

THE LOSS OF SINGLE ROOM OCCUPANCY HOUSING IN METROPOLITAN AREAS

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ABSTRACT

The demise of skid rows and the loss of the single room occupancy (SRO) housing stock in metropolitan areas has been widely noticed, but rarely quantified. This paper reports estimates derived from the Annual Housing Survey for changes in the SRO housing stock and the disposition of lost units between 1976 and 1980. For the entire United States, SRO units declined by one-fifth, from 376,000 units in 1976 to 307,000 units in 1980. Inside Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA), they declined 13 percent, from 307,000 units in 1976 to 267,000 units in 1980. The lost units have an estimated replacement value in excess of \$2 billion. These losses are concentrated among units that served the poorest tenants. Demolition and a lack of habitability account for the majority of losses. Conversion to owned units is an explanatory factor of negligible importance. Implications for the filtering concept are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Rental housing provides shelter for over one-third of the households in the United States. The single room occupancy (SRO) housing has been an important source of housing for individuals with the lowest incomes and fewest personal possessions. The loss of this portion of the rental stock has been widely noted, but rarely quantified. This paper reports estimates derived from the Annual Housing Survey regarding the extent of the loss in the late 1970s and the disposition of the lost units. Of particular interest is the question of whether the recent conversion of rental units to owned units has been an important cause in explaining the loss of this housing from the rental stock.

During the 1960s, the term "Single-Room Occupancy" (SRO) became a euphemism for a lifestyle associated with the skid-row subculture (Shapiro, 1971). The skid-row areas of cities contained ships, bars, rooming houses and hotels that served a transient labor force of men who were single or had left families behind to find work (Wallace, 1965). In some cities, these areas always existed. Others formed in coastal cities as industrialization brought a shift of labor from farms to urban areas and the cities absorbed large numbers of foreign

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immigrants. The Depression of the '30s and World Wars I and II greatly increased demand for SRO units by stimulating the movement of unemployed laborers, foreign nationals and recently discharged soldiers into the cities. Landlords converted apartments, houses and hotels into small units, leaving a bathroom and perhaps a kitchen to serve a number of separate tenants (Reynolds, 1969).

The characteristics of the SRO stock and tenants vary from one area to another. For example, in New York City, SRO tenants live primarily in large hotels that are often sandwiched between middle-class enclaves. A large proportion of SRO tenants in New York City are black (Siegal, 1978). In St. Louis, SRO tenants are largely white (Erllich, 1976). The literature on the SRO lifestyle offers varying sets of observations on such questions as the degree to which these tenants are lonely, alienated, and in poor health. (Bohannon and Eckert, 1978; Erllich, 1976; Lally, Black, Thornock, and Hawkings, 1979; Levy, 1968; Shapiro, 1971; Siegal, 1978; and Sokolovsky and Cohen, 1978). A unifying theme in this literature has been the tenants material deprivation.

The demise of the skid rows started in the 1950s with the implementation of federal urban-renewal programs and the revitalization of many inner cities (Bahr, 1967; Kasinitz, 1984; Lee, 1980; and Rudel and Neaigus, 1984). The shrinkage was so dramatic that by 1973, Koor was predicting the complete disappearance of SRO stock by the 1980s (Siegal and Inciardi, 1982). Since 1970, some cities have lost a substantial portion of their remaining units (Green, 1982; Hopper and Hamburg, 1986).

METHODS

During the '70s, the Annual Housing Survey (AHS) tracked a sample of housing units drawn primarily from the 1970 Census. These residences were visited yearly, enabling the documentation of the disposition of housing units that were removed from the housing stock as well as the characteristics of the housing stock itself. The Annual Housing Survey (AHS) is sponsored by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development and conducted by the Bureau of the Census. While this survey is currently the best source of information regarding changes in the housing stock, the sample does have problems. In 1977, the sample was deliberately reduced by seven percent. The sample also does not reflect local conditions in some cities. It is also not a census. It is a sample that contains cases for which weights are applied to achieve national estimates. The estimates of the disposition of lost SRO units are based on the 1976 weights and lack comparability to estimates using 1980 weights. Further, part of the sampling frame was the 1970 Census, which has been suspected of an undercount of the more squalid SRO units. The estimates presented in this paper, therefore, should be viewed as conservative.

Special tabulations of the Survey were performed. To be an SRO, a unit had to show the following characteristics: a rental unit that was one room and lacked a complete kitchen and/or plumbing for the exclusive use of the occupant and contained a single person who was 20 years old or older. All mobile homes and farms were excluded. For comparative purposes, efficiencies (i.e., single rooms containing complete kitchens and bathrooms) and multiple-room rental units occupied by a single person were also selected for separate tabulations.

RESULTS

The SRO units that lacked complete facilities decreased in the entire United States from 376,000 units in 1976 to 307,000 units in 1980, a drop of

approximately one-fifth (see Table 1). Meanwhile, the number of efficiency units increased by approximately one-fourth. The impression that SRO units tend to be in very large buildings is correct. In both 1976 and 1980, buildings with more than 50 units were the modal size buildings for these units. However, buildings this size did not contain the majority of these units (ie. An SRO unit was most likely to be found in very large buildings). In 1976, these buildings contained 28 percent of the SRO housing stock (106,000 units). In 1980, they contained 25 percent of the SRO stock (78,000 units). The SRO units in these large buildings decreased by about 26 percent. The percentage drop was larger, however, among the moderately sized buildings with 10-19 units. SRO units in these buildings dropped by 35 percent, from 89,000 units in 1976 to 58,000 units in 1980. A small increase occurred in buildings with 20-to-49 units, from 58,000 units in 1976 to 63,000 units in 1980, a gain of about eight percent.

The small increase seen in various portions of the SRO stock is most likely a result of decisions made by hotel and apartment building managers. New SRO units can be created by merely altering policies regarding room rentals and permitting their use on a longer term basis than is customary with transients. SRO units can also be created by closing off a room (that was once part of a suite or apartment containing several rooms) and renting it on a long-term basis. The managers are probably responding to increases in demand for this kind of shelter.

Inside MSA's, the number of SRO units decreased by 13 percent, from 307,000 units in 1976 to 267,000 units in 1980. SRO units in structures with more than 50 units decreased by one-fourth, from 104,000 in 1976 to 78,000 in 1980. During the same period, the number of SRO units in structures with 20-to-49 units increased from 40,000 to 52,000. There was a decrease from 73,000 to 43,000 in the number of SRO units in structures with 10-to-19 units, a decline of nearly one-half. There was a slight decrease from 62,000 in 1976 to 60,000 in 1980 in structures with five to nine SRO units and an increase in SRO stock from 27,000 to 34,000 in structures with one to four units. This small gain may be a reflection of the growing popularity in the use of accessory apartments to house elderly relatives. The biggest changes are in the disappearance of SRO units in structures with 10 to 19 units and in the disappearance of SRO units in structures with more than 50 units.

Almost half of the SRO units located outside MSA's disappeared, decreasing from 70,000 to 41,000 units. The SRO stock outside of MSA's declined from 19 percent to 13 percent in the entire United States. Single room units almost completely disappeared in structures with more than 50 units. Such structures, however, contained only three percent of all SRO stock. SRO units in buildings with one-to-four units disappeared at the highest rate. Of the 24,000 units in 1976, only one-third survived in 1980. This had been the most common size of structure containing SRO units outside of SMA's. By 1980, the most common-size structure containing SRO stock had 10 to 19 units. The SRO units in those buildings only decreased from 16,000 in 1976 to 15,000 in 1980.

The decrease in the number of SRO units leads to the question of their fate. It was supposed that abandonment and demolition would be the most important activity accounting for SRO unit loss inside MSA's, followed by the conversion of units from rentals to owned, popularly known as "condo conversion." The first expectation is supported. The second expectation is not.

Of the 307,000 SRO units that were occupied in metropolitan areas in 1976, 46 percent were still occupied SRO units when the interviewers returned four

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Table 1. Distribution of SRO housing stock in the United States in 1976 and in 1980 by size of structure
(In Thousands)

	SIZE OF STRUCTURE (NUMBER OF UNITS)					Total Units
	1-4	5-9	10-19	20-49	50+	
INSIDE MSA'S						
SRO units						
1976	27 (9%)	62 (20%)	73 (24%)	40 (13%)	104 (34%)	307 (100%)
1980	34 (13%)	60 (22%)	43 (16%)	52 (19%)	78 (29%)	267 (100%)
Efficiency units						
1976	39 (10%)	27 (7%)	42 (11%)	47 (12%)	229 (60%)	384 (100%)
1980	56 (11%)	43 (8%)	68 (13%)	82 (16%)	273 (52%)	522 (100%)
OUTSIDE MSA'S						
SRO units						
1976	24 (34%)	10 (14%)	16 (23%)	18 (26%)	2 (3%)	70 (100%)
1980	8 (20%)	7 (17%)	15 (37%)	11 (27%)	0 (0%)	41 (100%)
Efficiency units						
1976	11 (31%)	5 (14%)	4 (12%)	3 (9%)	12 (34%)	35 (100%)
1980	8 (31%)	5 (19%)	0 (0%)	2 (8%)	11 (42%)	26 (100%)
TOTAL U.S.						
SRO units						
1976	51 (14%)	72 (19%)	89 (24%)	58 (15%)	106 (28%)	376 (100%)
1980	41 (13%)	67 (22%)	58 (19%)	63 (21%)	78 (25%)	307 (100%)
Efficiency units						
1976	50 (12%)	32 (8%)	46 (11%)	50 (12%)	241 (57%)	419 (100%)
1980	64 (12%)	48 (9%)	68 (12%)	83 (15%)	285 (52%)	548 (100%)

Note: Farms, group quarters, lodgers in private homes and units occupied by households classified as having a usual residence elsewhere are excluded

Sources: Special tabulations of the 1976 and 1980 Annual Housing Survey

years later. Eight percent were vacant, but had retained their SRO status. Ten percent of the SRO units were modified into efficiency and/or multiple-room apartments. An additional four percent became rooms in boarding houses (i.e., lost direct access to the outside or acquired occupants who lived or ate with tenants in other rooms). In short, approximately two-thirds of the 1976 units were still available for rental purposes. An additional 11 percent had a status that could not be determined.

Less than one percent of the 1976 SRO units lost their status as a rental unit by 1980. This low percentage may be due to physical deterioration, an inevitable result of the practice of "milking" a building, abandonment, and the high cost of rehabilitation (Hartman, 1983). Many SRO units were undoubtedly in areas targeted for expanded commercial use (Cummings, 1982). Less than one percent still exist, but are used for nonresidential purposes. One percent are residential, but are being used by transients and are probably not available as permanent abodes. The greatest source of loss is the elimination of the unit or the unit becoming uninhabitable. This category accounts for 19 percent of the SRO units. While "condo conversion" accounts for large losses of SRO housing stock in some cities (such as New York City), the AHS results do not support its importance nationally. Redevelopment is the predominant explanation.

The third question is whether the losses occurred uniformly across the SRO housing stock. An examination of the characteristics of tenants solves the problem of a lack of comparability of rent structures across cities. Four-fifths (82 percent) of SRO tenants have incomes that are low enough to qualify them for rent subsidies under the Section 8 program. The units that housed them in 1976 are nearly three times more likely than units occupied by more affluent tenants to have been lost as housing for permanent tenants. Specifically, at least one-fourth of the 1976 SRO units that sheltered these low-income tenants were eliminated, became uninhabitable, were used for nonresidential purposes, or were used by transients. Among the units occupied by higher income tenants, at least six percent were lost due to these causes, with an additional three percent converted to owned housing. (These figures assume that the small portion of the 1976 sample with an undetermined status -11 percent- were distributed evenly across the sample.) Among the units with higher income tenants, 16 percent were altered to become efficiency and/or multiple-room apartments. Only nine percent of the units with low-income tenants were altered in the same way. These differences suggest that the remaining supply of SRO units shifted toward accommodating a higher income tenant population.

Changes in the characteristics of the SRO tenant population support the contention that SRO housing has been shifting toward serving a more affluent group of tenants. Tenants younger than 62 years of age have always been in the majority. Between 1976 and 1980, they increased from 62 to 69 percent of the SRO tenant population. For these younger tenants, little change is seen in the proportion of males, which remains at about 85 percent of this group. In spite of a decline in the overall number of tenants, the number of 30-to-44 year old males doubled.

The wealth of SRO tenants increasingly resembles other classes of single individuals in rental housing. The proportion of men under 62 years of age with very little education (eighth grade education or less) declined from 30 percent of SRO male tenants to 17 percent of SRO male tenants (see Table 2). The representation of men with college degrees increased from eight to 13 percent. These changes are reflected in the mean income of these younger SRO tenants. In 1976, the mean income reported for the preceding year was approximately \$5,800. Average incomes are only computed for those individuals who report

receiving any income, which increased from 96 percent to approximately 100 percent of the non-elderly SRO tenants. By 1980, the mean reported for the previous year was \$8,900, an increase of 53 percent. During this time, the mean income of tenants in efficiency units and single individuals in multiple-room units rose by only 32 percent. Not surprisingly, the percentage of younger SRO tenants who receive income from wages also increased substantially, from 66 percent in 1976 to 73 percent in 1980. The wage earners in SRO units showed an increase in average income of 60 percent, while wage earners in efficiency units only increased their income by 33 percent. The possibility that the SRO tenant population remained unchanged and discovered new sources of wealth is unlikely.

In spite of the narrowing gap in affluence between SRO tenants and other similar classes of tenants, SRO stock has not completely lost its character as shelter of last resort. One indication has been the dramatic increase in the percentage of tenants under 62 years of age who report receiving income from welfare. Unlike the elderly, this group must prove the presence of a severe disability to receive this benefit. This group increased from 17 percent in 1976 to 29 percent of the younger tenants in 1980. By 1980, 23 percent of the younger tenants were subsisting at 75 percent of the poverty level, receiving an annual income of \$3000 or less. By contrast, tenants with incomes this low comprised only ten percent of all renters (Dolbeare, 1983).

DISCUSSION

The AHS has provided the means to document part of the process of the destruction of SRO housing. It shows that the units that left the housing stock were likely to serve low-income tenants. They tend to be on sites that are redeveloped. These events, coupled with the concurrent increases in housing inventory (Sternlieb and Hughes, 1983) appear to be consistent with the filtering concept (Weicher, 1980). However, the evidence does not support the view that these changes indicate an improvement in housing quality for low-income households has occurred.

For more than a quarter of a century, the filtering concept has represented an attempt at a macro-analysis of the housing market (Grigsby, 1963). It refers to the process of housing units declining in value over time and becoming available to low-income households. Politically popular, it has been used to justify the concentration of federal housing subsidies on middle- and upper-income households (Aaron, 1972). The disappearance of the most deficient units in the housing inventory is usually interpreted as an indication of overall improvement in how well the population is housed.

Increasing the quality of the existing housing inventory does not necessarily mean that decent housing will be available to the lowest income groups. While filtering may have had this effect in the 1950s, the circumstances that produced it are gone. That the SRO tenants of the '50s experienced substantial improvements in the quality of their shelter is unlikely. The ability of displaced SRO tenants of the '70s to pay for the same or better quality housing is dubious, because filtering depends on declines in real prices in older neighborhoods (Grigsby and Rosenberg, 1975).

The relationships between the income of the SRO tenant population and rent structures have never been analyzed. However, other indicators imply little or no improvement of position of the SRO tenant in the housing market. Since the '60s, competition for this kind of shelter has been intensified by demographic shifts that have produced increasing demands for smaller rental units (Straszheim,

1975). New construction has typically been concentrated in the owned rather than rental market. As a result, rent structures are most sensitive to the income

Table 2. Age and educational attainment of younger^a SRO tenants and efficiency tenants in metropolitan areas in 1976 and 1980
(In Thousands)

	AGE OF TENANT POPULATIONS			
	20-29 years	30-44 years	45-61 years	Total
Male SRO tenants				
1976	58 (36%)	27 (17%)	78 (48%)	163 (100%)
1980	37 (24%)	58 (37%)	61 (39%)	156 (100%)
Female SRO tenants				
1976	10 (38%)	9 (35%)	7 (27%)	26 (100%)
1980	7 (26%)	10 (36%)	10 (37%)	27 (100%)
Male efficiency tenants				
1976	54 (48%)	30 (27%)	29 (26%)	113 (100%)
1980	109 (46%)	65 (28%)	62 (26%)	236 (100%)
Female efficiency tenants				
1976	56 (61%)	16 (17%)	21 (22%)	94 (100%)
1980	57 (50%)	36 (32%)	21 (18%)	115 (100%)

	EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF TENANT POPULATIONS				Total
	Eighth grade or less	Some high school	High school diploma ^b	College degree ^c	
Male SRO tenants					
1976	49 (30%)	29 (18%)	73 (45%)	13 (8%)	164 (100%)
1980	26 (17%)	27 (17%)	82 (53%)	21 (13%)	156 (100%)
Female SRO tenants					
1976	4 (15%)	6 (23%)	13 (50%)	3 (12%)	26 (100%)
1980	5 (19%)	5 (19%)	15 (56%)	2 (7%)	27 (100%)
Male efficiency tenants					
1976	24 (21%)	9 (8%)	48 (42%)	33 (39%)	114 (100%)
1980	11 (5%)	42 (18%)	106 (45%)	76 (32%)	235 (100%)
Female efficiency tenants					
1976	5 (5%)	12 (13%)	48 (51%)	30 (32%)	95 (100%)
1980	3 (3%)	8 (7%)	53 (46%)	51 (44%)	115 (100%)

^a Aged 20-to-61 years

^b Includes persons with some college

^c Completed four years of college

Sources: Special tabulations of the 1976 and 1980 Annual Housing Survey

level of a metropolitan area, instead of the size of the overall inventory (Gilderbloom, 1986). Rapid inflation of land and housing prices in the '70s kept many potential buyers in the rental market (Sternlieb and Hughes, 1984; Stokes, 1982; Stone, Whelan, and Murin, 1986). The financial position of low-income tenants has also been degraded by landlords' price setting strategies that tend to be more cooperative than competitive (Gilderbloom, 1985). Local political structures tend to favor developers and large rental-property owners (Mollenkopf and Pynoos, 1973). The loss of SRO housing is part of the crisis in rental housing affordability predicted by Downs (1983) and documented by Myers and Baillargeon (1985).

The magnitude of the loss of 40,000 units in the late '70s becomes clear when one considers the replacement costs of these units. In 1981, I. Donald Turner, director of California's Office of Housing and Community Development, estimated that the replacement of the state's 60,000 to 80,000 residential hotel rooms would cost \$4 billion. Initial construction costs for 1,000 efficiency apartments would be \$50 to \$100 million, with additional millions per year required for rent subsidies for these units. Rehabilitation of existing SRO units would have been one-tenth to one-twentieth of this amount (National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1981).

The SRO housing stock has been among the least expensive shelters in the United States and accommodates some of the most impoverished citizens. The documentation of its demise mandates the recognition of the validity of accounts that claim that many former SRO tenants became homeless (Alter et al., 1984; Kasinitz, 1984; Whitty, 1981; Wright, 1982; Young, 1981). Clearly, the congressional appropriation of \$355 million authorized by the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act will not meet long-term needs (Redburn and Buss, 1986; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1987; Watson and Austerberry, 1986).

Exact estimates of the number of homeless do not exist because systematic attempts to enumerate them would be very expensive. Thus far, the most restrictive definition possible of homelessness and a conservative methodology have produced a national estimate of 250,000 to 350,000 individuals (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1984). A broader definition yields an estimate of two to three million (Homburg and Snyder, 1982). This figure may also be conservative. During 1987, requests for emergency shelter in 26 major cities increased by 21 percent (Greene, 1987).

The number of homeless who are displaced SRO tenants is unknown. Observers of the portion of that population who resort to shelters find many homeless people who report that this kind of housing was the last they had. Although the homeless who are mentally ill have been receiving much of the attention, they are not the majority of the homeless (Hoch, 1986; Snow, Baker, Anderson and Martin, 1986). The high visibility of the homeless who are the de-institutionalized mentally ill can distract one from other powerful, but less obvious, trends that have produced homelessness, such as changes in the structure of family life, high unemployment, and decreases in public support programs, as well as the loss of low-cost housing (Fischer and Breakey, 1986).

The filtering concept fails to provide accurate indications of how well the population is housed insofar as it assumes that housing is nothing more than a commodity (Achtenberg and Marcuse, 1986). Such an analysis limits itself to discussing the ways in which housing serves the interests of private capital (i.e., how it is produced, owned, and sold) and ignores the role of housing as a necessity of life. The usefulness of the concept will be enhanced by including a

consideration of the costs to the actual consumer and the potential consumer that are part of the process of speculative gains made by successive owners.

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