 INTRODUCTION

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### 2.1 The study

Boarding houses provide low-cost accommodation to some of the most marginal and disadvantaged members of our community. Residents occupy a precarious position in the private housing market, are generally of low income, and many also have physical, intellectual, social and psychological difficulties which affect their everyday functioning to varying degrees. In the continuum of housing security, living in a boarding house is an insecure and commonly inadequate option, and there is increasing acceptance nationally of a definition of homelessness which categorises residents of boarding houses as “tertiary homeless”.<sup>2</sup>

Boarding houses are an important source of affordable accommodation. Indications are, however, that the sector is in decline, mostly attributed to issues of financial viability, ageing stock, and the difficulty of the client group. This contributes to the pressure on other forms of low cost and crisis accommodation, including public and community housing and homelessness services.

Issues relating to boarding houses are therefore significant in public policy and planning. Boarding house residents are vulnerable, have limited options, and their accommodation is likely to be less than optimal. Boarding houses, however, perform an important function in the housing sector, and their demise, unless matched by expansions in other forms of low-cost housing, will have considerable impacts for individuals and on the broader human services and housing systems. Such is the policy challenge.

Despite all that is known or rumoured about boarding houses, there is also much that is unknown. How many boarding houses are there in South Australia? Has the supply of rooms declined, why, and can and should this be reversed? Who lives in boarding houses, and does the accommodation meet their needs and acceptable community standards? Is safe, secure and affordable housing the sole policy and planning concern, or do boarding house residents have other support needs in addition to housing issues? Understanding the answers to these basic questions helps shape the answers to more complex issues; for example, how should boarding houses be regulated and residents better protected? Should government be actively intervening to prevent the demise of privately-run boarding houses, or building up an alternative sector? Do boarding house residents require better support from health and community services?

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<sup>2</sup> Chamberlain C & Johnson G (2001) *The debate about homelessness*, **Australian Journal of Social Issues** Vol 36 No. 1

This study has sought to address some of the basic questions about boarding houses, and thus to provide advice on the bigger issues. It has located, mapped and profiled the existing stock of boarding houses in metropolitan Adelaide (with some reference to the country); profiled the residents of these facilities; sought their views on their accommodation; and made some assessments of the future viability of the sector and the appropriateness of the existing facilities to the housing and support needs of the residents. It has also briefly examined developments in boarding house policy and practice across Australia.

Specifically, the research has explored the following questions:

- What is the current picture in relation to boarding houses across metropolitan Adelaide? Where are these facilities, who is in them, what tenancy arrangements exist, what do the facilities provide, and what is the quality of the establishments?
- Why do people live in boarding houses? Is it a housing option of choice or necessity?
- How appropriate is the accommodation and care provided to the needs and wishes of the residents? For which groups are boarding houses a viable option?
- What is the likely future of this sector, and consequently of its residents?
- How should government respond to the sector and its clientele? How can the care and support of people in boarding houses be improved?

Components of the study have included:

- Field research to locate and identify the current stock of boarding houses
- Interviews with 140 residents and 20 proprietors
- Focus groups/consultations with key players across the service system who have a knowledge of and relationship with boarding houses and their residents
- An examination of the literature
- Collation of information from across Australia on developments in boarding house policy/practice
- Gathering of information on the current regime of regulation of boarding houses in South Australia.

## 2.2 What is a boarding house?

In Australia the terms “rooming houses”, “boarding houses” and “lodging houses” are often used loosely and interchangeably. At the same time a distinction is commonly made between the provision of ‘room only’ and ‘room plus other services’. For instance

- ‘Boarding House’ describes a form of accommodation where rent is collected for the use of a single room, where other facilities such as kitchen, toilet and living areas may be shared. The single room may be provided on a single or shared basis. Meals and other services such as laundry may or may not be included.
- ‘Lodging’ and ‘Rooming’ houses generally provide accommodation only.<sup>3</sup>

Recently the term ‘Single Room Occupancy (SRO)’ has gained currency as a term inclusive of all these types of arrangements that are predicated on sole occupancy rental of a single room. “Boarding houses’, however, is probably the most common term in use in South Australia, and is therefore used throughout this report as a generic term.

Confusion is introduced by other types of cheap and/or short term congregate accommodation that have elements in common with boarding houses, such as private hotels, tourist or backpacker accommodation, worker’s quarters, and student hostels. This has made it difficult to precisely define the facilities in scope for this study. Other studies of the sector sometimes include one or more of these forms of housing in their brief.

This study has excluded accommodation primarily targeted at travellers or holiday makers (back-packer hostels, guesthouses and general purpose hotels), students, or hostels for particular population groups (eg employees in remote locations; Aboriginal hostels, the aged or disabled). It also excluded Supported Residential Facilities, as defined by the Supported Residential Facilities Act (1992).

Boarding houses are usually privately owned and operated; however some properties are publicly-owned (by housing authorities or community agencies) and administered either by for profit or not for profit operators. All these facilities were included in the study.

What makes living in a boarding house different to other forms of rented accommodation? As opposed to a tenant in a rented share house, a lodger in a boarding house has a contractual right to live in the premises but cannot

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<sup>3</sup> From the Department of Housing and Urban Development, **Boarding House Reform Discussion Paper**, 1994 cited in Luxford, L. (1996) **Boarding and Lodging House Accommodation Project**, National Conference on Homelessness.

call the place his own. He/she does not have “exclusive possession” of the property; and the landlord or his agents still retains unrestricted access to, and use of, the premises (a distinction clarified in the case of *Street v Mountford*).<sup>4</sup>

The South Australian Residential Tenancies Act (1995) defines a rooming house as:

*“A residential premises in which:*

- rooms are available, on a commercial basis for residential occupation, and
- accommodation is available for at least three persons on a commercial basis”.

However (as explained more fully in chapter 4) other legislative and regulatory definitions in South Australia differ, adding to the definitional confusion regarding boarding houses.

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in Maher et al (1997), **Australia’s Private Rental Housing Market: Processes and Policies**, Working Paper No 9, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

### 3 OVERVIEW OF PREVIOUS STUDIES

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Australian studies of boarding houses have tended to focus on key themes:

- understanding the role boarding houses play as a specific type of tenure in the private rental market
- documenting the level of amenity of boarding house stock
- concern about the decline of boarding house stock, and forecasting future need
- profiling the type of persons living in boarding houses, their needs and their housing aspirations, and
- concern about tenure and living conditions for residents.

Overall two primary (and somewhat oppositional) views emerge: that the boarding house sector is important for the continued housing of low income people in inner city areas; and, at the same time, there is concern about the standards and conditions in boarding houses.<sup>5</sup>

The current role of boarding houses is quite different to previous decades when boarding houses were a major form of 'decent and respectable' accommodation for working men. Boarding houses now provide accommodation for an increasing number of people reliant on government income support<sup>6</sup> and, in the broader community, are regarded as a less desirable form of accommodation that provides residents with an 'underclass existence'.<sup>7</sup>

Living in a boarding house is now regarded by some commentators as a form of homelessness. Chamberlain and Johnson<sup>8</sup> argue that all residents of boarding houses are in effect homeless due to their lack of housing tenure and housing choice; and the poor quality of amenities provided which fails to meet community standards of basic accommodation.

Boarding house living may be viewed favourably by some who feel suited to its particular characteristics: congregate living can provide a social environment; it is cheaper and some services may be provided. The short-term tenure and 'no questions asked' approach means people can come and go fairly anonymously; and there is a degree of acceptance for those with deviant behaviour. At the same time the reality is that residents may have few, if any, other options.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Luxford, L (1996) op.cit.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Hefferan, 1988, **Review of Boarding and Lodging Accommodation in Metropolitan Adelaide**, Department of Public and Consumer Affairs, South Australia, and Department of Housing and Construction, South Australia.

<sup>8</sup> Chamberlain C & Johnson G (2001) op.cit.

<sup>9</sup> Hefferan, 1988, op.cit.

How much people living in boarding houses do so out of choice, and how much out of necessity is a crucial question underlying research and policy in this area.

### 3.1 Decline in stock

Numerous studies in Australia have documented the decline in the number of boarding houses in key inner city areas where boarding houses tend to be congregated. For example, significant reductions in boarding house rooms have been documented in the Cities of Yarra<sup>10</sup> and Port Phillip<sup>11</sup> in Melbourne; in Adelaide<sup>12</sup> and in Inner Sydney.<sup>13</sup>

The gentrification of inner city areas; declining profitability; the increase in popularity of other forms of accommodation such as backpackers hostels and student accommodation; and an increasingly 'difficult' client group are identified as reasons for the rapid decline in the number of boarding houses.<sup>14</sup>

Spivac<sup>15</sup> reports that, over the past two decades, the loss was firstly in relation to smaller boarding houses that were converted over to domestic dwellings. More recently the increased popularity of inner city apartment style accommodation has resulted in the conversion of larger boarding house premises into 'up market' medium density accommodation. There is some evidence that the remaining boarding house stock, which has so far resisted economic and other pressures to convert usage, may be of a reduced standard.<sup>16</sup>

While some stock is lost outright through being sold or converted, the tightening of the market means that stock also becomes unavailable to the 'least desirable' segment of the boarding house population as proprietors become more selective about who they take in. In Jope's survey of proprietors in the City of Yarra, some claimed that they would no longer take referrals of homeless people or those with special needs, and almost half indicated that they would be making changes in the future to the type of residents they accommodated.

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<sup>10</sup> Jope, S (2000) **On the Threshold, the future of private rooming houses in the City of Yarra**, Brotherhood of St Laurence.

<sup>11</sup> Spivac, G (1997) **City of Port Phillip Housing Strategy**, City of Port Phillip

<sup>12</sup> Hefferan, (1988) op.cit.

<sup>13</sup> Davidson et al (1988) **Inner Sydney Boarding House Project**, research report for the NSW Department of Planning by the Urban and Regional Planning Program, University of Sydney.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*; Hefferan (1988) op.cit.; Luxford (1996) op.cit.; Foley, A (1997) *Boarding Houses: Strategies for a declining sector*, **National Housing Action**, November 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Spivac (1997) op.cit.

<sup>16</sup> Jope S (2000), op.cit.

A similar trend is reported by service providers in Adelaide; that, as the boarding house market becomes tighter, 'difficult' clients are being excluded, and people on low incomes with behavioural and social problems are finding it increasingly difficult to access this 'last stop' housing option. While public and community housing authorities have entered the boarding house field, this has not compensated for the loss of privately provided rooms.

### 3.2 Who lives in Boarding houses?

In 1995/96 National Shelter profiled the boarding house sector across Australia.<sup>17</sup> In reviewing the available studies that had been conducted in various States, it was concluded that the characteristics of boarding house residents were as follows:

- *Gender:* Boarding houses show a significantly higher proportion of males, although some studies have indicated that the numbers of females living in boarding houses is increasing.
- *Age:* Commonly people living in boarding houses are aged between 18 and 40 years. Those aged over 50 years appear to be a minority.
- *Marital status:* While marital status is difficult to ascertain, those people living in boarding houses are not living with a partner.
- *Income:* most studies cite the low income levels of boarding houses residents, with the majority receiving government income support.
- *Length of residency:* A significant proportion of boarding house residents appear to stay in this form of accommodation for long periods of time. While some residents are reasonably mobile, they often remain in the boarding house sector. Some residents may become homeless and then return to the boarding house sector.<sup>18</sup>

Thus the traditional view of boarding house residents as older males appears to have changed with younger people and a proportion of women now utilising this form of accommodation.

Horton<sup>19</sup>, in interviews with residents of rooming houses and private hotels in inner Melbourne, examined people's housing and personal histories to discover a picture of people living 'on the margins', both materially and socially. This study found many residents were single, and had never married or had children. As well, most had limited or no contact with family members, and the breakdown of relationships was a major contributing factor to their current living situation.

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<sup>17</sup> Luxford (1996) op.cit.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Horton N (1990) **Up, Down or Out? Property market pressures and the Homeless in inner Melbourne**, A study of the users of inner Melbourne's low cost single room accommodation, Econsult.

Lack of disposable income (two thirds of residents sampled paid over 40% of their income on rent) was a major issue influencing ability to move into another housing option. While some people clearly saw boarding houses as a temporary arrangement, others indicated that they would continue to live indefinitely in this form of accommodation, due to the lack of alternatives or the motivation and skills required to seek out options.

Some people had lived in rooming house accommodation for a long time, so that this had become their 'preferred' (or at least 'normal') type of housing. The connection between boarding house accommodation and homelessness was evident, as was the precarious nature of many residents' current situation, with 20% of the sample group having previously been homeless (ie sleeping out or living in a shelter or refuge) and 45% of the sample using welfare services for help with food and money whilst living in a boarding house.

Horton concluded that most people living in boarding houses fell into the following groups:

- The '*downward spiral*' - those who had previously lived in what they regarded as better housing, that was more stable, more 'respectable' or more comfortable. However, factors such as relationship or family breakdown, or suddenly changed economic circumstances through sickness or loss of employment, meant they could not maintain this accommodation. These people saw themselves as having 'lost ground' and often exhibited low self esteem.
- The '*upward spiral*' - those who had 'stepped up' from shelters or sleeping rough, often with assistance from welfare agencies. Some needed assistance to maintain their boarding house accommodation.
- The '*immobile group*' - those who had lived in boarding houses for several years, possibly shifting from one boarding house to another but usually not seeking any other form of housing. These people could not see themselves living in any other form of accommodation.
- The '*travellers*' - those needing temporary accommodation, possibly because they were working in the area or whilst they waited to move elsewhere, for example for seasonal work interstate.

To what extent do people living in boarding houses experience illness or disability? De-institutionalisation policies of the 70's and 80's saw many people with psychiatric, intellectual or physical disabilities find accommodation in boarding houses.<sup>20</sup> For instance the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health reported that

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<sup>20</sup> Foley A (1997), op.cit.



approximately 70-80% of residents in boarding houses in the central Sydney area experienced serious mental illness.<sup>21</sup>

Hefferan identified that in Adelaide some boarding houses were extending their services to provide care and support to the aged and disabled. A parallel inquiry into intellectually and psychiatrically disabled persons living in boarding houses found that at least 48% of residents in the boarding houses surveyed were considered to be receiving treatment for an intellectual or psychiatric disability.<sup>22</sup>

In the same vein, service provision documented by the Boarding House Social Work team in the southern suburbs of Adelaide in 1991 confirmed the high proportion of boarding house residents with psychiatric disabilities, as well as those with brain injury and alcohol and substance addiction<sup>23</sup>.

The introduction of the Supported Residential Facilities Act in South Australia in 1992 brought those boarding houses providing support services to residents with disabilities and mental illness under a new regulatory regime and provided a regulatory separation of the rooming house/ private hotel/boarding house sector from the supported residential facilities sector. It might be assumed therefore that people with disabilities and mental illness would not be prevalent in the boarding house sector today. However comparable interstate studies of rooming houses and private hotels suggest that, despite other States also distinguishing between 'residential-only' boarding houses and boarding houses that provide support to persons with disabilities, the 'residential-only' boarding house sector still continues to accommodate some people with a level of disability or illness.

For example, Horton identified that nearly 20% of a sample of persons living in rooming houses and private hotels in inner Melbourne indicated they received psychiatric treatment, and 30% had problems with alcohol. Close to half of the sample group of residents were not able to work due to their health or disability.<sup>24</sup>

In the City of Yarra study over half the proprietors surveyed reported that they accommodated people with special needs resulting from age, disability, mental illness, health, substance abuse and isolation from family. Service providers reported that residents had become younger and illicit drug use had become more visible, and that rooming houses accommodated persons with psychiatric disabilities and health needs.<sup>25</sup> At the same time service providers also reported that residents with mental illness had been 'squeezed

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<sup>21</sup> Cited in Maher et al (1997), op.cit.

<sup>22</sup> South Australian Health Commission, (1988) **Psychiatrically and intellectually disabled residents in boarding houses**; Report for the Human Services Committee of Cabinet.

<sup>23</sup> Chapman R & Provis J (1991) **Fritz and White Bread**, Report and Review of the Community Accommodation Support Service Southern Boarding House Social Work Team, South Australia

<sup>24</sup> [49% of the sample group received either Invalid Pension or Sickness Benefits \(Horton, \(1990\) op.cit.\)](#).

<sup>25</sup> Jope (2000), op.cit.

out' of certain boarding houses; therefore effectively reducing the prevalence of mental health issues in the boarding house population.

The evidence suggests that ill health, poverty, disability, as well as loneliness and a lack of significant relationships and support, characterise the lives of a significant proportion (although not all) of residents.

### **3.3 Views and housing aspirations of boarding house residents**

Studies involving interviews of residents have typically asked residents for their opinions about their current accommodation and their desired form of accommodation. This information can sometimes be difficult to distil, as residents' satisfaction with their present accommodation, and their aspirations for how they might like to live, are influenced by both real and perceived constraints. Residents are likely to have low expectations based on meeting their basic survival needs for food and shelter.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless it is apparent that residents will report both advantages and disadvantages with boarding house accommodation. Boarding houses are seen to be affordable and preferable to crisis accommodation. They offer ease of tenancy as residents are not required to have their own furniture or household goods; privacy (where residents have their own room) and usually a convenient location, close to transport, shops or services, or in a familiar neighbourhood. Disadvantages reported include the poor physical conditions of boarding houses and the behaviour of other residents.<sup>27</sup> In the City of Yarra study over half the residents interviewed reported that they would prefer to live in a self-contained flat. Similarly Horton<sup>28</sup> found that most commonly boarding house residents stated they would prefer to live in self-contained accommodation although a group were content to continue living in boarding house accommodation.

### **3.4 Counting boarding houses in South Australia**

The last metropolitan wide study of boarding houses in South Australia was carried out by Hefferan in 1988. This study used Local Council records, the ABS Census and 'Whereabouts' (a register of rental/share accommodation) to identify 125 establishments and 1543 beds in boarding and lodging houses. The majority of this stock was located in four local government areas: Adelaide, Port Adelaide, Glenelg and Unley, with the highest number of beds (529) and properties (45) being in the City of Adelaide.

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<sup>26</sup> Chapman & Provis (1991) *ibid*; Cleary et al (1998) *Boarding house life for people with a mental illness: an exploratory study*; **Australian & New Zealand Journal of Mental Health Nursing** vol 7.

<sup>27</sup> Jope (2000), *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> Horton (1990), *op.cit.*

Comparing with a previous study,<sup>29</sup> Hefferan concluded boarding house stock had declined by about 50% from 1978 to 1988. The 1978 study showed stock concentrated in the same four key council areas (Adelaide, Port Adelaide, Glenelg and Unley) noted by Hefferan, whereas prior to 1978 boarding houses were spread more generally across the metropolitan area. The 1978 study also indicated that the City of Adelaide had the highest number of beds (1597) and properties (88). As stock decreased between 1978 and 1988 the proportion of stock located in the City of Adelaide increased.

**Table 3.1: Boarding and Lodging Establishments and Bed Numbers, by Local Government Area: 1987/88**

LGA	Boarding & Lodging Houses		Rest Homes		Mental Health Hostels	
	N	Beds	N	Beds	N	Beds
Adelaide	45	529	2	41	-	-
Brighton	0	-	3	69	1	30
Burnside	2	26	2	52	-	-
Campbelltown	-	-	1	22	-	-
Elizabeth	-	-	-	-	-	-
Enfield	1	18	-	-	-	-
Glenelg	13	180	1	42	-	-
Happy Valley	-	-	-	-	-	-
Henley & Grange	-	-	1	19	-	-
Hindmarsh	9	69	-	-	-	-
Kensington & Norwood	6	58	1	5	2	54
Marion	-	-	2	103	-	-
Mitcham	1	20	-	-	1	26
Munno Para	-	-	-	-	-	-
Noarlunga	-	-	1	22	-	-
Payneham	-	-	-	-	-	-
Pt Adelaide	18	295	1	40	4	124
Prospect	2	22	3	71	3	60
St Peters	2	18	1	8	-	-
Salisbury	5	42	1	12	-	-
Tea Tree Gully	-	-	-	-	-	-
Thebarton	3	24	-	-	-	-
Unley	12	126	2	71	2	59
Walkerville	1	43	-	-	-	0
West Torrens	4	47	1	32	1	30
Woodville	1	26	-	-	1	40
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>1543</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>609</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>423</b>

From Hefferan, P (1988) op.cit.

<sup>29</sup> Badcock B & Ulrich Clothier D (1978) **Low Rent Boarding & Lodging Accommodation in the City of Adelaide**; a Report for the City of Adelaide Planning Commission

In 1988, about half the 125 establishments housed between five and nine residents, and a further quarter housed between 10 and 25 residents. Properties with more than 25 residents made up less than 10% of stock. Private ownership was predominant, with the SA Housing Trust owning 5% of the total stock. Most commonly boarding houses were operated by an individual or family partnership, with owners owning and operating a sole property. Multiple property ownership – ie where a private owner owned more than one boarding house property – accounted for about 20% of the total bed numbers.

Since 1988, studies have examined particular locations, such as the City of Adelaide and the West End region of the city<sup>30</sup> and particular tenure forms eg public boarding house stock.<sup>31</sup> However there has not been a metropolitan-wide study conducted to update Hefferan's work<sup>32</sup>.

Can we determine the number of persons living in boarding houses in metropolitan Adelaide from other information sources? A figure for the number of persons estimated to be living in boarding houses in each state has been compiled as part of a study to estimate the number of homeless persons in Australia.<sup>33</sup> Using the ABS Census category of 'boarding house, private hotel' as a starting point, a series of adjustments and refinements were proposed to this figure, to arrive at a final number of persons (who did not have a home elsewhere) living in boarding houses in South Australia on Census night in 1996 of 1,299 persons.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Adelaide City Council (1999); **City of Adelaide Rooming Houses: A sector under pressure**, notes for the Capital City Committee; Fraser G & Associates (1997), **West End Boarding and Rooming House Strategy**, unpublished report.

<sup>31</sup> Schneider M (1998) **Boarding House Review**, South Australian Housing Trust, internal working document.

<sup>32</sup> A count of boarding houses in the metropolitan area was conducted by Shelter SA in 2001, however these results are not reported here due to methodological problems.

<sup>33</sup> Chamberlain C (1999), **Counting the Homeless – Implications for Policy Development, Occasional Paper**, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Commonwealth of Australia.

<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that the purpose of the Census count was to estimate homelessness, therefore people staying in boarding houses on Census night with a home elsewhere (eg interstate or overseas)

The current study attempted to examine other data sources (including ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, 1998; and FaCS Centrelink Housing Dataset 2000) to determine whether people living in boarding houses could be counted by other means. None of this data could accurately or reliably identify and count persons in boarding houses according to the definition of 'boarding house' adopted in this study.

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were excluded. The present study has attempted to estimate boarding house beds, therefore these tenants are included. The Chamberlain study also included private hotels, beyond scope for the current count.

## **4 THE REGULATORY FRAMEWORK**

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There is no single Act that provides the regulatory framework for Boarding Houses. Regulation is complex, and spread across a number of Acts, including:

The Residential Tenancies Act (1995)

The Local Government Act (1934)

The Public and Environmental Health Act (1989)

The Development Act (1993)

The Supported Residential Facilities Act (1992)

### **4.1 Residential Tenancies Act**

The Residential Tenancies Act (1995) defines a rooming house as

*'a residential premises in which rooms are available on a commercial basis for occupation, and*

*accommodation is available for at least three persons on a commercial basis.'*

Under amendments in 1999, rooming houses were brought under the provisions of the Act to regulate the tenancy arrangements between boarding house proprietors and residents, and to provide protection to both parties. The regulations require that there be a written rooming house agreement between tenant and landlord. The regulations also provide for a code of conduct for proprietors and specify conditions for tenancy arrangements and the rights and responsibilities of tenants and landlords.

### **4.2 Local Government Act and Council By-laws**

Under the Local Government Act (1934), Councils have the power to make by-laws relating to a number of specified areas including boarding houses. Individual councils have determined whether they require by-laws regarding boarding houses; some have opted to 'drop' previously existing by-laws on the basis that they are no longer considered relevant or necessary. There is no consistency between Councils as to, firstly, whether they have a by-law regarding boarding houses, and secondly; by-law content. Only six metropolitan LGAs (Holdfast Bay; Adelaide; Norwood, Payneham and St Peters; Burnside; Port Adelaide Enfield; and Unley) currently have relevant by-laws (Table 4.1), although these LGAs account for 59% of beds in the state.

**Table 4.1: Local government By-laws relating to boarding houses**

<b>Local Government Authority</b>	<b>Minimum number of residents</b>	<b>License/ permit required</b>	<b>Inspections conducted</b>	<b>Standards specified</b>
Holdfast Bay	Six or more	yes	yes	List of prohibited activities for residents (eg no use of bathroom for laundry purposes)
Adelaide	No minimum specified	yes	yes	no
Norwood, Payneham and St Peters	No minimum specified	yes	yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Space per person</li> <li>• Minimum room size</li> <li>• Number bathrooms and toilets, etc</li> <li>• Laundry facilities</li> <li>• Cooking facilities</li> <li>• Cleanliness</li> </ul>
Burnside	Five or more	yes	yes	List of prohibited activities for residents (eg no use of bathroom for laundry purposes)
Port Adelaide	Six or more	yes	yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Space per person</li> <li>• Number beds per room</li> <li>• Other bedroom requirements</li> <li>• Number bathrooms and toilets, etc and other sanitation provisions</li> <li>• Fire safety</li> <li>• Cooking facilities</li> <li>• Laundry</li> <li>• Common rooms</li> <li>• Repairs</li> <li>• Cleanliness</li> </ul>
Unley	Four or more	yes	yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Space per person</li> <li>• Other bedroom requirements (including minimum bedding)</li> <li>• Cooking/kitchen facilities</li> <li>• Common rooms and open space</li> <li>• Natural lighting</li> <li>• Artificial lighting</li> <li>• Ventilation</li> <li>• Drainage</li> <li>• Number bathrooms and toilets, etc and other sanitation provisions</li> <li>• Fire safety</li> </ul>

The City of Salisbury has Public and Environmental Health Guidelines for Lodging and Boarding Houses. No non-metropolitan councils have specific by-laws or policies in relation to boarding houses apart from general planning and building controls.

Some LGA's (eg Adelaide and Port Adelaide Enfield) conduct inspections of boarding houses both for the purposes of registration and as a response to issues raised by residents or members of the community.

### **4.3 The Public and Environmental Health Act (1987)**

This Act deals with sanitation and public health issues. Local councils are responsible for inspecting premises and dealing with any breaches brought to their attention.

### **4.4 The Development Act (1993)**

Under the Development Act 1993 dwellings are required to comply with physical standards as set out in the Building Code of Australia. The Building Code classifies dwellings and ascribes building requirements accordingly. Key aspects of building amenity and safety, such as fire safety provisions, disabled access, and sanitation requirements (eg number of bathrooms and toilets per occupants) are specified in the Code.

Under the Building Code boarding houses will either be classified as Class 1B or Class 3 buildings. Class 1B is defined as

'a boarding house, guest house, hostel or the like with a total floor area not exceeding 300 square metres and in which not more than 12 persons would ordinarily be resident.'

Class 3 is

'a residential building, other than a class 1 or 2, which is a common place of long-term or transient living for a number of un-related persons, including, .....a boarding house, guest house, hostel, lodging house or backpackers accommodation.'

Different standards apply for these two classes.



New buildings, or premises applying for change of use or approval for alterations, are required to comply with the standards specified by the Building Code. Older premises being used as boarding houses are required to meet the standards that applied at the time of the last building alterations, or as considered reasonable by Council authorities should the property come to the attention of Council.

As well as general building and safety requirements, fire safety provisions are provided under the Development Act. Fire safety requirements for Class 1B buildings are found in Regulation 76B of the Development Regulations 1993 which specify the installation of smoke alarms. The fire safety requirements for Class 3 buildings are more stringent and specified in the Building Code.

The regime for inspecting and monitoring fire safety compliance is somewhat complicated. Under the Development Act 1993 local councils have responsibility for the inspection and monitoring of fire safety. Under the South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service Act (1936), fire officers are authorised to enter and inspect a public building to determine the adequacy of safeguards against fires or other emergencies. In practice the SAMFS has taken a pro-active approach to instituting a schedule of inspections of boarding houses they are aware of, and will also undertake fire safety inspections at the request of Councils and assist or advise Council staff conducting fire safety inspections.

#### **4.5 Supported Residential Facilities Act 1992**

This Act deals with residential facilities that provide personal care services to more than two residents. 'Personal care services' include

- Nursing care
- Assistance or supervision in bathing, showering or personal hygiene; toileting or continence management; dressing; or consuming food
- Direct physical assistance to a person with mobility problems
- Management of medication
- Substantial rehabilitative or developmental assistance, or
- Management of personal finances.

Certain types of residential settings such as nursing homes are not included under this act. 'Residential-only' facilities (boarding houses) are not considered to be Supported Residential Facilities and therefore do not come under this Act. However the Act does require the person in charge of a residential-only facility to seek assistance for a resident if that resident is in need of care (S42).

## 5 BOARDING HOUSES IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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### 5.1 Introduction

One of the main tasks for this study was to locate and identify the current stock of boarding houses in South Australia. This was done through the following strategies:

- Writing to all local government authorities asking them to identify boarding houses in their area. This was only effective where LGAs maintained a listing of boarding houses (usually where there were specific by-laws in place);
- Liaison with the Metropolitan Fire Service, who maintain a list of boarding houses in order to carry out fire safety inspections;
- Liaison with community-based organisations such as Westcare, Trace-A-Place, and Shelter SA who maintain listings of boarding houses, and
- Field research, including “word of mouth” from current boarders and proprietors, and field worker observation.

As much as was possible, visits were conducted to boarding houses that had been identified. In some instances, access was not possible or appropriate, but some assessment of the property could be gained ‘from the street’.

Despite these multiple strategies, the figures provided in this report are **still only indicative**. It is inevitable that there are boarding houses not identified by the study, including those of a size small enough to ‘escape’ local government by-law requirements. The number of properties also fluctuates, with boarding houses both opening and closing. Finally, it was often difficult to determine whether a property should be ‘counted’ in the study, sometimes because we lacked information about what the property actually was and/or its current use, and sometimes because it was not clear whether the property’s use met the definition. However, the study was able to identify a number of boarding houses not known to any authorities, particularly smaller domestic dwellings operating in suburban areas.

#### 5.1.1 Current stock of boarding houses

Employing the methods described above, the study identified 106 boarding houses in the metropolitan area, housing approximately 1,100 people. A further nine were identified in country areas housing approximately 60 people. Thus, overall 115 boarding houses were located in South Australia, with an estimated resident population of 1,160 (Table 5.1).

**Table 5.1: Audit of boarding houses - Type of boarding house, by location, South Australia**

Local Government Area	Private boarding houses		Publicly Owned Not For Profit Managed		Publicly Owned Privately Managed		Total boarding houses			
	No	Beds	No	Beds	No	Beds	N		%	
	No	Beds	No	Beds	No	Beds	No	Beds	No	Beds
<b>Metropolitan</b>										
ADELAIDE	14	133	5	76	2	116	21	325	18.3	28.0
BURNSIDE	2	32	-	-	-	-	2	32	1.7	2.8
CHARLES STURT	17	128	-	-	-	-	17	128	14.8	11.0
HOLDFAST BAY	8	70	-	-	-	-	8	70	7.0	6.0
MARION	1	12	-	-	-	-	1	12	0.9	1.0
NORWOOD, PAYNEHAM & ST PETERS	6	71	-	-	-	-	6	71	5.2	6.1
ONKAPARINGA			1	15	-	-	1	15	0.9	1.3
PORT ADELAIDE ENFIELD	19	148	1	5	-	-	20	153	17.4	13.2
PROSPECT	6	41	-	-	-	-	6	41	5.2	3.5
SALISBURY	9	101	-	-	-	-	9	101	7.8	8.7
UNLEY	4	35	-	-	-	-	4	35	3.5	3.0
WEST TORRENS	11	123	-	-	-	-	11	123	9.6	10.6
<b>Sub total</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>894</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>1106</b>	<b>92.2</b>	<b>95.2</b>
<b>Country</b>										
COORONG	1	6	-	-	-	-	1	6	0.9	0.5
MID MURRAY	1	6	-	-	-	-	1	6	0.9	0.5
MT GAMBIER	2	18	-	-	-	-	2	18	1.7	1.5
TATIARA	1	8	-	-	-	-	1	8	0.9	0.7
VICTOR HARBOR	4	18	-	-	-	-	4	18	3.5	1.5
<b>Sub total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>4.8</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>950</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>1162</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

NB: 1. data current as at 1 Jan 2002  
2. bed numbers may be approximations

By way of comparison, this figure is similar to that proposed by Chamberlain<sup>35</sup> who estimated 1,299 persons living in boarding houses in South Australia on Census night in 1996 (although counting rules for the studies were different). The 1988 count<sup>36</sup> of boarding houses identified 125 properties and 1543 beds in the metropolitan area indicating a reduction of close to 30% of boarding house beds since this time. However this figure should be viewed cautiously given that (a) there were variations between counting techniques between these two studies, and (b) some of the properties counted in 1987/88 are now licensed as Supported Residential Facilities and therefore excluded from this study.

<sup>35</sup> Chamberlain C (1999), op.cit.

<sup>36</sup> Hefferan P (1988), op.cit.

In addition, a number of inner city low-cost private hotels were also identified as accommodating short and long term residents who could be regarded as boarders, amounting to approximately 100 beds. (These have not been included in the tables and figures reported here.) There would also be similar hotels in the suburbs; however surveying these premises was beyond the scope of this study.

The distribution of the boarding houses in the metropolitan area is mapped overleaf.

Overall most boarding houses are located in older established and low-income suburbs. In the metropolitan area, the Local Government Area of Adelaide has the highest proportion of boarding house beds, with close to 30% of the identified beds. Taken as a group, the western suburb LGAs of Charles Sturt, West Torrens and Port Adelaide Enfield share over a third (36.5%) of all identified beds.

The major share of the boarding house sector in the metropolitan area is in the hands of private operators. Of publicly-owned properties, seven boarding houses in the metropolitan area were managed and operated by Not For Profit operators, accounting for 96 beds (8.7% of total metropolitan beds). At the time of the study a further two properties were publicly owned (by the South Australian Housing Trust) and leased to private operators.<sup>37</sup>

## **5.2 The current stock of boarding houses**

The following section summarises information about the current stock of boarding houses derived from sources including information provided by Local Government, field work observations and interviews with proprietors.

### **5.2.1 Size of properties**

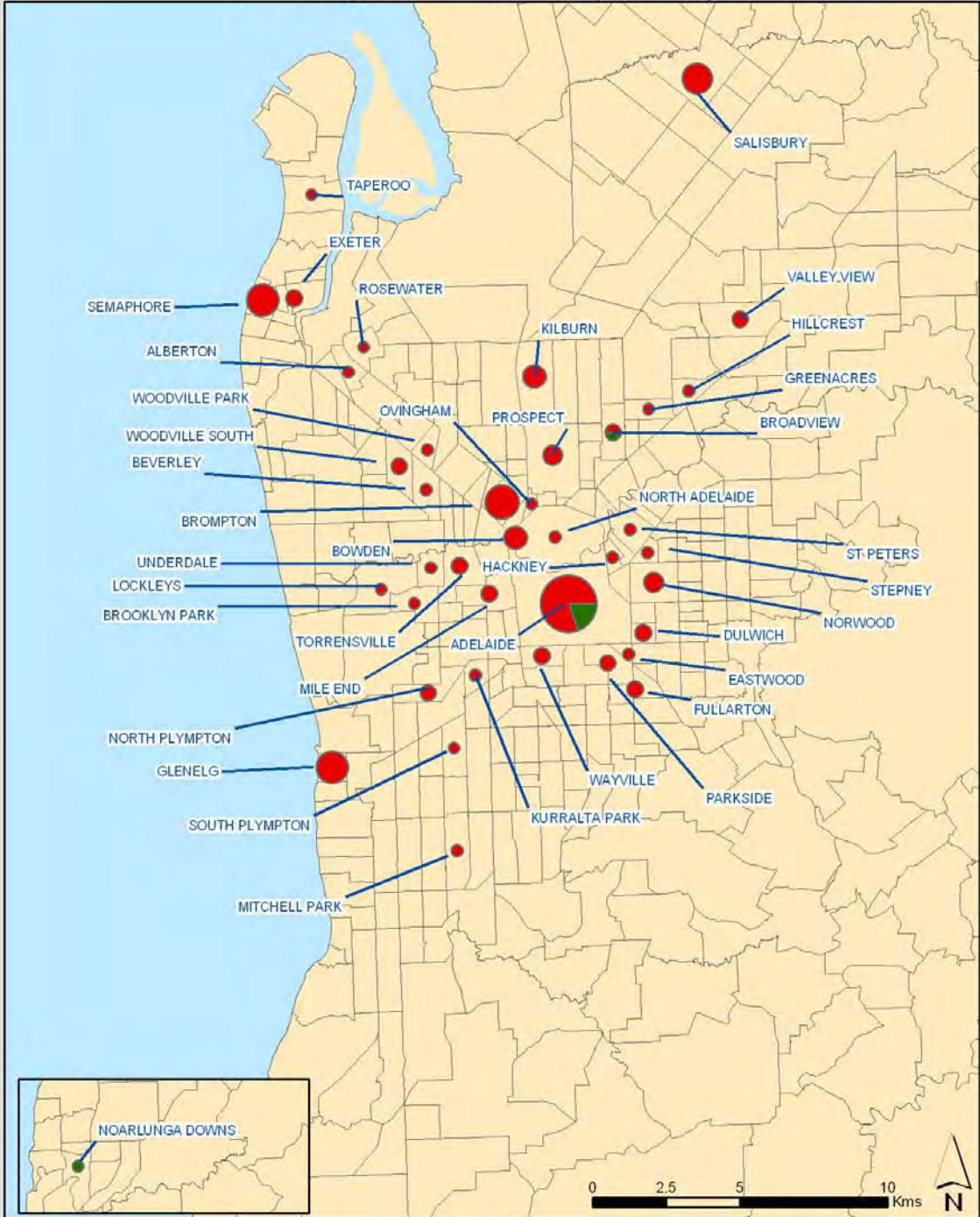
Most boarding houses are smaller premises of between 3 and 8 residents. 68 properties (64%) were in this category, with most of these (51 properties or 48% of the total) comprising 6 to 8 residents. Larger properties were less common - 23 properties (22% of total) accommodated between 9 and 19 residents, and 12 properties (11% of total) accommodated 20 or more residents.

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<sup>37</sup> Data classifies the Afton Private Hotel as a privately operated boarding house. However management has since been transferred to a community organisation. Data does not include Russell House and Glenelg House, both of which are owned by SAHT, as they were licensed SRFs during the period of the study.



## Boarding Houses by Suburb Privately and Community Managed



Data Source:  
Boarding House Survey, Jan. 2002  
Produced by:  
Data Analysis and Consulting Unit  
Information Management Services  
Department of Human Services  
Printed July 2002



### 5.2.2 Age of properties

Most commonly boarding houses operate in older properties. This has implications for the standard of stock as well as the costs of maintenance and improvements. However there are few instances of newer properties being purchased by private operators and renovated to establish boarding houses.

#### **Large Boarding House Inner Western Suburbs**

The building is a single story old stone villa, in reasonable condition, on the corner of a main road. It is close to transport and houses single males and some females and couples. A total of 30 people are resident. Red brick units were built out the back in the 1970's. The kitchen, bathroom and laundry facilities are at the rear of the main building. There are 3 toilets, 3 bathrooms and 1 washing machine. Gas stoves in the kitchen are paid for via a meter. There is a covered pergola area between the main building and the units and off street parking for a small number of cars. This space is used as a common area.

One family have owned and managed the property for over 20 years and a family member is manager. The manager in turn has appointed a resident caretaker, but also visits regularly. Family members do most of the cleaning and minor maintenance.

Rents range from \$70 to \$120 per week depending on the size of the room and facilities available. Units with cooking facilities are priced at \$120.

### 5.2.3 Multiple ownership

There are approximately 70 boarding house proprietors in South Australia. Thirteen individuals or families were identified as multiple owners, owning or managing between 2 and 5 properties each, accounting for more than 40 boarding houses. Generally, private proprietors have other business interests with their boarding houses only providing a proportion of their income.

#### **Medium Sized Boarding House Inner City**

The boarding house consists of two attached single-fronted old stone cottages with a besser block extension. The backyard is a small paved space between the ablutions area and besser block units. According to the residents the washing machine does not work. The kitchen has an old style gas stove and is the only common space in the house. The owner lives part time at the house.

The major source of referrals to the house are welfare organisations and the Housing Trust. The residents say they select amongst themselves who to house.

There are no written house rules but some unwritten ones such as no visitors, a rule largely ignored by residents.

#### 5.2.4 Standards and amenity

Whilst it was not the purpose of this study to carry out an assessment of property standards, several observations about the standards of properties can be made:

- Standards vary greatly across the sector. Roughly a quarter of the properties observed were regarded to be in poor condition.
- It is common for outhouses, sheds and garages, some of fibro and tin construction, to be used as bedrooms, especially in poor standard properties. It is also common for poor quality properties to be out of sight behind high fencing.
- Properties owned by the Housing Trust and those operated by Not For Profit organisations were observed to be consistently of good standard; while privately owned and operated properties were of variable standard.

##### **Small Boarding House Inner Western Suburbs**

The building is a double fronted old stone cottage in very poor condition. The roof is rusting, chimney collapsing and a tarp is used to seal a side doorway from the elements. The inside of the house is also poor. A number of walls have cracks in them. There is no garage or off street parking. The house is partly concealed behind a brush fence and is in a heavily industrialised area.

The boarding house houses 9 single males some of whom receive support from a welfare organisation. Rents range from \$35 per week to \$55 including utilities depending on the size of the room. There are no written house rules.

The property was subject to a Housing Improvement Act Order until 1998. The property is owned by a proprietor who owns other boarding houses which appear in a similar condition.

##### **Large Boarding House Southern Suburbs**

The building is a single story triple fronted rendered stone house in apparently poor condition. Corrugated iron and fibro sheds at rear form part of the residence. Approximately 12 caravans are permanently located at the rear of the property each with a carport type of covering. Caravans are spaced less than two metres apart. There is no recreation area on the grounds with caravans taking up most of the space.

The inside of the house also appears in poor condition. A number of walls have cracks in them and also mould. Mice droppings could be observed in the kitchen.

The property houses 25 plus men, some in share rooms, at approximately \$80 per week. It is owned by a family who also own another boarding house .



### 5.2.5 Development of new stock

The main area of expansion of the sector is private operators buying up low cost domestic dwellings in the inner suburbs to establish boarding facilities which predominantly house single men. Housing small numbers of residents means that these properties may not be covered by LGA regulations (where they exist).

#### **Small Boarding House Western Suburbs**

Seven residents live in the boarding house, a single fronted old stone cottage in fair condition on a small block. Rent is \$70pw for a room with a fridge and TV and including utilities. The main part of the house has four bedrooms. A divided fibro outhouse in the yard forms two additional rooms and the garage another. The walls in the garage and outhouse are not lined and residents report problems with noise from the street. These rooms appear in a very poor condition.

There is shared use of a small kitchen with two gas burners. There is not enough space in the kitchen to sit down. There is no common room or recreation space and residents congregate outdoors in a small concrete area on two benches.

The property has been owned by one family (who also own other boarding houses) for a number of years.

## **6 RESIDENT PERCEPTIONS OF BOARDING HOUSE LIFE**

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Sandra is in her late 40's. She had a difficult childhood - her father died when she was young, her mother had several nervous breakdowns and spent some time in an institution. Sandra was placed in foster care for a time. She went to a number of schools; after leaving school early she had periods of low-paid work interspersed with unemployment. Sandra says she is heavily dependent on alcohol and prescription medication and has used speed and other drugs. She has been hospitalised for mental health problems.

Sandra has been married twice: firstly to Ron with whom she had two children, and secondly to Geoff with whom she had two more. One of these children was fostered out after Geoff claimed it was not his. With both husbands she lived mostly in private rental accommodation. When Sandra separated from Geoff, he was given custody of their child.

Sandra lived in private rental and on and off with her mother after the marriage break-up. This ended when her mother moved into a single bedroom Housing Trust house.

Sandra has lived in three different boarding houses. She left the first as the drug and alcohol affected state of other residents scared her. She quite liked the second one because of its closeness to shops but thought it was too big, with too many fights with the police always attending. She stayed there for almost three years. Sandra lived at the third boarding house for 12 months. This boarding house was across the road from her mum's house.

At this boarding house Sandra paid \$70 per week for a room with a single bed, a heater, fridge and television. Her room was a fibro outbuilding at the rear of a single fronted cottage housing six other residents. There was no common area. She did not feel the facilities were up to scratch and thought there should have been a lounge room. She would also have liked a double bed but her room was too small. Sandra's boyfriend lived in a single room in the same boarding house. She spent her days going to the pub getting takeways and drinking them in her room with her boyfriend or in the small backyard area and popping in and out on mum.

Last year Sandra moved into a private rental flat after she inherited some money. But soon after she moved back to a boarding house having spent most of her money.

### **6.1 Methodology**

One hundred and forty residents of boarding houses in metropolitan Adelaide were interviewed, approximately 12% of the estimated resident population. The interview covered housing history and future plans, plus perspectives of their accommodation and rights.

Ethics approval for the study was provided by the Department of Human Services Research Ethics Sub-Committee. The interviewer was a trained social worker with extensive experience in housing and homelessness. Residents were offered reimbursement of \$10 for their participation.

Boarding houses were selected as a site for interviews in a process which included obtaining a spread of participants across Adelaide and from different sizes and standards of facilities. A small number of facilities were excluded due to concerns for the interviewers' safety on the property. Once a site was chosen, the interviewer made an introductory visit to the facility, where possible speaking to the proprietor or caretaker/manager. Usually, a time was made to return to the boarding house based on the proprietor/manager's views on when a reasonable number of residents would be present, and the most convenient time to interview. This ranged from 10am to late afternoon, and on occasion evening or night visits.

The interviewer then visited the premises at the identified time and approached residents, explaining the study, giving them an information leaflet, and inviting them to participate. Residents obviously incapacitated (eg due to alcohol use) were not approached. Interviews were anonymous. In larger premises, and based on the advice of the proprietor, the interviewer attempted to get a spread of "type" of residents using factors such as age, length of tenancy and life situations. On occasion, the interviewer re-visited the premises in order to include certain residents, eg those who were working.

## 6.2 Profile of respondents

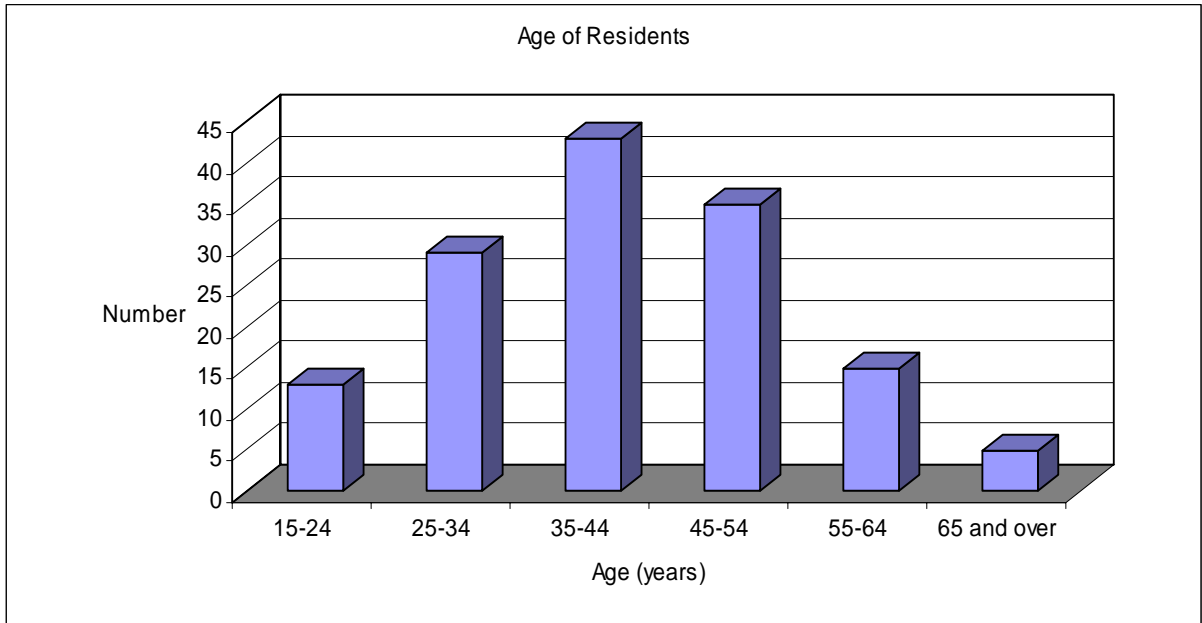
Of the 140 residents interviewed, 129 were male and 11 female. Almost all (95%) were born either in Australia or another English speaking country (Table 6.1). Six residents (4.2%) identified as of Aboriginal descent.

**Table 6.1: Country of birth of residents**

Country of birth	N	%
Australia	115	82.1
English speaking countries	18	12.9
Non English speaking countries	7	5.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Ages ranged from 17 to 74 years, with a mean age for men of 41.8 and for women 38.9 years. Almost one third were aged between 35 and 44. Only 9.3% were aged 25 or under, and a small number (3.6%) were aged 65 or over (Figure 6.1). Most commonly residents were aged between 35-44 years.

**Figure 6.1: Age of residents**



All but a very few said that they were single, with most (59.3%) never married (Table 6.2). Approximately a third were either divorced, separated or widowed. This suggests an isolated population with a high rate of relationship breakdown and few partner relationships.

**Table 6.2: Marital status of residents**

<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>%</b>
Divorced	20.7
Married (registered and defacto)	3.6
Never married	59.3
Separated	11.4
Widowed	0.7
No response	4.3
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<b>Total number</b>	<b>140</b>

Income source is summarised in Table 6.3. Financial vulnerability is indicated by the high level of dependence on Centrelink benefits or pensions (74% of respondents), whilst social vulnerability is indicated by the almost one third in receipt of the Disability Support Pension. Interviewer observation was that the type of disability was most likely to be mental health.

**Table 6.3: Income of residents**

Income source	N	%
Wages	26	18.8
Newstart Allowance	49	35.5
Disability Support Pension	44	31.9
Age Pension	7	5.1
Youth Allowance	1	0.7
Other Allowance or benefit	3	2.2
Other income source	8	5.8

Frequency Missing = 2

Almost half (46.4%) of those in receipt of wages were aged 35 to 44 years. The older aged groups had a higher proportion on Centrelink pensions or benefits (Table 6.4).

**Table 6.4: Source of Income by age of residents**

Age of resident (yrs)	Centrelink benefits %	Wages %	Other Income %	Total %	N
15-24	64.3	21.4	14.3	100.0	14
25-34	72.4	20.7	6.9	100.0	29
35-44	65.1	30.2	4.7	100.0	43
45-54	84.8	12.1	3.0	100.0	33
55-64	86.7	6.7	6.7	100.0	15
65 and over	83.3	16.7	0.0	100.0	6
Total	74.3	20.0	5.7	100.0	140

### 6.3 Housing history

Tom is a resident of a small boarding house and is on a Disability Support Pension. He is 40 years old and has lived in his current boarding house for 11 months. Prior to this he lived in two different boarding houses in the city for about 2 years. He was previously in a substance rehabilitation unit, and in gaol.

Tom was once a home-owner. However, the house was sold following the break-down of his marriage, and his housing options have since declined. Straight after the separation Tom moved to stay temporarily with friends. He has also spent time in Trust housing, but says this is no longer an option for him because of the size of his debt with SAHT. It is still, however, his housing preference.

Tom said that he is quite happy living where he is and intends to remain there, despite assessing his accommodation as being mostly fair or poor in terms of facilities and services. He prefers smaller boarding houses as there is 'more privacy and personal space'.

Most of those interviewed had lived in boarding houses for 12 months or longer. However, there was also a steady inflow of new residents into the

sector, with 14.3% having lived in boarding houses for less than one month (Table 6.5).

Although residents tended to have lived long-term in boarding houses, this was not matched by length of current tenancy. Thus only 27.1% had lived in their current residence for 12 months or more, compared to 59.3% who had lived in boarding houses for 12 months or more. This suggests unstable tenancy and mobility as a feature of boarding house life.

**Table 6.5: Length of time in boarding houses current and all**

Length of time	Living at current boarding house		Living in Boarding Houses	
	N	%	N	%
Less than one month	29	20.7	20	14.3
1 - 3 months	17	12.1	9	6.4
3 - 6 months	32	22.9	14	10.0
6 - 12 months	24	17.1	14	10.0
Greater than 12 months	38	27.1	83	59.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The older population were more stable in their tenancy: 90% of respondents aged 55 years or over had lived at their current address for over 12 months, including one who had lived in the same boarding house for over 20 years. By contrast, most (57%) of those aged 34 or under had lived at their current address for less than 3 months. This suggests a combination of a mobile younger population and a more stable population of older residents.

There is a lot of 'traffic' between boarding houses, with residents moving from one facility to another. Almost half the respondents (47%) had lived in other boarding houses, either in South Australia or interstate. One respondent said he had lived in 20 other boarding houses, and 12 had lived in 5 or more. Some respondents identified particular facilities they had lived in, and amongst these were a number of Supported Residential Facilities (respondents did not necessarily distinguish between a SRF and a boarding house) indicating the cross-over between sectors. 16% of respondents had lived in interstate boarding houses.

The most common reason for leaving a previous boarding house was dissatisfaction with the standard of the premises and the other residents:

*"There was too much noise and arguments and police visiting";*

*"There were lots of IV drug users and my room was broken into";*

*"The place was a dump and the people were desperados".*

Several residents had moved from Supported Residential Facilities because they could at least have their own room in a boarding house. As one complained, the SRF was *"too crowded - six to a room"*.

Conflict with other residents, which could precipitate eviction, was the next most common reason for moving from one boarding house to another: *"I was kicked out over a dispute"; "Problems with other residents"; "I had a fight and got evicted"*.

Some said they just moved around a lot, from place to place and one form of short-stay accommodation to another, and no particular reason had triggered the move.

Other moves between boarding houses were triggered by the need to change location or area. Reasons could be employment related (*"The site work I was doing was finished"; "I found casual work in this area"*); or about relationships: (*"I came to Adelaide to see my son"; "I'm travelling around looking for family"; "I moved to Adelaide to get away from a woman"*.)

Respondents were asked to summarize their housing history, and specifically if they had ever lived in a number of accommodation options (Table 6.6).

**Table 6.6: Housing history**

<b>Housing history</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Homeowner	24	17.1
SAHT/Public Rental	34	24.3
Private Rental Market	113	80.7
Lived with friends	76	54.3
Caravan Park	18	12.9
Shelter	10	7.1
Slept rough	28	20.0
Total	140	

Note: Residents may have lived in more than one housing situation so percentages do not add up to 100

Responses indicate a high degree of housing vulnerability and use of unstable and insecure accommodation options (aside from boarding houses) which equate with homelessness, namely sleeping rough; staying with friends; and living in caravans and shelters, as well as moving between these options and from place to place. Most (58%) had lived in at least one of these situations.

*"I lived in private rental with my partner, then I left and lived with a friend and then in a homeless shelter. I moved into Housing Trust accommodation but I had a breakdown, then went to live with my parents for a while"*.

*"I lived in private rental for over 14 years. I couldn't afford the rent rises and became homeless"*.

*"I lived in a few flats in Melbourne and also stayed at mates' places. I spent time in gaol for drugs and violence. I lived in boarding houses and moved around a lot. I stayed in an unlicensed unregistered car with a mate for 6 months, living on the beaches".*

Most boarding house residents (80.7%) reported having rented privately, a vulnerable arrangement for people on low income. 17% had also, at some time, been a home owner, but had lost the home, usually following a relationship break up.

Respondents summarised their housing history in a couple of sentences, however even in these brief and incomplete accounts most volunteered significant life events which they saw as triggering their move to a boarding house and declining quality of housing. Notable was the many references to losses – of significant relationships, family, financial security – which impacted on housing. Factors identified in the brief housing stories are summarised below.

**Table 6.7: Housing history – reasons for moves**

<b>Reasons</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Relationship with partner breakdown	47	34.3
Family breakdown	2	1.5
Mental health	9	6.6
Drugs use	8	5.8
Travel/ transience	29	21.2
Other health	4	2.9
Financial pressures	15	10.9
Homelessness	15	10.9
Eviction	8	5.8
Conflict with other tenants	16	11.7
Prison	9	6.6
Work related accommodation	8	5.8
No reasons given	15	10.9
Other	15	10.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>137</b>	

Relationship breakdown was the single most common issue cited, and identified as a factor by over a third. Commonly, housing was lost when a partner relationship split. Sometimes the female partner remained in the housing (perhaps with the children) and the man moved out; or the family home was sold. Financial pressures following separation restricted housing options. This was sometimes matched by deterioration in other life domains and a loss of family connections. Shame and embarrassment at present circumstances could reinforce isolation and disconnection, and limit ability to reconnect with family, particularly children.



*"I lived in private rental with my wife, and then we bought a house. After we separated she got the house. I got a pay out but I blew it on gambling. I went to live in a boarding house".*

*"I lived in private rental and then a Housing Trust place with my wife. After we split up she stayed in the house with our daughter".*

*"I mainly lived in Defence Force housing interstate. After I left that I lived in a caravan and then my wife and I were in public housing. After we separated my wife moved to Adelaide so I moved here too, to be close to the children, but I really don't see much of them. I wouldn't want to tell them I'm living in a boarding house".*

A high degree of mobility was evident in the stories of approximately one fifth of respondents. This was accompanied by disconnection from family and significant relationships.

*"I was born in New South Wales. I've been travelling around Australia picking up casual work for 20 years. I've lived in flats in Brisbane and Sydney".*

*"I lived in public housing with my family, then I was placed into foster care. Since then I've traveled all my life working odd jobs and living in caravan parks, boarding houses and a flat".*

*"I'm on the move; I can't settle down".*

For a few, the boarding house was essentially backpacker, or short-stay accommodation and they had bases somewhere else: *"I'm from England and currently touring Australia"; "I live in Melbourne and I'm just over here for 3 months for work".*

Many respondents had shared housing with others. The ending of these arrangements precipitated housing insecurity and/or housing decline:

*"I lived with my mother in private rental. When she died I couldn't afford the rent on the house. I lived in boarding houses and then lived rough in a car until I came to Adelaide."*

*"I lived with friends in a share house but the house was sold and we had to move. We couldn't get another house so I came here".*

*"I lived in a flat in New South Wales. I had to leave there because the other residents were into speed and other stuff. I came here to get away from them".*

Drug use, mental health problems and financial pressures all contributed to housing instability and poor housing options:

*"We owned a house in Perth and lost it due to my ex dealing in speed. We came to Adelaide, lived in private rental. We lost the house, lived in a shelter, split up".*

*"I lived in flats and then got a Housing Trust place. I fell behind in rent and it got trashed by druggies. I left the house to get away from them".*

A small group of men had been reliant on predominantly work-based accommodation for extended periods of time. Some had little experience of "normal" housing, and no expectations of, or aspirations to, a house as a home; and others had not had to think about or plan for their housing whilst earning.

*Bob, an aged pensioner, spent his working life in remote areas in construction gangs. His accommodation was in camps, huts, caravans or tents and he has never lived in private or public rental in Australia or owned a house. He moved into his current boarding house when he retired, and has been there for a number of years. It suits his needs.*

Marginal housing could also follow imprisonment:

*"I was in gaol interstate for 18 years. I moved into private rental then I came to Adelaide and lived in boarding houses".*

In summary, respondents usually had histories of unstable and marginal accommodation and moving through a range of types of housing. Their brief housing histories indicated emotional, social and financial vulnerability, and often losses or life patterns which impacted on housing. Most had experienced primary or secondary homelessness.<sup>38</sup>

## **6.4 Resident assessment of boarding houses**

David, aged 45, lives in a boarding house in the western suburbs. The house is made of corrugated iron and is in very poor condition. Internal walls are also of iron and in places there are holes. There are six men in the house, two of whom live in fibro outhouses. The kitchen is the only common space. The bathroom is a substandard room attached to the kitchen and it appeared that one side of the room is subsiding. Some of the internal walls had holes in them. For David "it's no palace but it's cheap rent".

Terry is a disability pensioner. He pays \$60 per week for his room, about six square metres in size, in a fibro attachment at the rear of the boarding house. Inside his room he has a fridge, television and single bed. The kitchen is the only common space. Terry is the caretaker and responsible for administering house rules, conducting evictions, collecting rents and maintaining the grounds. He gets reduced rental for this work. He lives in the boarding house because it is cheap and he can't afford a flat. He has spent a number of

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<sup>38</sup> 'Primary homelessness' refers to people without conventional accommodation ie those sleeping rough, or in makeshift shelters. 'Secondary homelessness' refers to those moving frequently from one form of temporary accommodation to another ie in crisis accommodation, staying with friends or family, or staying in boarding houses on an intermittent basis. (Chamberlain, (1999), op.cit.)

years in prison, and says that, compared with gaol, his current accommodation is a palace.

Respondents were asked to rate the standard of facilities in their current boarding house, from "poor" to "very good" (Table 6.8). Most (54%) were unable to provide an assessment of the common area/lounge because the boarding house did not have one. The lack of a common area, or its poor standard when it existed, was a common complaint.

**Table 6.8: Assessment of physical facilities (%)**

Physical Facilities	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Total	Total number
Toilet	14.4	38.8	41.0	5.8	100.0	139
Bathroom/shower	15.8	36.7	41.7	5.8	100.0	139
Laundry	24.4	28.9	39.3	7.4	100.0	135
Kitchen and cooking area	21.7	33.3	37.7	7.2	100.0	138
Common area	9.7	25.8	53.2	11.3	100.0	62
Personal room	9.4	29.7	52.9	8.0	100.0	138
Furnishings	16.7	39.9	38.4	5.1	100.0	138
Other	22.2	11.1	33.3	33.3	100.0	9

Less than half the residents assessed the standards of the toilet, bathrooms, laundry, kitchen, and furnishings as good or very good. Almost a quarter reported that the laundry facilities were poor, and about one fifth described the kitchen as poor. Residents were most likely to rate their own room as good or very good.

Residents were also asked to rate the standard of general services provided at their accommodation.

**Table 6.9: Standard of general services (% of responses)**

General services	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Number of responses
Meals	0.0	17.4	43.5	39.1	23
Linen service	14.3	3.6	50.0	32.1	28
Lounge areas	11.9	26.2	45.2	16.7	42
Staff help	16.3	17.5	38.8	27.5	80
Cleaning	19.2	28.3	37.4	15.2	99
Repairs and maintenance	25.2	30.5	37.4	6.9	131
Recreation facilities	27.7	34.0	34.0	4.3	47
Outdoor amenities	29.8	32.3	31.5	6.5	124
Privacy	8.7	29.0	58.7	3.6	138
Security	14.4	27.3	52.5	5.8	139

*Note: Not all services are provided at all boarding houses.*

Most residents rated outdoor amenities, recreation facilities and repairs and maintenance as only poor to fair, and the standard of cleaning was rated low by almost half. Privacy, security, recreation facilities, outdoor amenities and repairs and maintenance were described as "very good" by only a small

number of respondents. By contrast, meals (available to 17% of respondents) and a linen service (available to 21%) were rated highly.

## **6.5 Support networks**

During the fieldwork for the study, an elderly proprietor approached the interviewer and requested help with a resident, who he said was incapable of caring for himself and an alcoholic. The resident had recently injured himself in an alcohol induced fall. The proprietor did not know what to do or where to get help - he had tried a number of services, but could not find anyone willing to come out and assess the resident or help find more appropriate housing. The interviewer attempted to make contact with the resident, but he ran off when he saw the interviewer approaching. The interviewer also attempted to locate an outreach service that would visit into the boarding house. Within two months, the resident had a major violent episode which resulted in police intervention and admission to a psychiatric unit.

Residents of boarding houses are widely believed to be a vulnerable and frequently isolated population, often with unmet needs for support and lacking access to networks and services. Consequently, a number of questions were included in the questionnaire which sought to indicate resident links to support. However, this is a complex and personal issue and could not be properly explored in the interview format.

The interviewer observed that proximity to support services was often identified by residents as one of the factors influencing their choice of boarding house. In particular, the cities of Adelaide, Port Adelaide and Enfield and Charles Sturt were attractive due to the ease of access to services including health care, personal support, food and clothing.

Respondents were asked to identify who, if anyone, they would contact in a range of circumstances of need (Table 6.10).

As with most of the community, General Practitioners were most commonly identified as the point of contact when sick, although 17% indicated they would go straight to a hospital, suggesting a high use of emergency department services.

Welfare organisations were the first choice for most residents (50.7%) if in need of food or clothing. Residents specifically mentioned using Hutt Street Day Centre, the Magdalene Centre, Adelaide Day Centre, Port Adelaide Central Mission, the Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul Society, Westcare and Anglicare. The familiarity with these services suggest the vulnerability of many in the boarding house population and their marginal status with regards to the basic needs of food and clothing.

**Table 6.10: Residents, Person or organisation contacted by nature of need**

<b>Person or organisation would you contact if you were</b>	<b>Sick and needing medical treatment</b>	<b>In need of food or clothing</b>	<b>In need of money</b>	<b>Looking for other board and lodgings</b>	<b>Had a complaint about the landlord</b>	<b>Need advice on a personal matter</b>
Another boarder	0.7	0.7	5.0	19.3	7.3	6.4
Family	1.4	8.6	17.9	0.0	6.4	23.6
Friends	1.4	6.4	12.9	4.3	3.6	33.6
GP	70.7	0.0	0.0	1.4	0.0	3.6
Hospital	17.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.1	0.0
Professional person	2.1	0.0	0.0	2.1	1.4	6.4
Proprietor	0.7	0.0	0.0	4.3	42.1	5.0
Welfare Organisation	2.9	50.7	2.9	2.9	2.1	2.1
Centrelink	0.0	0.7	15.0	0.7	0.0	0.0
Housing Information Service	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.7	3.6	0.0
Newspaper	0.0	0.0	0.0	37.1	0.0	0.0
Residential Tenancies Tribunal	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.3	0.0
Other	1.4	0.7	2.1	7.9	5.7	3.6
None	0.7	30.7	40.0	10.7	6.4	15.7
No response	0.7	1.4	4.3	3.6	15.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total number	140	140	140	140	140	140

Respondents were also asked if they had a health/welfare person (eg a social worker or worker in a day centre) with whom they were in regular contact. 28% (39 respondents) reported that they did (Table 6.11), and most commonly a General Practitioner followed by mental health services.<sup>39</sup>

**Table 6.11: Regular support services**

<b>Professional support</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Accommodation service	1	2.6
Correctional services	2	5.1
GP	14	35.9
Hospital services	2	5.1
Mental health services	9	23.1
Welfare organisations	5	12.8
Not stated	8	20.5
Total respondents	39	100

The interviewer observed many instances of unmet need for support services amongst the boarding house population, particularly amongst the younger, more transient residents who were not connected into a local area. Stories related during the interviews suggested that some residents had lost

<sup>39</sup> The interviewer felt that there may have been some non-disclosure in relation to this question, in particular that people were wary of identifying contact with services which were felt to have some stigma attached – for example, mental health and welfare.

accommodation due to problem behaviour which may have been averted with support.

The study also attempted to obtain a picture of social interaction between residents. The responses suggest interaction at a fairly superficial level – chatting in common areas, on verandahs or in gardens, but less of the social activities that characterise friendships (going out together, sharing activities or meals).

**Table 6.12: Residents, number of other boarders interacting with by social situation (%)**

<b>Social situation</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Total</b>
Chat to in comon area or garder	7.1	7.1	16.4	16.4	9.3	43.6	100.0
Chat to in their rooms	38.6	25.7	17.1	7.1	3.6	7.9	100.0
Go shopping walking with	54.3	27.9	10.7	2.9	2.1	2.1	100.0
Socialize with at pub/club/here	34.3	24.3	22.9	6.4	5.0	7.1	100.0
Share chores cooking etc	66.4	19.3	5.7	2.9	2.1	3.6	100.0

Some residents indicated that the social interaction in the boarding house was significant to them, and better than the alternative of isolation in the community (*"There's people to talk to and I've got my own room"*). "Companionship" was identified as a positive aspect of boarding house life by most respondents (see following section), but simultaneously "dealing with other residents" was a downside. Finding people you could get on with and talk to was important, especially for those dependent on others in the boarding house for their social needs, but not necessarily easy to achieve.

## 6.6 Views on boarding house life

Bill is 70 years old and has lived in a boarding house in the western suburbs for the last four years. His major source of income is the aged pension but he still drives taxis to pay off a debt.

Bill has two children and was a home-owner with his wife for many years. The house was sold after they separated. He then lived in a flat but left to live in a boarding house which provided full board so he could get better meals. After 6 years Bill became unhappy with the standard of food and rent rises. He moved to his current boarding house where he has a small room.

Bill is fairly happy where he lives except that his personal possessions make the room very cluttered. His present location is close to the doctor, shops and transport. He says he does not want to change anything in his life as he wouldn't feel secure with change.

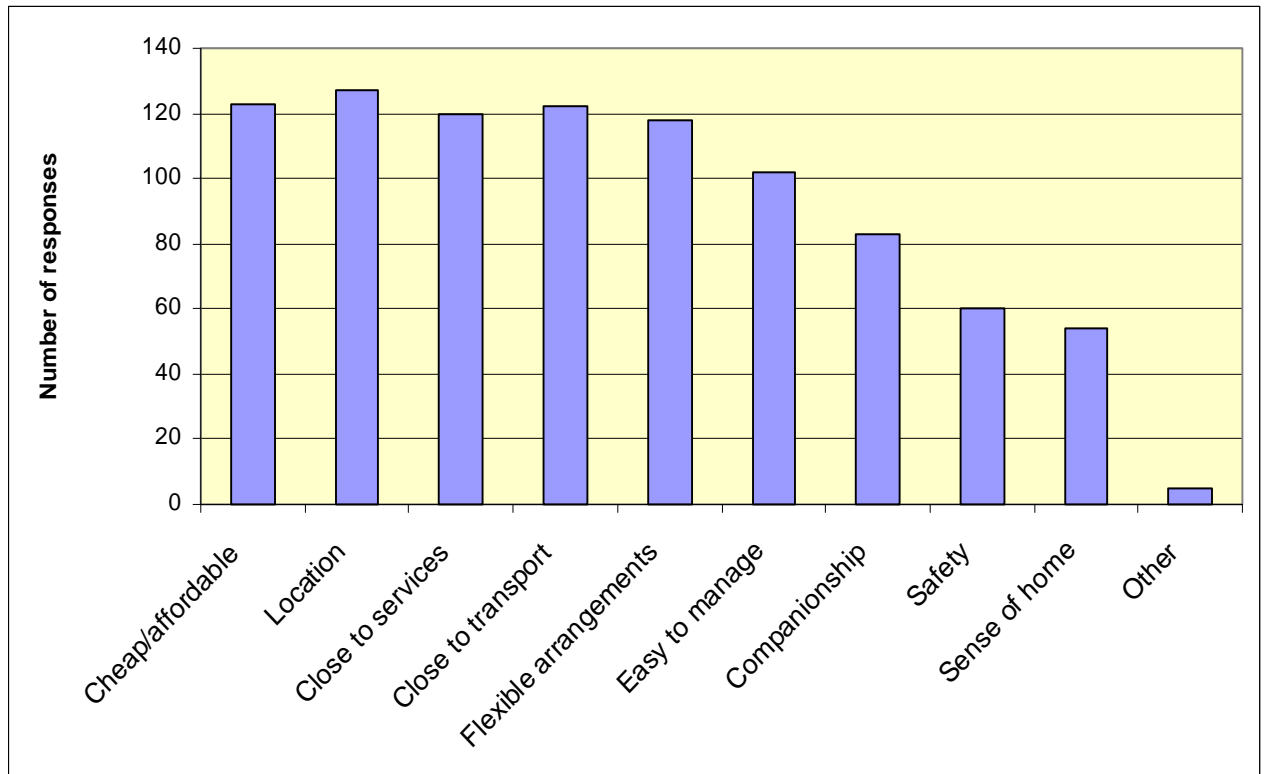
Bill's main complaint is that house rules are not enforced as they should be. He has been threatened by other residents for reporting breaches of rules to the manager.

Bill's children want him to live in Housing Trust accommodation. He thinks he should put his name down on the waiting list but hasn't yet done so. If he

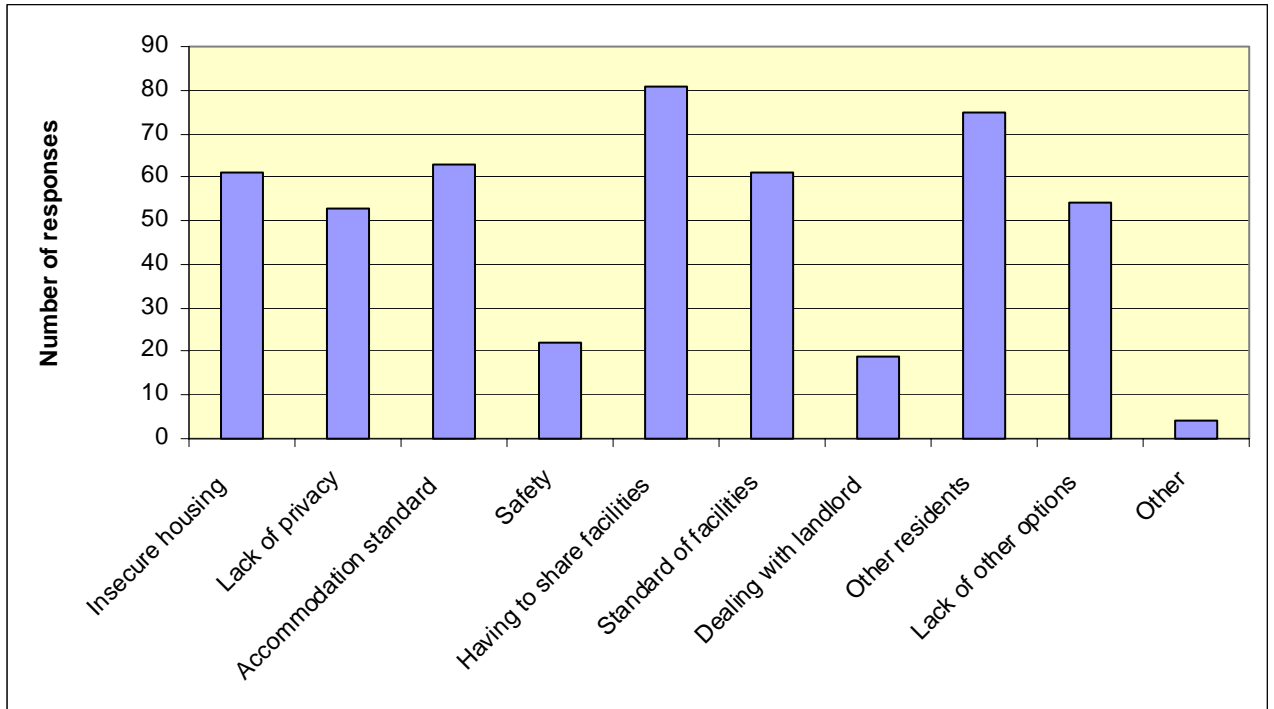
had a chance of a Trust home with the same access to facilities he would take it.

Respondents were asked to identify both the positive and negative aspects of living in a boarding house (Figure 6.2). Affordability, location, proximity to transport and services, and the flexible and "easy to manage" nature of boarding house life were commonly identified, and the opportunity to be around others was also valued by most. On the other hand, having to share facilities and problems with other residents were negatives identified by more than half, and insecurity of tenure and the standard of the accommodation were issues for almost half. Privacy was a common concern. A small but not insignificant proportion of respondents (15.7%) indicated that they had fears for their own safety in boarding houses.

**Figure 6.2: Positive aspects of living in a boarding house**



**Figure 6.3: Negative aspects of living in a boarding house**



Most respondents (82%) thought they got “good value” for the board they paid. Reasons given include location, proximity to transport and services, cheapness compared with private rental and the inclusion of utilities in the rent charge.

Ten participants (7%) received a rent reduction for acting as caretakers. Typically their tasks included collection of rents, administration of house rules, evictions, resident selection and cleaning. For undertaking these tasks caretaker-residents receive as little as \$20 per week in reduction of rent.

*Charlie, an aged pensioner, is the resident care-taker of a boarding house in the inner suburbs where he has lived for 20 years. He is responsible for administering house rules, conducting evictions, selecting and admitting new residents, collecting rent and maintaining the grounds. The house has a very low turn-over and most residents have lived there for between one and seven years. Charlie says residents have to ‘fit in.’ He does not accept women, as he says from his past experiences they are ‘trouble’.*

Residents were asked if they were satisfied living in their present location – and most (81%) said they were. A good location meant being near to services, shops and public transport. Boarding houses provided a means of living in an otherwise unaffordable location (eg the inner city). For low income earners this opens up access to a life-style, services and facilities that they would not otherwise have.

*“It’s right in the heart of the city”.*  
*“It’s very handy to shops and transport”.*



*"It's close to all the things I know".*

*"I couldn't find anything else for this price".*

Respondents were asked to identify the size of boarding house they prefer – and most said they liked the size they were currently living in. Residents preferring smaller boarding houses said they were more 'homely' and less likely to contain problem residents. However, those preferring larger facilities said they provided a better opportunity to meet others.

Respondents were asked if there was anything they would like to change about their current living environment. This was answered in widely varying ways. A few indicated that there was nothing they wanted to change, though for different reasons (*"It's quite smooth the way things are"; "I'm happy here and I'm doing some gardening"; "I wouldn't feel secure with change".*)

The majority indicated that they wanted to change something, but this ranged from the radical (*"Everything about my life"*) to the detail (*"A new shower screen"*).

Most commonly people wanted to change something in the standard of the facility or the way it was run: *"I'd like the place cleaned up a bit"; "I'd like a fridge, telly, better cooking facilities"; "I'd like a bigger room".*

Over a third (37%) identified change for them as connected with moving.

A quarter of respondents identified change in their personal lives (*"I want mum to get better"; "I'd like to change life"; "I want to go back home"; "I need a job"*). 10% specifically volunteered that they wanted to reconnect with family (*"I'd like to be back with my family"; "I'd like to see more of the kids, I can't have them here"*).

## **6.7 Future plans**

Respondents were asked if they intended to remain living where they were. Whilst most (57%) said "yes" to this question, their comments demonstrate a range of different attitudes and situations.

Only 14% (a group of older men) viewed the boarding house as their long term home. Some of these had "retired into" the boarding house after a life of high mobility or work-based housing: *"I've had my running around and seen what I wanted"; "They'll have to carry me out in a box".*

The remainder saw the boarding house as temporary, and an arrangement which suited them to a greater or lesser degree. For one respondent trying to get away from a drug lifestyle it was *"a good area, no temptation to use"*. For another *"it's affordable until I find work"*, and for another *"it suits me for the moment."*

A quarter said that they were looking, or were planning to look for, their preferred rental accommodation. For some an upgrade in accommodation seemed a real possibility ("I move into my flat tomorrow"), while for others it seemed more in the realm of vague intentions ("I'll look for a flat when I get my inheritance"; "I'll move one day"; "I need to make friends (to move out and share a flat with)"; "It's a dream I don't see happening".)

Some were awaiting specific events which would trigger a move: "I'll stay until my Workcover case is finished"; "I'll go home when my father settles down"; "I'll stay a few more weeks until I get my truckie licence".

14% indicated the boarding house was a temporary stop in their travels, usually interstate: "I'm travelling to meet my girlfriend"; "I'll keep travelling after summer".

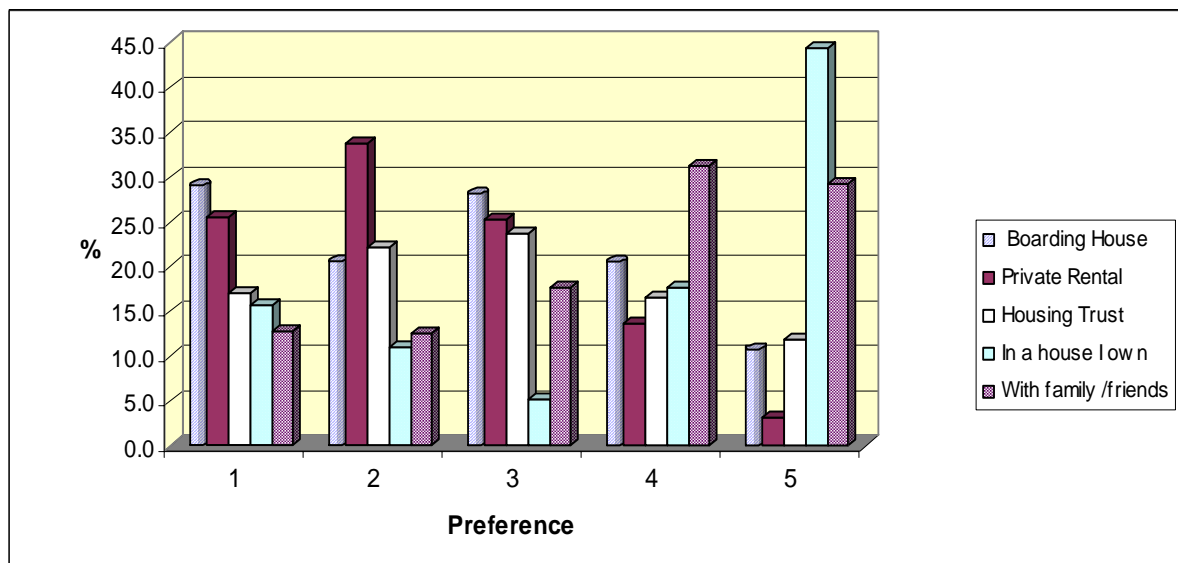
A small number (7.5%) said they were in the boarding house simply because they had no choice: "I don't have anywhere else to go"; "I have no other choices".

Several were in the boarding house for health related reasons, which may or may not be resolved: "I'm not well enough to live out in the community" (a respondent with mental health problems), "I'm here for medical reasons".

## 6.8 Housing preferences

Residents were also asked to identify their preferred housing option, given their personal circumstances, and to rate them from one to five.

**Figure 6.4: Boarding house residents preferred housing options**



Whilst the most common first preference was a boarding house, this still accounted for less than 30% of responses, and most said their first preference was something else. Even those who chose a boarding house as their preferred option often said this was based on what they considered possible (usually affordable) given their circumstances. Boarding houses are usually an option of necessity, not choice.

Those who did not select boarding houses as their preferred housing were asked to identify why they couldn't live in their first choice. A key factor in responses was affordability. Public housing is the most viable alternative, but limited availability, waiting lists and debt preclude entry.

37.5% of respondents said they were intending or hoping to move to other accommodation, but affordability was the major reason for staying in the boarding house at present. A small number (9.5%) hoped to move into private rental (*"I will live in a flat soon"*), but there were obstacles (*"I can't get a flat as even with references and a bond the agents wouldn't let to us"*).

Others were living in a boarding house during their long wait for public housing (*"I can't afford other accommodation; I'm on the Trust waiting list"*). Another group (9.4%) saw the boarding house as their only viable alternative to public housing, but were still not on the waiting list for Trust accommodation (*"I should be on the SAHT waiting list but I haven't put my name down"*). Three were hoping to get share accommodation, cheaper than sole tenancy .

Approximately a third weren't looking for other options, due to their financial situation (*"I can't afford rent or bond"*, *"I owe too much to the Housing Trust"*.)

Age was also a factor, raising the issue of affordable, decent and stable housing for aged people with no personal security (*"I'm too old to go on the Trust waiting list"*.)

15.6% cited relationship issues as the reason for not being in their preferred accommodation – the boarding house was the option they could afford given they couldn't live with a partner or family: *"I don't have family I can live with"*; *"I can't go home at the moment"* .

## **6.9 Rights and regulations**

Harry is on a Disability Support Pension and was referred to the house by his mental health worker. He lives there because rent is cheap and he can't afford a flat. He pays \$50 for his room and is concerned that the resident opposite only pays \$30. He took the issue up with the owner but was told he had no rights under the Residential Tenancies Act. He spends most days

lying on his bed watching TV as there is not enough room to put a chair next to his bed.

Matt manages a boarding house with a resident caretaker. He has recently been instructed by the Metropolitan Fire Service to install smoke detectors, and is in the process of complying. He says he has tried to weed out problem residents and thinks that increasing the rent has achieved this. The house rules state that tenants who have not paid their rent by 11 am Saturday will have their locks changed. Matt says this practice has been carried out. The house rules state that it is a Guest House and as such does not come under the Residential Tenancies Act.

Under the regulations of the Residential Tenancies Act, 'house rules' are to be in writing and proprietors are required to post (a) a copy of the house rules and (b) a copy of the regulations in a prominent location in the boarding house.

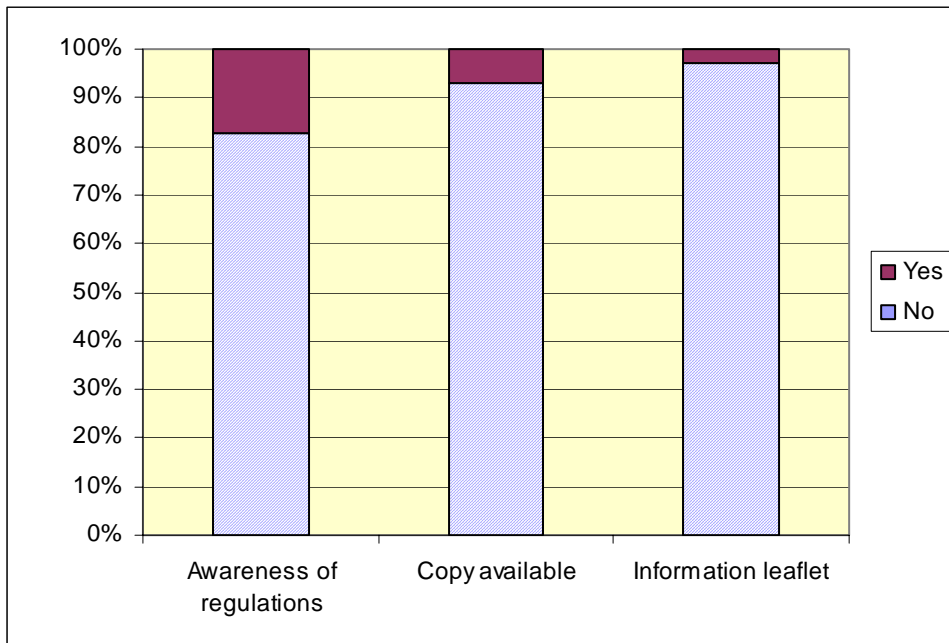
84% of participants said that there were rules for boarders in the facility in which they lived. Typically rules covered issues such as rent payment, cleaning, noise, visitors and privacy. More extreme examples of rules reported included changing tenants' locks if their rent is not paid and a ban on women on the premises.

In some boarding houses residents said they were given a printed copy of the house rules at the commencement of their residency, in others a copy was posted in a prominent place such as the kitchen door or walls, while in others managers or caretakers conveyed rules verbally.

Respondents were asked if they were aware of the rooming house regulations under the Residential Tenancies Act, if there was a copy available in their boarding house, and if they had the RTA information pamphlet (Figure 6.5).

Most respondents were not aware of the regulations. Only a very few had access to the Rooming House Regulations and even fewer had a copy of the RTA information pamphlet for boarding house residents. These responses suggest both a low rate of compliance with the legislation, but also the ineffectualness of the current regulation regime in relationship to rooming houses.

**Figure 6.5: Rooming House regulations under RTA, residents awareness, copy of regulations and information leaflet available**



## 6.10 Summary

The resident interviews confirm a high degree of social, emotional, housing and financial vulnerability amongst the boarding house population in Adelaide. Residents are in poverty, and living in unstable and marginal housing, usually because it is all they can afford. Most have long histories of unstable and poor quality housing and homelessness. Isolation and disconnection from family and significant relationships is common. The majority are either unemployed or have a disability (most commonly mental illness<sup>40</sup>) which precludes participation in the work-force. Further implications of the findings, including the different sub-groups within the boarding house population suggested by the study, the tenuous and insecure nature of boarding house accommodation, and gender issues, are discussed in Chapter 10.

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<sup>40</sup> Based on interviewer observation

## **7 PROPRIETOR INTERVIEWS**

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### **7.1 Methodology**

Twenty owners/proprietors were interviewed, representing approximately 25% of all owners/managers in South Australia. The interview sought information about the proprietor themselves, the boarding house and its facilities, services that were provided, occupancy, management issues and future plans.

### **7.2 Proprietor arrangements**

The twenty proprietors interviewed managed a total of 34 properties. Of these the majority (14 proprietors) owned or managed a sole property; the other 6 proprietors owned or managed more than one. Four operated a not-for-profit boarding house while sixteen operated a private facility. Thirteen of the sixteen private proprietors owned their boarding house. The South Australian Housing Trust owns the four managed by the community sector, as well as two leased by private operators.<sup>41</sup>

The length of time proprietors had managed their boarding houses ranged from 6 months to 40 years. 60% of proprietors had managed their business for 10 years or more. About a third of those interviewed were aged 60 years or over, and the average age was 57 years. The older proprietors were 'long termers' who have a strong identification with and long history in the sector. These proprietors, however, are the group most likely to be moving out of the industry over the next few years due to their age.

For some proprietors, the boarding house was part of a long-term family business in which family members were involved in the management and/or maintenance of the house.

Most proprietors (16) did not live on-site; however most properties (14) had a live-in caretaker or manager. Only two properties had neither a proprietor nor caretaker on-site.

### **7.3 Boarding House details**

The capacity of boarding houses operated by the proprietors ranged from 3 to 120 beds. Just over half the proprietors reported their boarding house as full (ie occupancy greater than 95%), and, overall, over three quarters reported current occupancy of 80% or more.

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<sup>41</sup> This includes the Afton Hotel, which at the time of writing was leased by SAHT to a private operator, and which is now operated by a community organisation.

The most common type of accommodation provided was that of 'bed with cooking facilities'; however a minority provided part board (with some meals) or full board (two or three meals per day).

Most proprietors said they provide a linen service, often simply a clean set of sheets on arrival and a cleaning service. Off street parking was available at almost half the facilities managed by the proprietors.

Just over half the proprietors reported a ratio of between 5 and 11 persons per toilet and/or bathroom. Most reported that they had a ratio of more than 6 people to each washing machine available.

In over half the properties proprietors said there was at least one inside or outside area available for socialising between residents, ie either a lounge room and/or an outside area (eg outside table and chairs with shelter from the weather). Conversely, in almost half there was no designated communal space. Several proprietors commented that they deliberately did not provide communal areas as this would encourage fights between residents and it was better that residents stayed in their rooms or off the property.

The majority of boarding houses had single bedrooms (ie sole occupancy); however 6 proprietors reported that some bedrooms in their properties were shared.

#### **7.4 Characteristics of residents**

Boarding house proprietors were asked to estimate basic information about the profile of residents within their boarding houses. Overwhelmingly current residents were single males with a few single females. Numbers of couples without children or family groups were negligible. Three proprietors said they accepted couples. Proprietors estimated that about a third of their current residents were unemployed, or receiving sickness benefits or a pension (another third), and that just under a third were employed either full time or part time.

Proprietors estimated that most of their current residents (60%) had lived at the present boarding house for up to a year. A quarter of proprietors said they had at least one resident who had lived at the property for more than ten years. Thirty years was the longest continual occupancy reported.

**Table 7.1: Estimated length of stay**

<b>Length of stay of current residents</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Less than one week	27	6.2
One week to three months	96	21.9
Three months to one year	139	31.7
Over one year	177	40.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>439</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Boarding house proprietors agreed that there had been a change in the type of residents during the time they had managed their boarding house. Previously, residents were seen to be from a more homogeneous group of mainly men, some of whom worked and who were more likely to drink alcohol than use illicit drugs, had less assets and were more settled and well behaved. Today's residents were perceived to be a more varied group and included:

- Increased numbers with mental health problems
- Increased numbers of drug users
- Increased numbers needing support services
- Residents having more possessions and expecting a higher standard of accommodation
- More transient people who were less honest
- More young people
- More unemployed people and more students
- More people for whom boredom was a problem.

All but one proprietor said some types of people were considered unacceptable as boarders. Most considered people who were drug affected ('druggies and junkies') to be unacceptable; as were, to a lesser extent, 'trouble makers' (those with extreme or aggressive behaviour) and those with mental health problems. Three would not accept young people and one considered Aboriginal people to be unacceptable.

A number of proprietors reported an increase in referral from agencies wanting to place clients with mental health problems. Proprietors frequently said they preferred to house residents 'with no problems', and they had become more selective about tenants due to low vacancy levels. It seems apparent that, whilst increasingly accommodating people with mental illness and drug taking behaviours, proprietors 'draw the line' when these characteristics result in a person's behaviour in the boarding house becoming extreme or problematic and are likely to pass over these potential tenants for more stable and less 'troublesome' options.



## 7.5 Tenancy Issues

There was considerable variation in the amount of rent charged, ranging from \$40 per week for 'bed with cooking facilities', to \$198 per week for full board. For the 14 boarding houses charging for 'bed with cooking facilities', the cost ranged from \$40 per week to \$105 per week with an average of \$74 per week.

In terms of tenancy arrangements and conditions:

- Just under half the proprietors said they require bond
- Most (80%) said they will allow visitors, and
- Boarders were largely responsible for protecting their own valuables; only two proprietors provided any facilities for safe storage of valuables.

In terms of compliance with legislative provisions

- Just over half the proprietors were aware of the rooming house regulations under the Residential Tenancies Act
- A small number (notably in the not for profit sector) said they posted a copy in their boarding house and
- Most (85%) said they had a set of rules for boarders.

Boarders who 'broke the rules' were dealt with by a variety of measures including negotiation, verbal warnings, written warnings, and eviction. A quarter of proprietors reported that they would use written warnings.

## 7.6 Management issues

Proprietors were asked to nominate some of the positive and negative aspects of owning or managing a boarding house.

Most saw the boarding house as a good property investment and just over half stated it was a good business overall. Only one proprietor considered his business unsuccessful, although approximately one third said it was unprofitable. Most (private) proprietors felt the property was a good investment.

Private proprietors said compliance with regulations such as Local Government by-laws, health, fire safety and parking laws were negative aspects of managing a boarding house. Dealing with residents was a negative aspect of proprietorship for about a quarter.

When asked to list any regulations and costs that affected their ability to operate, most indicated the cost of utilities, mainly electricity; as well as rates and taxes. Proprietors said that the cost of electricity contributed to house rules such as 'no heaters in bedrooms'.

## 7.7 The future

Most proprietors intend to stay in business at least in the short-term, with all but one saying they will still manage their business in 12 months time and almost all in 5 years time. For the older proprietors, the decision to remain in business would be dependent on relatives' willingness to take over.

Factors identified that would influence the decision to stay in business include strategies which would reduce costs (such as Council rates and electricity).

The task of managing a boarding house has changed significantly in recent years, reflecting the changing role of boarding houses in the spectrum of housing options, and the changing profile of tenants. Most stock is now ageing, with considerable investment required to bring it to an acceptable standard. Government regulations have placed new requirements on proprietors (for example, fire safety). Thus, whilst boarding houses remain, for most, a profitable business, it is a challenging 'line of work' and the profit margin is threatened by the costs necessary to lift standards and fulfil obligations. Concerningly, cutting corners and not investing in standards or maintenance can increase or maintain profit.

Indications are that over the next few years the 'older school' of proprietors will gradually move out of the business, and younger family members will probably bring a different attitude to administration, if they choose to take over at all. Conversely, new proprietors are emerging, but with quite different approaches to business and expectations about profit and investment. Increasingly, boarding houses will be seen as an investment, rather than a job and 'career choice' for proprietors. This 'new breed' will not be so involved in administration and the day to day operation of properties, and are more likely to own a string of properties (namely, small facilities in suburban houses of a size which may escape regulation) and appoint a resident caretaker in what could be perceived as an exploitative arrangement. The profit margin will become more important, and a proprietor more likely to move their property over into other uses if it appears more desirable or easier. Tolerance with and support to difficult tenants is not likely to increase.

Conversely, the not-for-profit sector are looking to expand their 'share' of the market, and increasingly view boarding houses as an important form of social housing and a necessary service. The capacity of the sector to increase stock to compensate for the downturn or changing patterns in the private sector is dependent on policy and funding decisions by government.

## 7.8 Summary

Boarding houses in South Australia are predominantly operated by private individuals who operate a single boarding house, although a minority own and operate several properties. Unlike boarding house sectors interstate boarding house in South Australia tend to be smaller properties located in the suburbs and run by an individual or family.

For most proprietors, the business is profitable; with vacancy rates generally low. Most proprietors had been in the industry long term and report that the nature of residents has changed, with residents increasingly being younger and more involved in drug use and with mental health issues. A significant proportion of current proprietors may not continue to operate in the future, given the age profile of owners and those who reported an unprofitable business. Boarding houses will be increasingly seen by the private sector as an investment, rather than a career choice. The capacity of the not-for-profit sector to expand to meet demand for this form of accommodation is dependent on government support.

## 8 INFORMATION FROM SERVICE PROVIDERS

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Two round-tables were held with service providers, one in the inner city and one with western metropolitan area services, to provide a forum for key agencies and organisations to input into the research.

Agencies such as CHAST, Westcare, Wesley Mission, Port Adelaide Central Mission, Magdalene Centre, Adelaide Day Centre, Port Adelaide Central Mission, Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul Society, Anglicare and Metro Access have contact with a number of boarders in Metropolitan Adelaide and provide support and referral to other services.<sup>42</sup> The Daughters of Charity (Hutt Street) have assisted a number of boarders with support needs to move to more appropriate accommodation.

Service providers have concerns about the substandard condition of some boarding houses and the impact of these conditions on the outcome of their services. They also feared some boarding house residents did not enjoy easy access to services that could help them to continue to live well and independently.

Service providers also raised issues in relation to the selectivity of private landlords. For example certain landlords will refuse to take referrals from accommodation services for homeless men; one proprietor will only take a social work referral if he has 'vetted' the client himself. This screening by proprietors means that those people with higher support needs are likely to find it difficult to access suitable boarding house accommodation.

Inner city day services reported that a proportion of their clients were boarding house residents. Data collected by one such agency - Byron Place Community Centre - indicated that persons living in boarding houses made up 7.3% of their client group.<sup>43</sup>

One inner city housing service reported maintaining a list of boarding house contacts that it shared with other agencies, to assist in finding accommodation for clients. Other metropolitan services reported keeping their own lists (for example various Housing Trust offices, FAYS offices and Crisis Care) which were sometimes out of date. It appeared that a number of agencies referred clients to boarding houses but that there was no systematic process for doing this.

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<sup>42</sup> This is not an exhaustive list.

<sup>43</sup> Data indicates accommodation of client on the previous night; derived from annual census figures; average for period 1996- 2000.

Concerns were also raised about the appropriateness of some of the referrals, eg referring homeless families with young children to unvetted boarding houses known by service providers to be high risk and of poor quality. It was apparent that some boarding houses were used by agencies as a form of emergency accommodation when other more appropriate options were not available.

## 9 NATIONAL DIRECTIONS

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This chapter provides a snapshot of state and local government policy and initiatives in relation to boarding houses in other States and Territories, including:

- Regulatory arrangements in other states
- The extent to which public and community housing authorities provide boarding house accommodation, and
- Initiatives to encourage private sector expansion of boarding house stock.

### 9.1 Queensland

Recent data indicates that Queensland has 368 boarding houses accommodating 5,500 people; 81% of these people reside in Brisbane.<sup>44</sup>

The Queensland Department of Housing runs a Community Housing Boarding House program which provides capital funds for the purchase or construction and furnishing of properties for use as boarding houses. Properties are managed by Not For Profit organisations which use revenue from rent payments to cover costs associated with tenancy and property management. The Department of Housing retains title to properties funded through this program, and leases properties to managing organisations. The program, which commenced in 91/92, is targeted to low income earners who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, with a special emphasis on single people who are socially marginalised and seeking a safe secure affordable and flexible housing option.

Currently six community organisations manage seventeen properties, housing 368 people. Existing projects are in inner Brisbane suburbs, Cairns, Gold Coast, Townsville and Nambour. Future projects are planned for inner Brisbane suburbs, Bundaberg and Rockhampton.

In relation to tenancy protection legislation, the Residential Tenancies Act 1994 does not apply to tenants who are a boarder or lodger. However new legislation has recently been introduced (Residential Services (Accommodation) Bill 2002) to provide for contractual tenancy arrangements and dispute resolution mechanisms in residential services, which include boarding houses as well as supported accommodation services and aged care complexes. As well, the Residential Services (Accreditation) Bill 2002, introduced concurrently, aims to ensure minimum standards for boarding houses and will require boarding house operators to be accredited.

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<sup>44</sup> <http://www.consumer.qld.gov.au/oft/oftweb>. titled *Accreditation, Minimum Standards for Hostels, Boarding houses*

## 9.2 Victoria

The Victorian Office of Housing manages a Rooming House program under the Long Term Community Housing Program. The program is targeted to low-income single people and couples with no children. Funds are provided to local government and community housing organisations for the construction and acquisition of boarding houses. A feature of the program is joint venture arrangements.

Most boarding houses are in the inner city municipalities of Port Phillip and Yarra; however a significant number are found in regional towns throughout Victoria. The current rooming house market is increasingly tending towards smaller properties.

In Victoria boarders and lodgers are covered under the Residential Tenancies Act (1997) and this coverage is extended to long term residents of hotels where residence has been for more than 60 consecutive days. Disputes are resolved through the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT). The current Act is the consolidation of all tenancies legislation into one Act.

## 9.3 Western Australia

In Western Australia, the Department of Housing and Works directly manages 7 small boarding houses in inner Perth and Fremantle housing 63 people. A further 8 boarding houses, housing approximately 150 people, are owned or partially owned by the Department of Housing and Works and leased to community housing organisations such as Fremantle Housing Association. Two are located in regional centres. City Housing, a community housing organisation, owns and manages two large boarding houses in inner Perth (53 rooms). Community managed boarding houses have been purchased under the Joint Ventures Housing Program.

The Western Australia Residential Tenancies Act 1987 does not apply to any residential tenancy agreement where the tenant is a boarder or lodger.

## 9.4 New South Wales

In NSW the licensed boarding house sector covers what in South Australia would be regarded as Supported Residential Facilities. The *unlicensed* boarding house sector is equivalent to boarding house and rooming house sectors interstate. There is little accurate data available about the numbers of people living in boarding house accommodation.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Mott P (2001) **In New South Wales the answer is – Boarders rights or Homeless Nights** Paper presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> Australasian Conference of Tenancy Tribunals & Associated Bodies, Adelaide

The New South Wales Department of Housing has set up an Office of Community Housing. Its role is to:

- Negotiate for resources for the community housing sector
- Administer and allocate these resources
- Plan new community housing provision in conjunction with other parts of the social housing system

A number of boarding houses have been purchased under this program and managed by community housing organisations. Boarding houses are also being leased under the Long Term leasing program where properties are leased for up to 10 years from private owners.

Boarders and Lodgers are not covered under the Residential Tenancies Act (1987) in New South Wales. The Act specifically excludes residential agreements where the tenant is a boarder or lodger. A Boarders and Lodgers Action Group (BLAG) has been campaigning for the introduction of legislative rights for boarders and lodgers.

The State Environmental Planning Policy No. 10 (SEPP10) has been amended to provide mechanisms for the retention of low cost accommodation. Under this policy, where alterations, additions, demolition or conversion to another use is being proposed, state and local governments are required to consider such factors as available alternative accommodation and the financial viability of the property in their assessment of the proposed development.

## **9.5 Tasmania**

The Tasmanian Department of Housing manages most of the small stock of boarding houses in Tasmania. The Residential Tenancy Act 1997 does not apply to any premises or part of premises used or occupied by a boarder or lodger.

## **9.6 Australian Capital Territory**

In the Australian Capital Territory all boarding houses are required to be registered under the Public Health (Boarding Houses) Regulations if the number of persons lodged or boarded exceeds two.



## **10 BUILDING THE PICTURE**

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This chapter summarises and discusses the trends and issues that have emerged from the research from all information sources.

### **10.1 Key locations**

The study identified that current boarding house stock is concentrated in particular locations, notably the inner city and the LGAs of Port Adelaide Enfield; Charles Sturt; West Torrens and Salisbury. Consolidation of stock in these areas has increased over recent years, and is influenced by factors including the nature of the population in these areas; historical land use; the attraction of certain locations (eg the city); the availability of suitable housing stock; costs; and accessibility to a range of features including services and transport.

### **10.2 Availability and access**

Proprietors report a high occupancy rate, and this gives the power to 'pick and choose' tenants. This, combined with the relatively stable population of boarders and lodgers in the better standard facilities, means some groups—usually those seen to be the 'least desirable'—are likely to miss out, become reliant on poorer standard facilities, or move often between facilities.

In addition, there are very few boarding house beds available to women, severely limiting their affordable housing options. Information from service providers indicates that safety is a major concern for women in predominantly male settings.

### **10.3 Standards of facilities**

Sub-standard buildings and the lack of basic facilities is not uncommon in the private boarding house sector and the poor quality of establishments is a long-standing theme and issue of concern. This is perhaps not surprising given the variable regulatory regime that exists (discussed below). A number of properties were known to have either been, or were currently subject to, Housing Improvement Act Orders and have had rents fixed.<sup>46</sup> Publicly owned and not-for-profit facilities were observed to be in a better condition.

The inconsistent regulatory regime is not able to ensure decent standards. In private businesses, maximising profit is a dominant interest. This can be achieved by cutting corners and minimising outlay, as well as maximising tenancies. There is little to protect the rights of residents in these situations.

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<sup>46</sup> The study was not able to document the number of properties subject to a HIA order; however it may be possible to undertake a cross-check of properties with the data on HIA properties in order to determine the extent to which boarding houses operate in premises subject to a HIA order.

## 10.4 Compliance with the Residential Tenancy Act

This study was able to observe some (but not all) of the key areas required under the Residential Tenancy regulations, and identified that compliance by proprietors with requirements under the Residential Tenancies Act was poor (particularly in the private sector).

The regulations require that there be written house rules that are posted in a prominent location. These house rules should not be 'harsh or unconscionable'; must only relate to health and safety of persons and property; and must comply with the code of conduct for proprietors, which (amongst other things) specifies that proprietors will not

*'unreasonably restrict residents' quiet enjoyment of their room and facilities, and their peace, comfort and privacy'.*

Many boarding houses have no written rules. Only a minority of premises had a copy of the regulations posted in a prominent location, as required. The nature of rules in some facilities (written or verbal) would arguably contravene the Residential Tenancies regulations (for example, bans on women, gambling, noise after 7pm, and on bar radiators in rooms.) Proprietors appeared to have a low level of awareness of their responsibilities under the regulations, and tenants of their rights.

Boarding houses in the not-for-profit sector and those owned by the Housing Trust were observed to have a much higher level of compliance with and understanding of the provisions of the Regulations.

Information from the Residential Tenancies Tribunal indicates that since the regulations came into effect only a small number of cases have been brought before the tribunal. There were 6 hearings in 2000 and 7 in 2001, comprising less than 0.1% of the total matters heard in each of those years. Of the 13 applications, 10 were lodged by the landlord for vacant possession, with 7 being successful. Two were dismissed and one withdrawn before hearing. One landlord application for compensation was successful. One tenant application for bond was successful and one withdrawn before hearing.

The lack of knowledge amongst proprietors and tenants about responsibilities and rights under the Residential Tenancies Act and the limited compliance is of significant concern. It increases the vulnerability of those in already vulnerable housing; and indicates the lack of an *effective* regulation and protection regime.

## **10.5 Fire safety**

The responsibility to monitor fire safety in boarding houses appears, in a practical sense, to be shared between local councils and the South Australia Metropolitan Fire Services. SAMFS have instituted a program of inspections of boarding houses and other similar properties such as backpacker hostels. This inspection program is based on a list of relevant properties compiled by the SAMFS, in part on advice from local councils as to the boarding houses and other similar properties in their area.

In the local government areas where Councils have regulations regarding boarding houses, inspections of properties will be carried out, including fire safety inspections. Where councils do not license boarding houses, it falls back onto the rolling inspection program instituted by the Metropolitan Fire Service to detect any contraventions of fire safety requirements.

The issue of identification is crucial: if a boarding house is not on the SAMFS list, and if councils do not actively institute their own inspections, a property will 'escape' inspection. Identification is most comprehensive and reliable in the LGAs where regulations apply. Given that this study identified properties not previously known to SAMFS, it is inevitable that there are boarding houses that are not inspected because they have not been identified. In light of the observed standards in boarding houses, and the level of risk to residents where fire safety is not properly observed, this is of considerable concern.

## **10.6 The regulatory regime**

The current 'fabric' of regulation relating to boarding houses is patchy, complex and inconsistent. Responsibility is spread across a number of Acts, and inevitably there are gaps and areas not covered. There is a lack of an overarching Act or regulatory process to ensure standards and monitor compliance.

As reported previously, only six Local Government Authorities have a by-law relating to boarding houses, and another provides guidelines for the operation of boarding houses. By-laws vary in content, definitions, and enforcement practices. Where councils do not regulate and inspect boarding houses, matters of fire safety, poor building condition, poor amenities, and unsanitary conditions may only be brought to the council's attention if a complaint is made.

The differing definitions between council regulations, the Residential Tenancies Act and the Supported Residential Facilities Act mean that some premises will 'slip through the gaps', for example 'community houses' operated by some Supported Residential Facilities, where several people share a house under the supervision of the SRF. They are not 'captured' under boarding house licensing provisions where Councils define the occupancy of five, six or more, residents to be a boarding house; and if these residents are not receiving personal care services from the Supported Residential Facility they will not be covered under the provisions of the Supported Residential Facilities Act.

The overall current regulatory framework for residents is inadequate. It means that it is possible for boarding houses to operate without being subject to scrutiny as to whether conditions for residents are decent, reasonable and safe.

## **10.7 Future of the private sector**

Evidence gathered in this study suggests that the current stock of boarding houses in the private sector will continue to decline. Many private proprietors are ageing and will therefore be retiring over the next decade. Declining profitability, the ageing of stock, the level of investment required to improve or maintain property standards, and the increasingly difficult nature of the client group are all influences documented in the study.

These factors, coupled with the gentrification of inner city areas and the conversion of larger properties to domestic dwellings or apartments, are likely to result in a significant proportion of current private boarding house stock being lost over the next decade.

## **10.8 Residents of Boarding Houses**

This study supports findings from previous research about the boarding house population with regards to gender, age, personal vulnerability, social isolation and housing marginalisation. The findings of previous studies with regards to the housing aspirations of residents is also supported, namely the low expectations, and perceptions of the disadvantages and advantages of boarding house life.

The following key points are noted:

- Most boarding houses have a core group of relatively stable tenants;
- There is a trend towards younger residents, notably people aged between 20 and 34 years.

- Younger people tend to be much more mobile and less in contact with support services than the older population.
- Women make up a very small percentage of residents and are predominantly housed in the not-for-profit sector. This is facilitated both by the nature of facilities in the private and public sector, and the exclusionary policies of some of the private sector towards women;
- Residents often have low expectations of accommodation, and limited housing aspirations, with a focus on meeting basic needs. The ease of tenancy, affordability and the convenience of boarding house life is, however, valued, although most would prefer not to be in a boarding house and in better standard accommodation with security and privacy.

The study has confirmed that residents, as well as being poor, often experience other personal and social vulnerabilities. Boarding houses provide marginal accommodation, to people in very vulnerable housing circumstances which are well-defined as homelessness. Gender issues are also raised. These are discussed below.

### 10.8.1 Personal vulnerability

The research found a high degree of social, emotional, housing and financial vulnerability amongst the boarding house population. Residents are in poverty, and living in unstable and marginal housing, usually because it is all they can afford. Most have long histories of unstable and poor quality housing. Isolation and disconnection from family and significant relationships is common. The majority are either unemployed or have a disability (usually mental illness) which precludes participation in the workforce.

The population, however, is not homogenous. The research suggests the following loose sub-groups:

- **Poor, and no choice:** This group are dependent on Centrelink payments. They live in boarding houses because it is all they can afford, and, whilst they find aspects convenient, they would prefer something better. Their housing is marginal but they also have other issues, including mental health or other disabilities; drug use; involvement in offending or disconnection from family and community.
- **Poor, but it suits for now:** This group, either low-income wage recipients or welfare beneficiaries, find boarding house life convenient, at least for the short term. They lack other affordable housing options, but also appreciate elements of living in a boarding house - location, companionship, less to manage. They don't view the boarding house, or the sector, as their long-term home.

- ***Poor, and it's home:*** This small group (usually older men) have lived in the boarding house sector, and often the same house, for years and regard it as their home. Some were previously reliant on employment-related accommodation, and were often highly mobile. They have few contacts with family, and are reliant on the boarding house for their social interaction. They are strongly connected to particular facilities, although they have no long term tenancy protection and few rights. They are particularly vulnerable as they move into old age, and with age-related frailty, as they lack other housing options and personal supports and resources, and have little protection of their housing or other rights.
- ***Poor and not looking for stable housing:*** These residents are highly transient and/or travelling and do not have, or necessarily aspire to, a permanent home. Their moving around is usually marginal and associated with other issues, such as drug use, offending, and breakdown of family and relationships.
- ***Poor but they've got a home somewhere else:*** A small number of residents are living in a boarding house for now but have a home elsewhere – for example backpackers, students and low-income people in town for work or reasons.

Alternatively, the sub-groups proposed by Horton<sup>47</sup> also ring true for this study, namely, people on a *downward spiral* (through housing options); on an *upward spiral* (“stepping up” from shelters or sleeping rough), the *immobile group* (who have lived in boarding houses for years) and the *travelers*.

Also evident are various degrees of vulnerability amongst the population. Most residents have the self-management capacities necessary for living in the sector (those who don't probably leave or are moved on). There is also a minority that has marginal capacity for independent living and evidence of cross-over between the boarding house and supported residential facilities sectors.

The boarding house population is predominantly made up of marginal single adults, who are largely invisible and often fall through the gaps of the service system. Residents generally would have a better quality of life if they had access to better quality and more secure affordable housing, and if there was better regulation of the sector and protection of their rights. Some residents would also benefit from the provision of personal support and opportunities for socialisation and community integration although there are different levels of need. Some people, for reasons of their vulnerability, should not be in boarding houses at all, and especially not subject to the vagaries of the private market. The current and future needs of the population who are ageing in boarding houses is also of concern.

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<sup>47</sup> Horton N (1990), op.cit.

### **10.8.2 Marginal housing**

The research confirms that boarding house residents live in relatively cheap and insecure accommodation, often of very poor quality, and with very limited effective protection of their rights. The housing histories of respondents demonstrates the marginal position of boarding houses in the housing market – residents have often experienced steadily declining quality of housing, with a boarding house the last stop before the streets or a shelter. Alternatively many residents have actually lived on the streets and in shelters, and for them the boarding house is a step up – but still tenuous and insecure. It is unlikely that many residents have much support available to them to consolidate their position in the housing market and move on to better, more stable housing.

Most residents view boarding house accommodation (realistically or otherwise) as a temporary event suitable for the short-term or as their only current option until they can move onto something better. It is not usually the option of choice.

### **10.8.3 Gender issues**

Boarding houses are almost exclusively a male domain. There are undoubtedly many reasons for this, ranging from access (few boarding houses accept women) to gender differences in life patterns and aspirations (women may be more likely to want a home of their own; men may be more satisfied with a single room; women are more likely to have children living with them). Indications are, however, that demand for boarding-house style accommodation for women is increasing. Given the issues around female access to and safety in boarding houses in the private sector, this need will best be met through the not-for-profit sector.

There is not a strong body of knowledge in Australia on gender differences in homelessness and marginal housing. For example, little work has been done on the distinctive pathways into homelessness for men, as compared to women. The current research suggests the key role of relationship breakdown and loss as events in a process by which men can slide down into homelessness, through increasingly marginal housing options and loss of connections, relationships, financial security and esteem. If this is correct, reintegration and the rebuilding of links and relationships become important agendas. This area is worthy of further study.

## 11 RENEWING THE BOARDING HOUSE SECTOR

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### 11.1 Boarding houses within the broader housing market

Boarding houses play a distinct role in the low-cost housing sector. Boarding house accommodation can be regarded as a desirable 'step up' from sleeping rough or living in squats, shelters, or other forms of marginal accommodation. Alternatively it can be seen as an undesirable 'step down' from more secure tenures such as private rental or public housing.

This study confirms that boarding houses are a marginal housing option **at the interface** between homelessness and sustainable and appropriate housing. The stories of residents provide a vivid picture of people at this interface.

Thus, boarding houses fulfil an important function for a small group of people who, for a variety of reasons, find it difficult to achieve long term 'success' in the alternatives available to them as low income earners.

A range of personal, social and structural issues influence why boarding houses residents are not living in private rental or social housing. The personal histories of boarders reveal stories of low income, personal misfortune, relationship breakdown, and very often disability, health problems and other issues, combined to create housing vulnerability and limit options. At a social level it is likely that the same factors limit opportunities to share housing with friends or significant others, and, in a competitive rental market, those seen by landlords as 'not so desirable' will miss out. There was plenty of anecdotal information throughout the course of this study to indicate that some boarding house residents have poor presentation and engage in behaviours such as drinking, substance abuse, fighting and conflict with other tenants that would certainly go against them being considered as 'preferred tenants' in the private rental market.

There are also structural issues in relation to the rental market which mean that some people fare worse than others, and these factors limit the opportunity for boarding house residents to participate in the broader housing market.



In terms of affordability, boarding house rental is markedly less costly than private rental. According to this study, the average rent paid by boarding house tenants for 'bed and cooking facilities' was \$74 per week, in a range from \$40 per week to \$105 per week. This compares with private rental rates of \$120 per week for a flat/unit and \$160 per week for a house for the period 2000/2001.<sup>48</sup>

While the number of private rental properties in South Australia has been increasing<sup>49</sup>, the private rental market has been tightening. Data for 2002 indicates that the vacancy rate is somewhere between zero and one per cent – well below the accepted market equilibrium of three per cent.<sup>50</sup> Average weekly rents for private rental have been increasing consistently since 1996 – the average weekly rental of a 2 bedroom unit has risen from \$115 pw in 1996 to \$148 for the March 2002 quarter, an increase of 29% over this time. In such a tight rental market, those with the least capacity to pay and 'compete' for limited stock will miss out.

While public housing generally provides a more affordable alternative to private rental for people on low incomes, access to public housing is now determined on a needs basis through the application of a segmented waiting list. Total rental stock for the South Australian Housing Trust has declined over the past decade with a corresponding decline of new tenants being allocated housing.<sup>51</sup>

Thus boarding house accommodation offers an alternative tenure, especially for single males, that is cheaper than private rental and more available than public housing.

Studies in this area indicate most residents would prefer **not** to live in a boarding house. These people need decent quality, affordable housing options, and, in some cases, support to make and maintain this transition.

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<sup>48</sup> Data refers to nominal median weekly rents. Source: Median Weekly Rent for Private Rental Dwellings, Population Strategies and Research Branch, DHS.

<sup>49</sup> ABS Census data for occupied private dwellings shows that the number of private rental dwellings increased by 7% from 93,043 in 1996 to 99,548 in 2001.

<sup>50</sup> Housing Industry Prospects Report, March 2002.

<sup>51</sup> For data see the Triennial Review of the South Australian Housing Trust 1997/98-1999/2000, p39

However, boarding houses continue to have a distinct and necessary role as a housing option, due to their affordability and other characteristics. Boarding houses offer a certain level of anonymity; social opportunities; flexibility ('walk in, walk out') and ease of tenure (furniture is provided; white goods are not needed); and remove the responsibilities of running a household and paying bills. They are often located in inner city or near city locations, close to shops and services, very important features for people on low income. These particular qualities of boarding house accommodation lend themselves to take-up by people with limited financial and other resources or particular lifestyles. For these reasons it is important that this distinct function and nature of the sector is clearly articulated in policy and planning related to housing and assistance to vulnerable adults.

## **11.2 Protection and regulation in the private sector**

This study suggests that much of the current stock of private boarding houses is marginal or sub-standard in quality and would not meet minimum community standards of acceptable housing. There are serious issues in relation to the standard of facilities, the adequacy of current regulatory regimes, and the extent to which appropriate protection is provided to residents.

Instances of what appear to be sub-standard conditions occur in spite of the current regulatory provisions - building, environmental and health standards - administered by local government. Where councils have elected to set specific standards *over and above* the general requirements of the Development Act and the Public and Environmental Health Act, there is the opportunity to more rigorously enforce reasonable standards of accommodation. Issues such as minimum bedroom size, sufficient lighting and power in bedrooms, adequate heating and cooling, ventilation, a window or natural light, locks on doors, lockable cupboard space - factors that can make a significant difference to a person's quality of life - could be able to be addressed in this way. However, the evidence suggests that even where such regulations exist, standards are still highly variable.

Inconsistencies in the control, licensing, inspection and regulation of boarding houses could be addressed through a tighter and more consistent and effective regulatory framework. Such a framework could protect consumers by ensuring appropriate standards (fire safety, building standards and the like), reasonable levels of amenity, and consistency across South Australia and with other relevant regulation, such as the Residential Tenancies Act and the Supported Residential Facilities Act. In this regard, there are a number of legislative options that could be considered, including amending the Supported Residential Facilities Act to include provisions for controlling, licensing, inspecting and regulating boarding houses.

The study has also documented consistently poor compliance with and knowledge of the requirements of the Residential Tenancies Act in relation to Boarding Houses. This should be considered by government, including in the context of the review of this Act.

### **11.3 Towards a 'renewed' boarding house sector**

While it is important that regulatory issues are considered, it is likely that there will only be minimal gains from attempts to improve the current private sector provision of boarding houses. A more fundamental level of change is required to ensure adequate stock of boarding house-type accommodation with acceptable standards of amenity and affordability.

Continued reliance on private sector provision of this form of low cost housing stock is not realistic. Evidence suggests that private operators will continue to retreat from this sector due to factors such as declining profitability and more attractive alternative property uses, a generational change in ownership, and an increasingly difficult and residual tenant group. Attempts by regulatory authorities to impose higher standards may also lead to some private operators relinquishing their stock and/or ceasing to operate boarding accommodation.<sup>52</sup>

In itself, reliance on the continued use of current stock is also not desirable. Chamberlain and Johnson (2001) propose that a minimum level of housing amenity acceptable by Australian standards is equivalent to a small flat or unit (ie an individual has their own living room, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, plus an element of security of tenure). In South Australia most boarding houses are older properties where lounge rooms, kitchens and bathroom facilities are shared. The few exceptions are where new premises managed by community agencies have been purpose-built in conjunction with state housing authorities and incorporate features such as en-suite bathroom and toilet facilities. Arguably, the current stock does not meet minimum community standards as discussed above; and by this definition, people living in boarding houses can be considered homeless.<sup>53</sup>

There is a growing and now significant body of knowledge and expertise in the area of public sector provision of rooming-style accommodation. This includes the aspects of:

- Design and construction of the built form
- Community sector management of facilities, and

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<sup>52</sup> For example, recent changes to fire safety standards for boarding houses in the City of Yarra in Victoria have been directly associated with a number of boarding house closures. In Adelaide, the YMCA ceased operating because of concerns that it was not able to meet new fire safety requirements.

<sup>53</sup> Referred to as 'tertiary homelessness' (Chamberlain, (1999), op.cit.)

- Partnership approaches to the funding and development of new stock.

These are discussed below.

### 11.3.1 Design

There are many interstate examples of either conversions of existing premises or purpose-built new developments, where the design and layout of facilities provide for greater privacy and autonomy for residents as well as a higher level of comfort and convenience. The traditional boarding house lay-out – of individual rooms running off a central corridor – can be disregarded in favour of smaller groupings or clusters of bedrooms around common areas, creating facilities more akin to a shared household or group home and enhancing a sense of ownership over communal spaces. As well as increasing the level of amenity for residents, good design can cater for some of the specific requirements associated with boarding house clientele (eg access to smoking areas) and play a role in minimising some of the negative characteristics of residents (eg minimising noise from disruptive residents).<sup>54</sup>

### 11.3.2 Management

Across Australia there has been increasing involvement of community agencies in the management of publicly/community owned boarding house premises. In some areas, community management of boarding houses comprises a significant share of all stock - for example 56% of the boarding house stock in the City of Port Phillip is publicly managed.<sup>55</sup> By comparison South Australia only has a very small proportion of boarding houses under community management.

The trend towards community management has seen a corresponding development of expertise in the community sector in meeting the challenges of both property and tenancy management in a cost-effective manner.

Management by community agencies – through their effective links with a range of community support services – has also assisted in the process of channelling a higher level of support to vulnerable adults in boarding houses. It also means that vulnerable people are not subject to the vagaries of the private sector with its dominant profit motive.

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<sup>54</sup> For a fuller discussion of design features see for example, Fraser and Associates (1999), **Rooming House Feasibility Study: A report prepared for the South Australian Housing Trust and the Adelaide City Council**, draft copy, pp 33-35 for a discussion of environmental and physical design specifications for the Rooming House Feasibility Study, and the City of Port Phillip *Community Housing Program* for descriptions of various rooming house projects in the City of Port Phillip.

<sup>55</sup> Cited in Fraser and Associates, (1999) op.cit. p. 27

### **11.3.3 Funding and development**

A range of models have been employed interstate to creatively develop new funding opportunities and establish funding and development partnerships between community housing programs, local governments and State housing authorities. Joint venture projects between private developers and state or local government have gained momentum in developing new purpose built stock, which in turn can be managed by community organisations.

Local government has played an active role interstate, with models including:

- developing a council-owned property or acquiring a private property for conversion to a boarding house
- sale of council-owned sites and the use of proceeds to fund a boarding house on-site
- property packaging (purchase of part of a private property to develop as discrete community housing, with the vendor developing the balance as private housing)
- cross subsidisation with council as the developer of a mixed private housing and boarding house development with the private component sold to subsidise the boarding house, and
- transferring council land to a developer and in return receiving a boarding house built on part of the land as consideration for the land.

The development of a renewed boarding house sector through increased public provision also sits within a broader framework of housing assistance to low income and special needs groups, which aims to increase the provision of a diversity of forms of accommodation provided through a 'suite' of social housing products.

## **11.4 Supporting vulnerable adults in boarding houses**

Residents of boarding houses experience a high degree of social, emotional, housing and financial vulnerability. There are differing levels of support needs, with a minority of residents having significant support issues. It is apparent that some very vulnerable residents are not in contact with services they need and are entitled to.

Whilst there is some contact between boarding houses residents and support services, without assertive outreach it is likely that some residents will 'slip through the net'.

Interstate, assertive outreach programs funded through a variety of sources including HACC, disability and mental health, provide assistance to vulnerable adults in marginal accommodation such as boarding houses and Supported Residential Facilities. Queensland will shortly be introducing a targeted response model which aims to link boarding house residents with primary health services and other services, social and recreational opportunities, and personal care services.

The findings of this study suggest that exploration of models of support provision for residents in boarding houses in South Australia is warranted.

## **11.5 Conclusions**

This study has confirmed that:

- In line with previous reported trends in South Australia and interstate, it can be expected that the private boarding house sector will continue to decline
- Boarding houses in this state offer a marginal form of accommodation, often with poor standards, insecure tenancy and a level of amenity that does not meet minimum community expectations of housing
- Residents in boarding houses are vulnerable and at risk across a range of dimensions
- Boarding Houses supply a unique form of affordable, convenient and available accommodation to people experiencing housing and other vulnerability, and
- Boarding Houses have a limited capacity to meet housing needs and most residents would prefer alternate accommodation.

The South Australian community, through government, has accepted responsibility to care for and protect vulnerable members, including through the provision of affordable, stable and appropriate accommodation and support. In this context, the needs of residents within the boarding house sector should be considered, and appropriate responses developed, including the active generation of a 'renewed', not-for-profit sector.

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