



# Observer-Rated Housing Quality

Exploring quality in Winnipeg's rooming houses and SRO Hotels



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
WINNIPEG

Institute of Urban Studies, 2015

# Outline

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- The Observer-Rated Housing Quality Scale (OHQS) is a research tool developed by the Mental Health Commission of Canada's At Home Chez Soi Project (2009-2015).
- The OHQS was field tested in Winnipeg and Toronto and used in Moncton, Montreal, and Vancouver.
- The OHQS can be easily used by housing workers, tenants, landlords, and community agencies to easily assess the condition of rooming houses and single-room occupancy hotels as well as other forms of accommodation.
- This presentation offers guidance on its use in Rooming Houses and Single Room Occupancy Hotels.

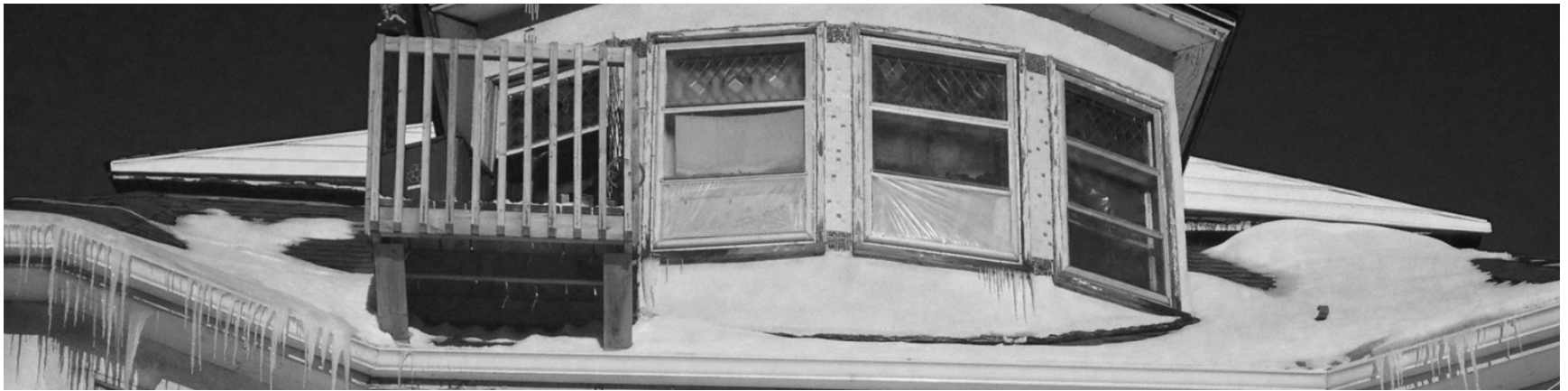
# Resources!

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- This presentation includes links to supporting materials!
- Throughout the slides you can click on the **blue box** for additional web based resources!
- Each link offers starting points for further research or in some cases direct connections to city departments.



Click for  
more!



# 1. Background





# 1.0 Measuring Housing Quality

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- Housing quality is linked to overall health and well-being.
- Assessing housing quality can provide a strong indication for “program fit” (e.g., should a client be placed in a unit or whether a housing subsidy should be considered).
- There are “shades of grey” in rating the quality of housing, especially for rooming houses and single room occupancy hotels where conditions are highly variable.
- The OHQS should be considered a tool that **helps people make informed decisions** about housing options including placement and subsidy.
- The OHQS is ***NOT*** a substitute for a Building Inspection done by a professional and licensed inspector.

Supporting  
Successful  
Tenancies

Health and  
Housing





# 1.1 Background

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- This Observer-rated Housing Quality Scale (OHQS) was developed and deployed in five Canadian cities as part of the Mental Health Commission of Canada's At Home Chez Soi project.
  - In Winnipeg over 100 units of housing were examined and rated using this tool.
  - The OHQS has extensive consultation with a national committee that helped refine the tool and the variables used to ensure that they were reliable and consistently rated.
  - For example, field testing involved comparing the scores of building inspection professionals with individuals with no formal training.

OHQS  
Background





# 1.2 OHQS and Housing First (HF)

- The OHQS was used to assess the quality of housing during the At Home Chez Soi project.
- HF provides housing with support as a key step toward ending homelessness and addressing mental health or addiction issues.
- HF has been proven effective
- A key component of HF is housing choice .



Housing First  
Backgrounder

HF National  
Toolkit





## 1.3 Why Rooming Houses and SROs?

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- Can offer a sense of community for residents
- A desirable, convenient option for many persons
- Often more affordable than an apartment in the private market
- Have filled an void in the provision of affordable housing

Rooming  
House  
Study

SROs in  
Winnipeg





## 1.3 Defining a Rooming House (RH)

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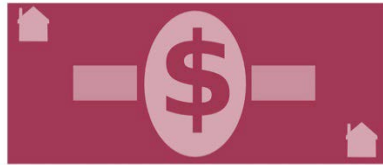
- Originally designed for 1-2 families, but have been converted to higher density
- Less than 3 stories
- Separate sleeping rooms, but shared common facilities (bathroom, kitchen)
- Centrally located



# 1.4 Rooming House Numbers

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**\$345.00**



Median Rent Monthly Rent



Average Time Living in Unit

**0 tenants**



Held a Lease



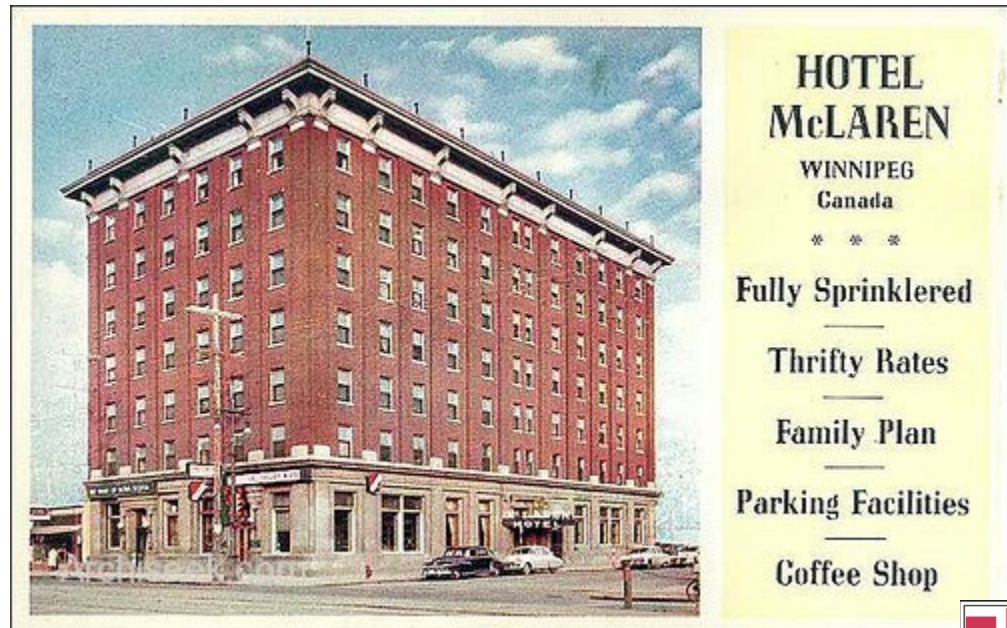
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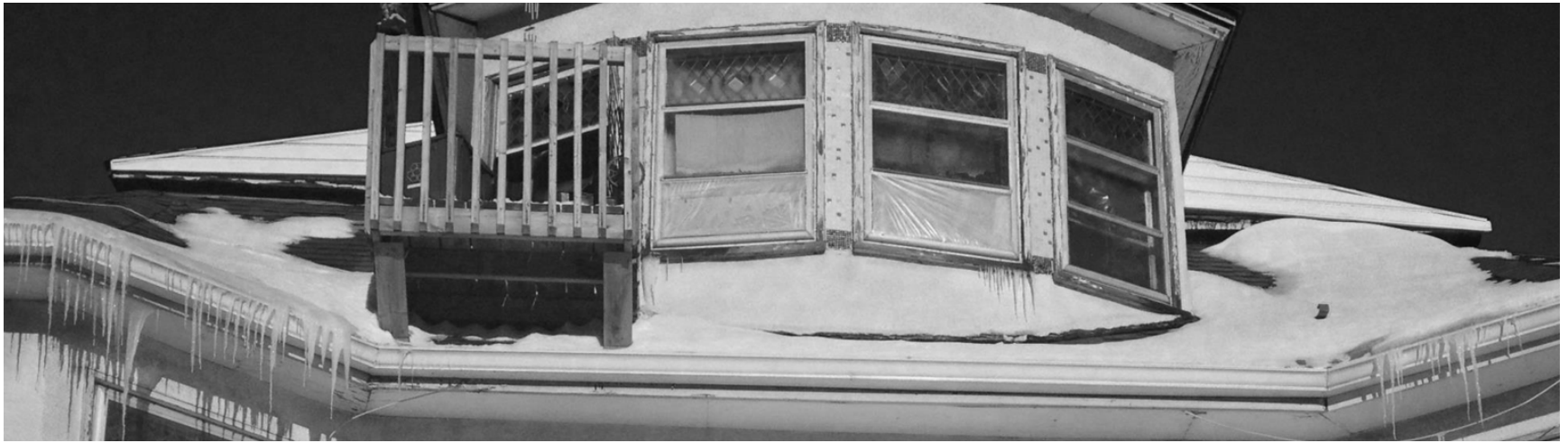
Live With a Guest



# 1.5 Defining an SRO Hotel

- Hotels where guests typically pay on monthly or weekly basis.
- Older centrally located buildings typically constructed before 1945.
- Like in a rooming house, bathrooms and common amenities are shared.
- Limited kitchen space.





# 2. Using the OHQS

Fieldwork approaches for assessing quality





## 2.0 The OHQS Instrument

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- The OHQS contains a summary page with general instructions.
- A set of preliminary questions about the unit that are collected for reference use.
- A set of 27 items that require a rating and eventual scoring form the core of the tool.
- In addition, there is an interpretation table for OHQS rooming and SRO scores to be assessed.



## 2.1 Getting Started: The OHQS Checklist

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1. Review property and neighbourhood options with the client
2. Identify the address to be visited
3. Determine if the property has a license by contacting City of Winnipeg's Licensing Branch
4. Schedule and conduct the OHQS
5. Add up the OHQS score and compare with rating scale
6. Sum it up! Discuss the results with the client to help make an informed decision

Winnipeg Rental  
Network

Winnipeg  
Neighbourhood  
Profiles





## 2.2 Before you Visit!

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- A license from the City of Winnipeg is required to operate a rooming house in Winnipeg (NOT HAVING A LICENSE SHOULD RESULT IN NOT CONDUCTING A SITE VISIT).
- The license requires that a basic level of health and safety has been met, and ensures the property complies with:
  - Winnipeg Neighbourhood Livability By-law
  - Winnipeg Residential Fire Safety By-law
  - Manitoba Public Health Act
- While having a license does not indicate the property presently meets the above by-laws, it does indicate that it conformed at some point in the past.

City Licensees

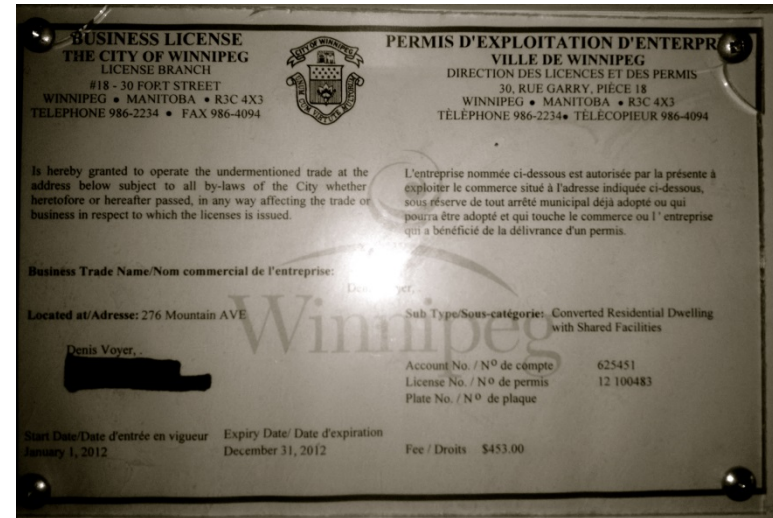
City  
By-Laws





## 2.3 Eligibility: Things to Look For

- Licensing and Community By-law Enforcement can be called to determine if a rooming house is licensed.
- A rooming house license is sometimes posted in the house.



City By Law  
Enforcement





## 2.4 Neighbourhood Livability By-law

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- Ensures a basic standard of living
- Focuses on size of dwelling, rooms, corridors, etc





# 3. Preparing for the Visit

Using the OHQS in the field





## 3.1 At the Entrance: Fire Safety Plans

- All multi family units must have a plan posted!
- Fire emergency procedures must be prominently displayed in the building.
- A rooming house with 4 or more units must have a working fire alarm system.

### IN CASE OF FIRE

#### UPON DISCOVERY OF FIRE

- Leave the Fire area immediately
- Close and latch all doors behind you
- Activate the fire alarm pull station to notify building occupants
- Leave the building immediately via the nearest exit
- Telephone the Winnipeg Fire Department - DIAL 9-1-1

#### UPON HEARING FIRE ALARM

- LEAVE the BUILDING immediately via nearest exit
- Take your keys
- CLOSE and latch DOORS behind you – do not lock

#### IF YOU ENCOUNTER HEAVY SMOKE

- STAY in your suite IF you are UNABLE TO EXIT
- DIAL 9-1-1 and await further instructions

#### REMAIN CALM

#### WARNING

Tampering with any fire protection systems and equipment is a criminal offence subject to a heavy fine, imprisonment or both.  
ISSUED BY THE FIRE & PARAMEDIC CHIEF.





# 3.1.1 The Rating System

- Each item on the scale is scored out of 10 (with ½ points).
- Reviewing each item carefully will help ensure consistency.

Housing Unit N = 19										
1. Security	.5	1	1.5	2	2.5	3	3.5	4	4.5	5
	No locks on exterior doors No locks on windows or broken window(s) No way to screen visitors		Handle locks only and hollow core exterior doors No locks on windows			Handle lock and security chain or bar on hollow core doors Windows lock		Handle and deadbolt locks on semisolid doors and peephole viewers		Handle and deadbolt locks on solid exterior, self-closing solid core doors with door savers, peephole viewers and electronic entry system to screen visitors



## 3.2 Eligibility: Rating Health and Safety

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- An unlicensed rooming house should not be considered acceptable for use in Housing First applications. Licensing ensures basic health and safety standards had been met and that the unit was looked at by a qualified inspector.
- The quality of health and safety in a licensed rooming house will be measured using the OHQS.





## 3.3 Rating the Unit

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- Be respectful of staff, tenants, and privacy.
- Remember, we aren't building inspectors!
  - We don't evaluate electrical or structural conditions
- Follow the OHQS form closely to ensure an accurate rating for each of the assessed items.
- Rating the unit and property typically takes 20-30 minutes.

Vulnerable Person's  
Office

Residential  
Tenancies Branch



## 3.3 Rating the Unit

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- Examine the individual dwelling units of a rooming house and shared facilities (bathroom, kitchen).
- 19 items to assess and rate, including:
  - Unit Safety
  - Heating
  - Water
  - Evidence of Pests





## 3.4 Rating the Building

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- Examine the common areas of building interior, exterior, and property overall.
- 8 items to assess and rate, including:
  - Unit Security
  - Condition of common areas
  - Garbage facilities
  - Access to nature







## 3.5 Using the OHQS

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- Two persons visit and rate the unit and building individually – scores don't have to match perfectly (the goal is to be complementary).
- Rooming houses and SROS may not score very high in some areas – fewer amenities than other housing types. That's okay! See the interpretation scale for a discussion of the results.
- “Good” rooming houses will still score higher than “bad” ones.
- This is not an assessment of cleanliness or neatness in units but an objective examination of overall facilities and amenities.



# 4. Interpreting the Score

What does this number mean?





# 4.1 The HQI Results for RH and SROs

- Once the score has been added, it's time to review against the rating chart.
- The chart is intended to help you and your client make an informed decision about the unit and its potential for habitation and a subsidy.

Rooming House/Single Room Occupancy Hotel (SRO) General Interpretation Guidelines			
Range	Condition Range	Description	Action
Below 50	Not Acceptable	Very likely substandard, potentially not meeting licencing/community standards; not advisable for habitation	Not advisable for a rental subsidy and that client should be directed to seek alternative accommodation
50-60	Very Poor – Marginal	Lowest scores in this range are associated with very poor quality habitation and not desirable for clients; higher scores provide marginally acceptable conditions	Lowest scores may result in a not acceptable recommendation; quality of amenities and unit deficiencies must be carefully examined to assess for habitation or program subsidy; higher likelihood with increased score
60-70	Acceptable to Higher Quality	Quality and amenities generally improve, with habitation much more possible as score rises	Likely more acceptable, with subsidy and support possible but careful weighting of individual deficiencies advisable
70+	Most Acceptable	Quality rises and most likely units are much more acceptable in condition and amenities	Offers higher standard for a Rooming House or SRO with subsidy more easily supportable

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## 4.2 The Rating Scale: Part I

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- Scores under 50 are considered to be very marginal and should not be recommended.
- Scores between 51 and 60 fall into a very poor category and should also be carefully weighed on a case by case basis.
- Generally, scores higher than 60 will begin to increase in quality but careful consideration of key factors (safety and security) must be considered as whether there is potential for the unit to provide long term stable housing.



## 4.3 The Rating Scale: Part II

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- Scores exceeding 70 increase the quality, but again, each unit will have strengths and weaknesses that will need to be considered for both occupation and subsidy.
- Generally, scores in this range should result in more positive accommodation.



## 4.4 Adding It All Up

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- The OHQS helps individuals in need of housing make informed decisions.
- Can also help organizations make informed decisions about supplementing rents or other supports.
- Work with the scale and overall impressions – each range is not absolute. There are shades of grey and different factors that might sway a decision.
- Include red flags – higher/lower scores might not reflect red flags like pest infestation, safety, or social the functioning of a place.



## 4.5 Conclusions

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- The OHQS scale for Rooming Houses and Single Room Occupancy Hotels is considered a starting point for community standards.
- Each community may shift the ranges as they see fit, based on community standards.







## 4.6 The OHQS: Final Thoughts

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- The OHQS is a simple to use tool to help communities make informed decisions about assessing housing quality.

- For further details on the development of the scale:

Adair, C E., Koop, B., Lavoie, J., Distasio, J., Hwang, S.W, Watson, A, Veldhuizen, S., Chislett, K., Voronka, J., Ahmad, M., Ahmed, N., Goering, P., (2014). Development and Initial Validation of the Observer-Rated Housing Quality Scale (OHQS) in a Multisite Trial of Housing First. *Journal of Urban Health*:

<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11524-013-9851-6>



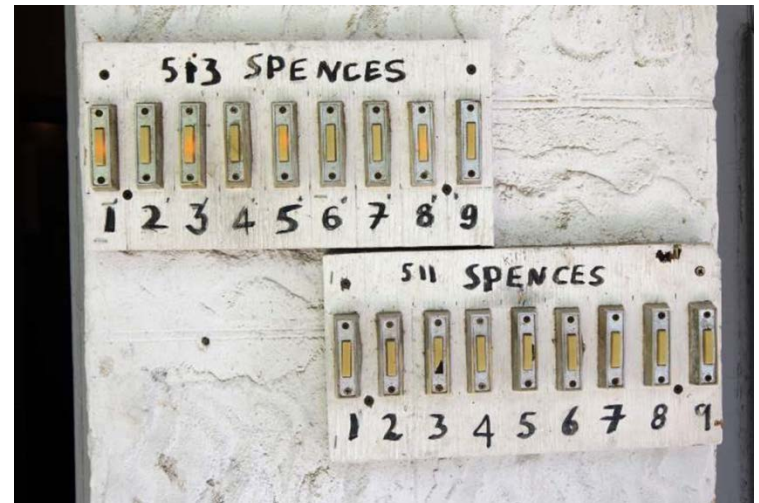
# 5. Next Steps

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# NEXT STEPS

- Partner with local owners to identify units for training and testing.
- Conduct field training (using the instrument).
- Training the trainer – IUS will help you learn and support the implementation.
- Refining the scale to determine the best fit for West Broadway.



# NEXT STEPS

## ○ Deliverables:

- OHQS revised to reflect RH/SRO
- PowerPoint slides for training and awareness
- Initial scoring system
- Field training sessions
- 'Train the trainers' sessions

