ARE BOARDING HOUSES DISAPPEARING?

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This is a controversial report. It is appropriate to point out that I alone am responsible for the arguments presented here.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report investigates whether boarding houses are disappearing. Chapter 1 points out that the most persuasive evidence for this argument comes from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). In 2011 the ABS released census data showing that the boarding house population had fallen from 23,750 in 2001 to 16,830 in 2006, a decrease of 29 per cent.

Chapter 2 explains the official definition of a rooming house in Victoria. Then it outlines the six main sources of evidence used in this report. The following chapter investigates whether the ABS has adequately substantiated its claim that the boarding house population was 16,830 in 2006. The chapter concludes that the ABS has not established its case, and that there are major limitations to establishing the boarding house population using census data.

Chapter 4 outlines an alternative method for counting boarding houses, using council records. The new approach was tested in metropolitan Melbourne in 2011. The next chapter shows that the rooming house population in Melbourne increased from 3739 in 2006 to 12,568 people in 2011, an increase of 236 per cent. If the ABS (2011) figure of 2946 is used as the benchmark, then the increase was 327 per cent.

Chapter 6 describes the range of dwellings that currently operate as boarding houses and explains why census collectors often misclassify them. Chapter 7 examines the argument that rooming house accommodation is only slightly below the community standard of a self-contained flat. It concludes that the evidence does not substantiate this contention.

The final chapter summarises the three main findings. First, in metropolitan Melbourne the rooming house population increased three to four times between 2006 and 2011. Second, the population has become more diverse, with a range of disadvantaged people now in boarding houses. Third, the national rooming house population is now about 70,000.

The report concludes that the ABS method of counting boarding houses is fundamentally flawed.
INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, a boarding house provided long-term single room accommodation and also provided meals … A rooming house did not … Nowadays, the terms boarding house and rooming house are used interchangeably (Greenhalgh, Miller, Minnery, Guran, Jacobs and Phibbs, 2004, p. 2).

This report is concerned with Victoria where the parliamentary legislation refers to ‘rooming houses’ rather than ‘boarding houses’. In other parts of Australia the terms ‘boarding house’ and ‘lodging house’ are in common usage (Department of Human Services 2011, p. 21). This report uses the term ‘rooming house’ when referring to the Victorian legislation. Elsewhere in the report, the terms ‘boarding house’ and ‘rooming house’ are used interchangeably.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2011) classifies people living in boarding houses as part of the ‘tertiary homeless’ population when it enumerates homeless people on census night (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 2008). This chapter begins by explaining the definition of homelessness used by the ABS. Then it reviews the argument that boarding houses are disappearing. Finally, the chapter summarises the main aims of the research and explains how the report is organised.

1.1 Tertiary homelessness

The ABS (2011) employs the cultural definition of homelessness to enumerate the homeless population. This definition distinguishes between primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness. Primary homelessness refers to people sleeping rough, squatting in derelict buildings or using improvised dwellings for temporary shelter. Secondary homelessness refers to people who move frequently from one form of temporary accommodation to another. This includes people staying temporarily with other households because they have no accommodation of their own; people staying in emergency or transitional accommodation; and people staying in boarding houses on a short-term basis, operationally defined as 12 weeks or less. Tertiary homelessness refers to people who live in boarding houses on a medium to long-term basis, operationally defined as 13 weeks or longer. Residents of private boarding houses are homeless because their accommodation is below the minimum community standard of a small rental flat with a bedroom, living room, kitchen and bathroom (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 1992).
Boarding house residents include people in both the secondary and tertiary population. However, in *Counting the homeless 2006* (CTH 2006) temporary residents of boarding houses were enumerated in the same category as longer-term boarding house residents. This is because it was not possible to ascertain from census data how long people had lived in boarding houses. The term ‘tertiary homelessness’ has come to mean all people in boarding houses and this is how the term is used here. The Australian Government endorsed the cultural definition in *The road home*, which specifically noted that ‘tertiary homelessness includes people living in boarding houses … both short and long-term’ (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2008, p. 3).

1.2 **Boarding houses are disappearing**

There is widespread agreement that boarding houses are disappearing. National Shelter reviewed the available evidence for each state and territory, focusing on the mid-1990s. They warned that it was not possible to provide an accurate figure for the number of rooming houses. Nonetheless, they published ‘indicative estimates’ for each state and territory (2000, p. 14). National Shelter estimated 2700 boarding houses across the country with about 58,000 tenants in the mid-1990s.

Others were certain that boarding house numbers were declining rapidly, particularly in the inner suburbs of the capital cities. Anderson, Hume, Rogers and Stephenson (2003) undertook a detailed study of boarding houses in Adelaide and found that:

> [n]umerous studies in Australia have documented the decline of the number of boarding houses in key inner city areas ... significant reductions in boarding house rooms have been documented in … Yarra and Port Phillip in Melbourne, in Adelaide and in Inner Sydney.

In 1988, Hefferan reported there were 1540 people in boarding houses in Adelaide, but Anderson et al. (2003) found that this had fallen to 1100 people by January 2002, a decrease of almost 30 per cent. In Melbourne, Jope (2000) found that rooming houses in the City of Yarra had declined by 50 per cent between 1992 and 1997. In Sydney, Davidson, Phibbs and Cox (1998) estimated that boarding houses were declining at about seven to eight per cent per annum in the late 1990s. Greenhalgh et al. (2004, p. i) concluded that ‘there is clear evidence that, at least in the major metropolitan areas, the number of establishments and beds are declining’.
The most persuasive evidence about the decline of boarding houses comes from the 2001 and 2006 Censuses. The ABS (2011) estimated there were 23,750 people in boarding houses on Census night 2001, but this had declined to 16,830 in 2006, a decrease of 29 per cent. The numbers had dropped significantly in all states and territories.

1.3 Research questions
This research set out to investigate the boarding house population in metropolitan Melbourne at the time of the 2011 Census. The aims were:

1. to establish the number of people in boarding houses, using a different method from that used by the ABS
2. to map the geographical distribution of the boarding house population
3. to describe the characteristics of dwellings currently used as boarding houses
4. to investigate whether boarding houses provide basic accommodation only slightly below the community standard of a small self-contained flat
5. to identify any changes in the social composition of the boarding house population.

Six main sources of evidence are outlined in Chapter 2 while Chapter 3 critically reviews the ABS argument that the boarding house population had dropped to 16,800 in 2006. Chapter 4 outlines a new method for counting the boarding house population in 2011, using records collated by local councils. Chapter 5 explains how the new method was tested in metropolitan Melbourne.

The main finding is that the boarding house population increased from 3700 people in 2006 to 12,500 in 2011. Chapter 6 describes the wide range of buildings that are now used as boarding houses and chapter 7 investigates whether most boarding houses were only slightly below the community standard of a small, self-contained flat. The final chapter summarises the main findings.
2 METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the official definition of a rooming house in Victoria. Then it outlines the six main types of evidence used in this report.

2.1 Definition

According to the Victorian Residential Tenancies Act 1997 and the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Regulations 2009, a rooming house is a building where ‘one or more rooms is available for rent and the total number of people who occupy those rooms is four or more’ (Department of Human Services, 2011, p. 13).

The Building Regulations 2006 distinguish between small rooming houses which are known as Class 1b dwellings and larger rooming houses which are known as Class 3 dwellings. Class 1b rooming houses have up to 12 occupants and a total floor space of not more than 300 square metres. Class 3 rooming houses have more than 12 occupants and a floor space of more than 300 square metres.

All Class 1b and Class 3 dwellings ‘must have a hard-wired smoke alarm or a smoke detection system’ (Victorian Department of Human Services 2011, p. 20). However, Class 3 dwellings ‘must be equipped with additional safety measures which can include fire detection systems, evacuation plans, fire fighting equipment and automatic sprinkler systems’ (Department of Human Services 2011, p. 20). Because of the extra cost of installing this additional equipment, many rooming house operators prefer to have properties that accommodate 12 or fewer people.

A rooming house tenancy is not the same as a shared household in the private rental market. In a shared household, the persons living in the property will be joint parties to one tenancy agreement which gives them rights to the whole property. The persons on the lease are likely to be friends, or in some other way connected, and the tenancy agreement will provide them with access to the entire building.

In a rooming house, the residents have exclusive access only to their own bedroom, and have shared access rights to communal areas such as bathrooms, kitchens and living areas. Residents are typically not connected to each other through friendships, and they enter into the agreement with the rooming house owner independently of the other residents in the property. Residents are often isolated from one another and they may have difficulty sharing communal facilities such as kitchens and bathrooms.
The rooming house sector is diverse, but boarding houses usually have the following characteristics:

- They provide single room accommodation.
- There is shared access to common facilities such as bathrooms, kitchens, laundries and living areas.
- Residents enter into a tenancy agreement with the boarding house operator on an individual basis.
- There are locks on bedroom doors.
- No formal support services are located on the premises.

2.2 Evidence

Under section 67 of the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act (2008)* in Victoria, all rooming houses must be registered with local councils. As part of this process, councils inspect rooming houses to ensure that they meet the minimum standards set out in the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act (2008)* and the *Building Act (1993)*. The Office of Housing collates this information on a central register.

At the time of the Census in August 2011, the central register was nearly a year out of date. The best way of gaining up-to-date information was to approach local councils for current information about rooming houses in their municipality. Altogether, 30 out of the 31 councils supplied updated information.

Thirty-one council officers were interviewed. All had been involved in the inspection of rooming houses. They had detailed knowledge about what was happening in their municipality. These interviews produced high quality information about the characteristics of the dwellings, the behaviour of boarding house operators, and the social characteristics of the tenants.

In addition, 28 staff were interviewed at 15 agencies that provide direct support to homeless people. All 15 services used rooming houses. The agencies were spread across metropolitan Melbourne and many staff had extensive experience working with homeless people.

Some council officers had reported that there were students living in rooming houses close to universities and TAFE colleges. Therefore 10 housing officers were interviewed from Melbourne’s eight universities and six welfare staff from TAFE colleges.
Information was available from 65 in-depth interviews with homeless people who had lived in boarding houses. This research was carried out by Guy Johnson and I. The respondents were recruited at agencies in two local government areas in Inner Melbourne. This study is referred to as the Pathways project.

Finally, 250 field visits were undertaken to rooming houses. One purpose of these visits was to establish the range of buildings that are currently being used as rooming houses. Another purpose was to investigate whether census collectors would recognise that these dwellings were boarding houses.
3 ABS COUNT

CTH 2006 found that there were 21,596 people in boarding houses in 2006. The ABS (2011) review of CTH 2006 reduced the boarding house estimate to 16,830, a reduction of 4768 or 22 per cent. This chapter investigates whether the ABS has adequately substantiated this claim.

The ABS (2011) method of counting the boarding house population is based on the approach developed by Chamberlain and MacKenzie (C & M) for the 1996, 2001 and 2006 Censuses (Chamberlain 1999; C & M 2003; 2008), so that approach is explained first. Then the chapter outlines the two most important methodological changes made by the ABS. These changes account for 90 per cent of the reduction in the boarding house estimate.

The first change involved moving 1970 people from the boarding house category into a new category called ‘persons in other temporary dwellings’. The creation of a new category was justified, but some people placed in the new category were boarding house residents. The second change involved moving 2343 people from the category which identified boarding houses misclassified as private dwellings. The ABS argues that these people were in shared households. This chapter demonstrates that they could have been in rooming houses. Finally, it is pointed out that the ABS did not deal satisfactorily with undercounting.

The overall conclusion is that the ABS has not adequately demonstrated its main claim.

3.1 The C & M method

C and M’s basic rules for identifying boarding houses were laid down in 1996 (Chamberlain 1999). However, the rules were supplemented by additional conventions in both 2001 and 2006. A short version of the rules is explained first.

Basic rules (1996)

The census uses the categories ‘hotel, motel’ and ‘boarding house, private hotel’. Hotels and motels provide short-term accommodation for people who have a permanent home elsewhere. In contrast, boarding houses and private hotels provide accommodation for people who live permanently in single rooms or use boarding houses as emergency accommodation.
Local census collectors decide whether dwellings should be classified as hotels, boarding houses or staff quarters, and they often make mistakes. The 1996 research team developed various rules to correct for these errors.

The first rule was that dwellings should be removed from the boarding house category if 60 per cent or more of their adult residents were working and earning $600 or more per week. These were either ‘hotels’ or ‘staff quarters’. The same rule was applied to dwellings classified as ‘staff quarters’. If fewer than 60 per cent of residents in these dwellings were working and had incomes below $600 per week, then the dwelling was recoded as a ‘boarding house’. This was the first reclassification rule.

The second rule was that hotels were recoded as ‘boarding houses’ if they had the following characteristics: 20 per cent or more of their residents were living there permanently (very unusual for a hotel); and 75 per cent or more of residents were either unemployed or outside the labour force and earning less than $600 per week. (Hotels are not full of people on low incomes who do not have a job). This was the second reclassification rule.

The third rule dealt with people in other types of non-private dwelling who reported ‘no usual address’. In 1996 this group included 150 people in psychiatric hospitals, about 300 in public and private hospitals, 140 in other welfare institutions, a small number who were probably in the ‘lock-up’ and some who were staying temporarily with religious orders. This is called the ‘residual inclusion rule’. Just over 1000 people were included in the boarding house population under this rule.

2001 conventions
Following the 1996 census, ABS staff telephoned dwellings where there was insufficient information to identify dwelling type. Where additional information could be obtained a more accurate classification was entered.

In 2001 the ABS discontinued the practice of follow-up telephone calls and the number of dwellings in the category ‘other’ increased from 536 to 2784. The number of persons in those dwellings jumped from 12,938 to 54,636. In 2001 conventions were developed to identify boarding houses that had been misclassified in ‘other’ and the same rules were applied in 2006. The method focused on excluding dwellings from ‘other’ that could not be boarding houses. The method included rules to exclude

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1 These are the monetary values used in 2006.
retirement villages, nursing homes, boarding schools, residential colleges, halls of residence, correctional institutions for children, hotels, motels, staff quarters and religious institutions.

The 2001 analysis found 4905 boarding house residents hidden within ‘other’. Applying the same rules in 2006 produced a correction of 3763.

**2006 conventions**

When the 2006 Census analysis was undertaken, it was known that new boarding houses were opening in the outer suburbs. These were suburban houses that rarely had a sign outside indicating the use of the dwelling. Census collectors were likely to misclassify some of these boarding houses as ‘private dwellings’.

In 2006, 9000 private dwellings were identified that had five or more unrelated adults. It was thought that boarding houses could be hidden within this group. Rules were devised to exclude dwellings that were more likely to be group (share) households.

First, dwellings were excluded if 60 per cent or more of the residents were earning $600 per week or more. This removed working households of unrelated adults. Then households were removed if 60 per cent or more of the residents were studying or working full-time. This removed student households and ‘mixed’ households. After that, dwellings were excluded if 60 per cent or more of the residents were in need of assistance with ‘care activities’. This was supported accommodation for disabled people, usually with a carer on site. Finally, dwellings were excluded if they had fewer than four bedrooms. These properties were too small to be boarding houses.

This left 705 dwellings with 3343 residents. These were boarding houses that had been misclassified as private dwellings. In 2006 the total number of persons in boarding houses was 21,596. This was made up of 14,490 under the basic rules, 3763 people under the 2001 rules and 3343 under the 2006 rules.

### 3.2 ABS changes

The ABS (2011) review of CTH 2006 reduced the boarding house estimate from 21,596 to 16,828 in 2006, a reduction of 4768 or 22 per cent.

Table 3.1 shows that 90 per cent of those removed from the CTH 2006 boarding house estimate were in two categories. There were 1970 people moved from the
boarding house count into a new homeless category called ‘persons in other temporary lodgings’. This accounted for 41 per cent of the reduction. There were 2344 people removed from the category which identified ‘boarding houses misclassified as private dwellings’. This accounted for 49 per cent of the reduction. These changes are discussed next.

Table 3.1 | ABS changes to boarding house count

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Remove to new homeless category</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remove from ‘misclassified private dwellings’</td>
<td>2343</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous small adjustments</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total adjustment</strong></td>
<td><strong>4768</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**New category**
The first change involved moving 1970 people from the boarding house category into the new category, ‘persons in other temporary lodgings’. This change involved an adjustment to the original rules developed in 1996.

The 1996 research team had found 23,300 people in boarding houses, including just over 1000 people who were included under the residual inclusion rule. These people were not in rooming houses but in other types of non-private dwellings such as psychiatric hospitals, public hospitals, other welfare institutions, the ‘lock-up’ and so forth. In 1996 they were four per cent of the boarding house population or one per cent of the homeless population overall. C & M thought this group was too small to be a category in their own right. Nonetheless, the ABS considers them to be a separate category. This is probably reasonable.

However, the new category also includes people in boarding houses that were misclassified as hotels and staff quarters. The first and second reclassification rules had identified boarding houses that had been misclassified as ‘hotels’ and ‘staff quarters’ and put them back into the boarding house count. The ABS has reversed this decision. The ABS (2011, p. 31) paragraph is poorly worded, but it is clear what has been done:

CTH also includes … persons enumerated in a ‘hotel, motel’ [emphasis added] who reported ‘no usual address’, had low income, and were unemployed or not in the labour force. ABS accepts that some or all of the 544 people identified in this way may be homeless … However, it would
be more useful … to record this population separately from the boarding house population. Another CTH rule includes 1,426 persons in the boarding house population who report ‘no usual address’ and were enumerated in staff quarters [emphasis added] halls of residence, public hospital, private hospital, hostel for the disabled etc … This review records a new category for the 1,970 people enumerated in these non-private dwellings and … assumed to be homeless.

The estimate of 1970 in ‘other temporary lodgings’ includes 544 people in boarding houses that were misclassified as ‘hotel, motel’, an unspecified number of people in boarding houses that were classified as ‘staff quarters’, and an unspecified number of people who could reasonably be included in the new category. Altogether, the ABS category includes 1970 people (544 + 1426 = 1970).

### Boarding houses misclassified as private dwellings

It has been pointed out that it was necessary to search for boarding houses that might have been misclassified as private dwellings. This was done by examining 9000 private dwellings that had five or more unrelated adults. Various rules were used to exclude 92 per cent of these households, leaving 705 dwellings with 3343 residents. These were boarding houses that had been misclassified as private dwellings. C & M felt certain that their correction was conservative for reasons that will be explained in the next section. However, the ABS (2011, p. 31) took a different view: ‘…only approximately 1,000 of the 3,342 persons reclassified in CTH 2006 could possibly be residing in boarding houses’. The ABS reduced the correction by 2342 or 70 per cent. Roughly 500 additional dwellings were removed from the correction. The ABS argument is explained next.

First, the ABS increased the number of dwellings that were excluded because they had students in them. C & M had excluded dwellings ‘where 60 per cent or more of the residents were either studying or working full-time’, but C & M had not included students who did not report the type of educational institution attended. The ABS included these students, which increased the number excluded from the correction.²

In 2011, 31 local government officers responsible for inspecting rooming houses in Victoria were interviewed. They reported that there are students in rooming houses, particularly in locations near Melbourne’s universities and TAFE colleges. This was confirmed when housing officers from Melbourne’s eight universities were interviewed. The decision to exclude dwellings from the correction on the grounds

² The ABS (2011) report did not specify the increase.
that they contained students was not sound. The ABS has exacerbated the problem by tightening up the rules.

The ABS (2011, p. 31) also excluded dwellings from the correction that had the following characteristics:

- a real estate agent as the landlord
- mortgage repayments
- being in a rent–buy scheme
- paying rent to a parent or relative of one of the group members
- a group of persons reporting themselves as religious volunteers (some households appear to be groups of nuns; others appear to be monks).

The ABS account does not specify how many dwellings (or persons) were excluded on each of these criteria, but the two large exclusions were probably ‘real estate agents’ and ‘mortgage repayments’. In both cases, it needs to be asked whether these were group households or boarding houses. Households reporting mortgage repayments are discussed first.

*Mortgage repayments*

The ABS argument is unconvincing for two reasons. First, it seems far-fetched to suggest that most of the group households with five or more unrelated adults were actually groups of friends who had taken out mortgages together. It is far more likely that one person had a mortgage and was subletting to four or five others to help with mortgage repayments. But should this be considered a group household or a boarding house? Under the Victorian legislation (Department of Human Services, 2011, p. 13), a rooming house is a building where ‘one or more rooms is available for rent and the total number of people who occupy those rooms is four or more’.

Second, boarding houses contain unrelated households who often do not cooperate well together. If the census collector delivered one household form, none of the tenants may have thought it their responsibility to gather the information from the other five to 10 people. It is more likely that owners would have gathered the information from tenants, possibly when they came on their weekly visit to collect the rent.

Owners may have asked tenants to fill out the personal questions (about age, income, employment, and so on), but they are likely to have answered the questions
about the dwellings themselves. Many rooming house operators have mortgages, particularly if they intend to be in the business for the longer term (Victorian Department of Human Services 2011, p. 17). How would an owner with a mortgage have answered the question, 'Is this dwelling owned outright, owned with a mortgage, being rented, and so on?' The answer is obvious: 'mortgage'. The ABS asserts that these dwelling must be group households, but it is more likely they were rooming houses. Unfortunately, the census data does not provide the information that is needed to make an informed decision one way or the other.

**Real estate agents**

The ABS also excluded dwellings from the correction where a real estate agent was the landlord of the property. The ABS review did not specify how many dwellings were excluded on this criterion, but this number was probably substantial. The ABS excluded these dwellings on the grounds that they were all shared households. However, it is common for entrepreneurs to rent houses from real estate agents and then to sublet rooms to tenants on an individual basis. This is known as 'head leasing'. According to the Victorian Department of Human Services (2011, p. 17), the entrepreneur will ‘lease a property from a landlord and then sublet individual rooms … these owners … maximise profit by accumulating a portfolio of several head-leased properties’.

Once again, if the boarding house operator oversaw filling out the census form, then when it came to the question about dwelling tenure he or she would have reported ‘rented’. The next question asked, ‘Who is it rented from?’ In many cases, the correct answer would have been ‘real estate agent’. The ABS asserts that these dwellings must be group households, but it is possible that they could have been rooming houses. Once again, the census data does not provide us with the information that is needed to make an informed decision one way or the other.

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### 3.3 Undercounting

In 2011 field visits were undertaken to 250 rooming houses across Melbourne. Most of them looked like suburban houses and less than 10 per cent had a sign outside indicating the dwelling was a rooming house. Once boarding houses have been misclassified as private dwellings, it is difficult to identify them using census data.
In 2006 C & M undertook a search for boarding houses that had been misclassified as private dwellings. This was done by examining 9000 private dwellings that had five or more unrelated adults. There are three reasons why this approach undercounted boarding houses that had been misclassified as private dwellings.

First, it was pointed out in Chapter 2 that the legal definition of a rooming house in Victoria includes dwellings with four or more occupants. C & M’s approach only examined dwellings that had five or more unrelated adults. This means that none of the boarding houses with four persons could have been identified. In 2006 there were 19,200 private dwellings in Australia that had four unrelated residents. It was not obvious what census variables could have been used to distinguish boarding houses from share households.

Second, there are some people in boarding houses who were either married or in de facto relationships, or with accompanying children (families). If people acknowledged those relationships on their 2006 census forms, then their rooming houses were excluded from the correction. C & M only examined dwellings that housed unrelated adults. This is another example of undercounting.

Third, dwellings were also removed where 60 per cent or more of the residents were studying full-time on the grounds that they were more likely to be share households. These days it is known that some boarding houses have students and they need to be included in the census count. However, it is not obvious what census rules should be used to distinguish student rooming houses from shared households.

How did the ABS (2011) deal with the fact that the CTH 2006 correction undercounted students, couples, families and rooming houses with four tenants? The ABS ignored the problem.

3.4 Summary

The ABS (2011) review of CTH 2006 reduced the boarding house estimate from 21,596 to 16,828, a reduction of 4768 or 22 per cent. This chapter has investigated whether the ABS has adequately substantiated this argument. There are three reasons for rejecting the ABS claim.

First, the ABS moved 1970 people moved from the boarding house count into a new homeless category called ‘persons in other temporary lodgings’. The new estimate included 544 people in boarding houses that were misclassified as hotels or...
motels, an unspecified number of people in boarding houses that were classified as staff quarters, and an unspecified number of people who could reasonably be included in the new category. One cannot legitimately remove all 1970 from the boarding house count.

The second ABS change removed 2344 people from the CTH 2006 category which identified ‘boarding houses misclassified as private dwellings’. The ABS increased the number of dwellings that were excluded because 60 per cent or more of the residents were either studying or working full time. The ABS did not realise that these days there are students in rooming houses. The ABS also excluded dwellings if it was reported that there was a mortgage on the property or rent was paid to a real estate agent. Some of these dwellings may have been group households, but it is possible that many of them were boarding houses. Unfortunately, it is not possible to distinguish between these categories using census data.

Finally, attention has been drawn to the fact that it is difficult to identify rooming houses that had been miscoded as private dwellings. The method used in CTH 2006 could not identify boarding houses with four tenants; it missed rooming houses that contained couples or families; and it undercounted boarding houses that contained students. The ABS review ignored this undercounting.

There are two overarching conclusions to be drawn from this chapter. First, the ABS has not established its claim that the boarding house population was 16,830 in 2006. Second, this chapter has demonstrated that there are major limitations to establishing the boarding house population using census data. In the next chapter a new method for counting boarding houses is described.
4 A NEW APPROACH

4.1 Rooming houses

This chapter outlines an alternative method for counting the boarding house population using council records. The main weakness of the ABS approach is that it relies on census collectors to identify boarding houses. In 1996 census collectors sometimes misclassified boarding houses as hotels and staff quarters. The 2001 research team developed additional conventions to identify boarding houses that census collectors had misclassified as ‘other’. By 2006 it was known that new boarding houses were opening up in conventional houses. Census collectors were likely to misclassify these boarding houses as ‘private dwellings’.

In 2011 it was decided to trial a new method of counting the boarding house population in metropolitan Melbourne. Under section 67 of the Public Health and Wellbeing Act (2008) in Victoria, all rooming houses must be registered with local councils. The Office of Housing collates this information on a central register. There are 31 local councils in the Melbourne Statistical Division. At the time of the 2011 Census (August), there were 806 rooming houses registered in the Melbourne Statistical Division. However, the central register had last been updated in October 2010 and was nearly a year out of date. Consumer Affairs Victoria reported that some councils would have a lot of new registrations. The best way to gain up-to-date information was to approach local councils for current information about the rooming houses in their municipality.

Altogether, 97 per cent of councils (30 out of 31) provided updated figures. It is known that census collectors often classify dwellings incorrectly, but there can be no doubt that the dwellings recorded in the official records are rooming houses. As part of the registration process, each dwelling is inspected by council staff to see that the dwelling conforms to the relevant public health and planning legislation.

However, many council officials thought that there were unregistered rooming houses in their municipality. Rooming houses have to come to a council’s attention before they can be registered. A minority of rooming house operators register their properties voluntarily. These are usually rooming house operators who have a commitment to staying in the industry longer term and they often have a number of properties. However, ‘Mum and Dad’ operators are often unaware of the regulations.
Council officials also reported that there were ‘some operators who do not want to bring themselves to our attention’ (Environmental health officer, Eastern suburbs). Another council official (Inner Melbourne) said: ‘If the operator owns the dwelling he is more likely to be registered. Those who are renting places to make a quick buck are less likely to be registered’.

Operators who want to make ‘a quick buck’ often breach health and safety regulations or are running very marginal operations. Some marginal operators specialise in renting properties that are waiting to be demolished. These properties can be rented cheaply because they are in poor condition. Rooms will usually be rented for $150 to $160 per week (2011 prices). If the property can house six tenants, then the revenue will be $900 to $960 per week.

The most important reason for undercounting is that rooming houses often do not come to the council’s attention until there are complaints about the property. These complaints come from a number of sources, including former tenants who report grievances to Consumer Affairs Victoria or tenants who contact the Tenants Union of Victoria. However, council officials reported that most complaints come from neighbours:

- Neighbours complain about noise, or garbage, or something like that. Often new tenants will not know when the garbage is collected and they leave it out at inappropriate times … (Environmental health officer, South-eastern suburbs).

- It is almost always because of complaints … in relation to noise, antisocial behaviour, people coming and going, and so on. We have some well-off suburbs. People do NOT like it if a rooming house opens in their street (Team leader, Inner South-east).

- … complaints about noise or lots of people coming in and out of the property. … Parking can cause a lot of friction between neighbours (Environmental health officer, Northern suburbs).

Another reason for undercounting is that a minority of councils keep inadequate records. One council had only begun registering boarding houses a few weeks before the 2011 Census. Another council had ‘200 dwellings under investigation’. The council officer appeared to be doing a good job, but did not have the resources to keep up with the steady flood of notifications. Another front-line official said that her council’s register was ‘a bit of a mess’ and that she had inspected lots of dwellings that could not be registered. These dwellings did not comply with the building regulations. However, these rooming houses had not been closed because ‘people
would end up on the streets’. The council was turning a ‘blind eye’ to enforcing the regulations.

The 31 councils across metropolitan Melbourne reported 1276 registered rooming houses. Of course, the number of unregistered properties is unknown. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify some dwellings that were unregistered.

Interviews were carried out with 28 staff from 15 welfare agencies that provide support to homeless people across Melbourne. Some of those agencies had lists of rooming houses they were currently using. Wombat Housing and Support Services also compiled a list of boarding houses that were currently being used by services in the North and West of Melbourne. It was possible to check the addresses on the various lists against the addresses on the lists provided by the councils. Altogether, 175 unregistered rooming houses were identified, mainly in the North and West.

Overall, 1451 boarding houses were identified across the 31 local councils in metropolitan Melbourne. Only one council had no boarding houses; 19 councils had between one and 49; another eight had between 50 and 99; and three councils had more than 150.

4.2 Tenants

When rooming houses are registered, all councils record information on the number of bedrooms in the dwelling, but most councils do not record information on the number of tenants. In this analysis, the numbers of bedrooms will be used as a proxy for the number of tenants. This may involve undercounting in some dwellings and overcounting in others.

The number of bedrooms does not necessarily equate with the number of tenants. In some rooming houses, there will be couples sharing one room. In other rooming houses, there can be more than one bed in the same room. There are also a small number of rooming houses that provide dormitory accommodation.

Five councils collected additional information that enables us to understand more about the relationship between the number of rooms and the number of tenants. Four councils collected information on the number of rooms and the total number of persons that could be accommodated. One council collected information on the number of rooms and the number of beds. The number of beds is likely to be lower than the total number of persons, because there are some couples in rooming houses.
Nonetheless, for the purpose of this analysis, it will be assumed that the number of beds is the same as the number of persons who could be accommodated.

Table 4.1 shows that the five councils had registered 165 rooming houses. These rooming houses had 1603 bedrooms, but they could accommodate up to 1969 people. The new method uses the number of number bedrooms as a proxy for the number of persons accommodated. In the case of the five councils, this method assumes that the rooming houses were 81 per cent full (1603/1969 = 81 per cent). Most service providers think that the occupancy rate would be closer to 90 per cent. The new method may undercount the boarding house population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.1</th>
<th>Rooming houses, five councils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of rooming houses</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of bedrooms</td>
<td>1603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum number of tenants</td>
<td>1969</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, it has been pointed out that 175 unregistered rooming houses were identified. There was no information on the number of bedrooms in those dwellings. Therefore an examination was undertaken of the first 760 dwellings where data was available. This data indicated that the average size of a rooming house in Inner Melbourne was 14 bedrooms, whereas the average size in suburban Melbourne was eight bedrooms. Seven unregistered rooming houses were identified in Inner Melbourne and these were recorded as having 14 bedrooms. Unregistered rooming houses in suburban Melbourne were recorded as having eight bedrooms.
5 HOW MANY PEOPLE IN ROOMING HOUSES?

There is widespread agreement that the boarding house population is shrinking. The critical piece of evidence that supports this interpretation was published by the ABS in 2011 when they released new figures on the number of people in boarding houses in 2001 and 2006 (Table 5.1). The ABS reported that the national boarding house population had fallen from 23,750 in 2001 to 16,830 in 2006, a decrease of 29 per cent. In Victoria, the fall was ‘dramatic’. The number of people in boarding houses declined from 5701 in 2001 to 3355 in 2006, a decrease of 41 per cent (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 | Number of persons in boarding houses in Australia, 2001 and 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>% change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>8374</td>
<td>6303</td>
<td>-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>5701</td>
<td>3355</td>
<td>-41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>5613</td>
<td>4145</td>
<td>-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>1336</td>
<td>1129</td>
<td>-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>1456</td>
<td>1085</td>
<td>-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>-27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>845</td>
<td>593</td>
<td>-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Capital Territory</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>-76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Australia</strong></td>
<td><strong>23,751</strong></td>
<td><strong>16,830</strong></td>
<td><strong>-29</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ABS (2011, p. 73; p. 85)

CTH 2006 also reported a decline in the boarding house population, down from 22,877 in 2001 to 21,596 in 2006, a decrease of six per cent. CTH 2006 also reported a decline of 15 per cent in Victoria, down from 5264 to 4457.

This chapter compares the ABS findings for 2006, the CTH 2006 estimates, and the findings for 2011 using the new method.

5.1 How many rooming houses?

The ABS report and CTH 2006 were concerned with estimating the number of persons in rooming houses, but neither report provided information on the actual number of rooming houses. In Chapter 4 we saw that the average size of a rooming house in Inner Melbourne was 14 bedrooms in 2011, whereas the average size of a
rooming house in suburban Melbourne was eight bedrooms. If we assume that the average size of a rooming house in 2006 was the same as in 2011, then we can estimate number of rooming houses in 2006 and compare those figures with the findings for 2011.

Table 5.2 | Number of rooming houses by geographical area, 2006 and 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SSD</th>
<th>ABS 2006</th>
<th>CTH 2006</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inner Melbourne</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner West</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner North</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner East</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner South-East</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer West</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer North</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer East</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer South-East</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>1,451</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: ABS (2011); C & M (2008).

Table 5.2 shows that there is a striking increase in the number of rooming houses between 2006 and 2011. In Inner Melbourne there were between 128 and 146 rooming houses in 2006 compared with 188 in 2011. This is an increase of roughly 30 to 50 percent, depending upon which benchmark is used for 2006.

In Outer Melbourne the number of rooming houses increased from between 18 and 29 in 2006 to 214 in 2011. In 2006 there were few boarding houses in these communities. Now there are 35 rooming houses in the Outer West, 37 in the Outer East, 62 in the Outer North and 80 in the Outer South-East.

The increase was largest in the inner suburbs of Melbourne. There were between 117 and 183 rooming houses in 2006 but this had increased to 1049 by 2011. In the Inner West the number of boarding houses increased from between 26 and 36 in 2006 to 339 in 2011. In the Inner East the number increased from between 49 and 68 to 394. Overall, there was a five to sixfold increase in rooming houses in the inner suburbs.
Table 5.3 provides a detailed breakdown for each statistical subdivision. Besides the very large increases in Western Melbourne and in Eastern Middle Melbourne, there were substantial increases in Moreland (from 16 to 64), Northern Middle Melbourne (from 14 to 90), Southern Melbourne (from 18 to 73), Dandenong (from 31 to 89) and Frankston (from 7 to 50).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistical Subdivision</th>
<th>ABS 2006</th>
<th>CTH 2006</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inner Melbourne</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Melbourne</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melton-Wyndham</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moreland City</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Middle Melbourne</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hume City</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Outer Melbourne</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boroondara City</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Middle Melbourne</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Outer Melbourne</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yarra Ranges Shire</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Melbourne</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Dandenong</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Eastern Outer Melbourne</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankston City</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mornington Peninsula</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>263</strong></td>
<td><strong>358</strong></td>
<td><strong>1451</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: ABS (2011); C & M (2008).

5.2 How many tenants?

Counting the boarding house population is not a ‘precise science’ when census data is used. Small boarding houses are often misclassified as private dwellings and a household form is delivered rather than an individual form for each tenant. When a household form is delivered to a dwelling that has multiple tenancies, it is often unclear who should take responsibility for completing the census form. In some cases, it is probably the operator of the boarding house, but in other cases one of the
tenants may take on the task. The tenant filling out the census form may feel no responsibility towards other persons in the dwelling and some people may not be recorded.

The new method is not a ‘precise science’ either. The new method uses the number of bedrooms as a proxy for the number of tenants because all councils record information on the number of bedrooms; but most councils do not record information on the number of tenants. However, where councils do record information on the maximum number of occupants, this figure is always greater than the number of rooms. The new method assumes that boarding houses are 81 per cent full on census night. Most service providers think that the occupancy rate is higher than this. The 2011 figures could be an undercount.

Table 5.4 | Number of tenants by geographical area, 2006 and 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SSD</th>
<th>ABS 2006</th>
<th>CTH 2006</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inner Melbourne</td>
<td>Inner Melbourne</td>
<td>1,795</td>
<td>2,040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner West</td>
<td>Western Melbourne</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner North</td>
<td>Moreland, Northern Middle Melbourne</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner East</td>
<td>Boroondara, Eastern Middle Melbourne</td>
<td>392</td>
<td>545</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner South-East</td>
<td>Southern Melbourne Dandenong</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer West</td>
<td>Melton-Wyndham</td>
<td>np</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer North</td>
<td>Hume, Northern Outer Melbourne</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer East</td>
<td>Eastern Outer Melbourne, Yarra Ranges</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer South-East</td>
<td>S.E. Outer Melbourne, Frankston City, Mornington Peninsula</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,946*</td>
<td>3,739</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NP: not published to ensure confidentiality.
* Information missing on 123 cases.

Table 5.4 shows two important patterns. First, there has been a large growth in the rooming house population between 2006 and 2011. It has increased from roughly 3700 people in 2006 to about 12500 people in 2011. Second, most of this growth was in suburban Melbourne.

In Inner Melbourne the rooming house population increased from 2040 people in 2006 to just under 2700 people in 2011, an increase of about one-third. In inner
suburban Melbourne there was a sixfold increase over the same time period: from 922 to 1461 people in boarding houses in 2006 to 8417 people in rooming houses in 2011. In the outer suburbs, the number increased from between 106 and 238 people in 2006 to 1469 people in 2011. This was also a sixfold increase.

Table 5.5 | Number of tenants by statistical division, 2006 and 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ABS 2006</th>
<th>CTH 2006</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inner Melbourne</td>
<td>1795</td>
<td>2040</td>
<td>2682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Melbourne</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>2669</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melton-Wyndham</td>
<td>np</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moreland City</td>
<td>np</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Middle Melbourne</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>673</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hume City</td>
<td>np</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Outer Melbourne</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boroondara City</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Middle Melbourne</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>2821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Outer Melbourne</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yarra Ranges Shire</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Melbourne</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Dandenong</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>642</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Eastern Outer Melbourne</td>
<td>np</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankston City</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mornington Peninsula</td>
<td>np</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2946</strong></td>
<td><strong>3739</strong></td>
<td><strong>12,568</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NP: not published to ensure confidentiality.

*Information missing on 123 cases.


Table 5.5 provides a detailed breakdown for each statistical subdivision. There has been a huge increase in the rooming house population in Eastern Middle Melbourne: from just under 300 people in 2006 to 2800 people in 2011. There has been a similar increase in Western Melbourne: from just under 300 people in 2006 to more than 2600 people in 2011. There have also been substantial increases in
Moreland (from 125 to 646), Northern Middle Melbourne (from 116 to 673), Southern
Melbourne (from 142 to 460), Greater Dandenong (from 245 to 642) and Frankston
(from 53 to 313). All of these increases are larger if one uses the ABS figures as the
benchmark for 2006.

5.3 Conclusion
This chapter has identified two major trends. First, there has been a large growth in
the rooming house population in Melbourne: from roughly 3700 people in 2006 to
about 12,500 people in 2011. Second, most of this growth has been in suburban
Melbourne. If one uses the CTH figures as the benchmark for 2006, the increase is
236 per cent. If one uses the ABS figures as the benchmark, the increase is 327 per
cent.
6 CHARACTERISTICS OF DWELLINGS

This chapter describes the range of buildings that currently operate as rooming houses. Three generic types of boarding house are identified, following the framework proposed in two influential reports (Rooming House Standard Taskforce 2009; Victorian Department of Human Services 2011).

First, there are traditional rooming houses that accommodate at least 20 people. Many of these boarding houses are in Inner Melbourne or in suburbs close to the central city. Second, there are small rooming houses in suburban Melbourne, usually accommodating four to nine people. This report uses the terms ‘small rooming house’ and ‘suburban rooming house’ interchangeably. Third, there are community rooming houses, usually operated by welfare agencies. These are also called ‘not-for-profit’ rooming houses and this term is used synonymously with the term ‘community’ rooming house.

This typification of boarding houses into three generic types is a useful starting point. However, this chapter draws attention to the range of dwellings within each of the categories.

6.1 Traditional rooming houses

Originally, boarding houses were large-scale dwellings that provided dozens of rooms and shared facilities. In Melbourne, these dwellings were often called ‘private hotels’. They usually accommodated 20 or more people in one purpose-built dwelling. Large boarding houses were easy to recognise from their external appearance and there was usually a sign outside indicating the use of the dwelling. Most of these older style rooming houses have now closed. Those that remain are typically located in the inner suburbs (Department of Human Services 2011, p.17):

Historically, rooming houses were large-scale operations providing dozens of rooms ..... some private rooming house owners continue to operate ... Now ageing, these large rooming houses are predominantly located in inner suburbs  … .

This is the typification of a traditional rooming house. It is a large-scale operation, purpose-built, with many rooms, often in poor condition, and with a sign outside indicating the use of the dwelling.
First, an examination is undertaken of rooming houses in the Inner Melbourne Statistical Division (SSD). This SSD includes the City of Port Phillip, the City of Yarra, the City of Melbourne and part of the City of Stonnington. It includes the suburbs of Carlton, Fitzroy, Richmond, South Yarra, Prahran and St Kilda, as well as the City of Melbourne. These are the areas where traditional rooming houses are most likely to be located. For the purposes of this analysis, rooming houses are classified into three categories: large (20 or more bedrooms); medium (10 to 19 bedrooms); and small (four to nine bedrooms).

Table 6.1 | Size of rooming houses in Inner Melbourne

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Rooming House</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large (20 or more bedrooms)</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (10 to 19 bedrooms)</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small (4 to 9 bedrooms)</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.1 shows that one-fifth (18 per cent) of the rooming houses in Inner Melbourne could accommodate 20 or more people (33 dwellings). This included a rooming house in St Kilda that can accommodate 60 people, another in East St Kilda that has 44 rooms, another in Prahran that can house 40, one in South Yarra that can accommodate 50, and another in Carlton that accommodates 32. These were older style rooming houses that fitted the typification of the traditional rooming house. However, field visits revealed that some of the larger rooming houses were not purpose-built. A number were made up of two or three large houses that were being operated as one rooming house. Another was a former nurses’ home, now in poor condition. Another was an old factory that had been converted into a rooming house, specialising in ‘budget accommodation’.

Thirty-eight per cent of the boarding houses accommodated 10 to 19 people (Table 6.1). Most were large, older style houses that had been converted into rooming houses, sometimes with outbuildings used as additional bedrooms. One field visit was to a boarding house in the City of Port Phillip: ‘It’s a big, old double storey house. There’s no sign outside. It looks a bit run down. There were lots of lights on … There appeared to be some rooms added at the back’ (Field notes).

Another field visit was to a converted shop in Carlton (Field notes):
I think it could have been a shop from the front window. When you walk down the side lane it looks more like an old factory at the back. Downstairs, there are six windows on to the side lane, all with bars on them. Five of these rooms appear to be bedrooms. Upstairs I counted six windows looking on to the street and side lane … It is registered as having 19 bedrooms.

Although some older style rooming houses were purpose-built, many of the medium and larger properties were originally designed for other purposes.

Table 6.1 shows that 44 per cent of all rooming houses in Inner Melbourne accommodated four to nine people. These were mainly conventional houses that were operating as rooming houses. In the City of Yarra, just over half the rooming houses had four to nine bedrooms, as did two-thirds of the rooming houses in the City of Stonnington.

The ‘traditional rooming house’ typification has a factual basis, but there is a lot of variation in the size of dwellings. Inner city rooming houses vary from large, older style dwellings with 20 to 60 bedrooms to small suburban houses with four to nine bedrooms.

6.2 Small rooming houses

Table 6.2 shows that 80 per cent of rooming houses in inner suburban Melbourne had four to nine bedrooms, as did 93 per cent of rooming houses in the outer suburbs. Most of these dwellings were formerly suburban homes. The typification of the ‘suburban rooming house’ has a strong basis in fact. Nonetheless, there is some variation in the dwellings that are used as rooming houses. A distinction can be drawn between ‘smaller’ suburban rooming houses, ‘larger’ suburban rooming houses, and ‘properties awaiting demolition’.

Table 6.2 | Size of rooming houses in suburban Melbourne

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Inner suburbs (N = 1049)</th>
<th>Outer suburbs (N=214)</th>
<th>Total (N = 1263)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large (20 or more bedrooms)</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (10 to 19 bedrooms)</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small (4 to 9 bedrooms)</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1 Traditional boarding house in Inner Melbourne

2 Large dwelling converted into a rooming house in the 1980s
3 Two Victorian houses operating as a boarding house

4 An old factory now providing 'budget accommodation for students'
5 Suburban rooming house, Eastern suburbs

6 Suburban rooming house, Western suburbs
7 Former shop now operating as a boarding house with a large dwelling at the rear

8 Suburban rooming house, probably awaiting demolition
A two-bedroom property can be converted into a four-bedroom rooming house by putting up a partition in the lounge room, creating two additional bedrooms. A three-bedroom property with a lounge room and dining room can become a five-bedroom property if all five rooms are used as bedrooms. If the lounge room and dining room are large, it may be possible to turn this into a seven-bedroom property, by erecting partitions.

According to one council officer: ‘The rooming houses vary a lot. Some are quite run-down with partitioned rooms, but others are better. Most house have between four and seven people’. According to another council official: ‘A three-bedroom property will usually have four to eight people. Often the lounge room will be used as a bedroom. The most I have seen is three people in one room’.

There are also ‘larger’ suburban rooming houses. Field visits revealed that some were two storey dwellings that had multiple bedrooms. Others were rambling, single storey houses that had outbuildings. These larger suburban rooming houses were usually registered as accommodating eight or more people.

There are also suburban rooming houses that are ‘awaiting demolition’. According to a council official in the South-Eastern suburbs: ‘Many of the rooming houses have a short life span. The owner may be waiting for a permit to demolish and the dwelling is rented out short term’. Another council officer in the North said:

Occasionally kids will inherit an old house from a parent who has died. It might be an old weatherboard on a large block. They plan to pull it down and build town houses, but they may turn it into a rooming house until they are ready to build.

The typification of the small rooming house has a strong basis in fact, but not all suburban rooming houses are the same.

6.3 Community rooming houses
The ‘traditional rooming house’ and the ‘suburban rooming house’ are partly geographical typifications focusing on where rooming houses are located and partly size typifications, focusing on whether dwellings are large or small. The community rooming house is a different sort of typification, based on the fact that these are not for profit. In fact, community rooming houses can be found anywhere and some are large and others are small.
All councils were asked to supply information on whether their rooming houses were operated by companies, individuals or not-for-profit organisations. However, two councils with more than 150 rooming houses were unable to provide these figures. Other councils had missing information and there was no information on the owners of the 175 rooming houses that were unregistered. Overall, there was information on 57 per cent of the rooming house operators. These findings must be treated with caution.

### Table 6.3 | Location of not-for-profit rooming houses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inner Melbourne</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner suburbs</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer suburbs</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most (61 per cent) not-for-profit operations were in Inner Melbourne (Table 6.3). Another one-third (32 per cent) were in the inner suburbs. However, both councils that reported 'no information' were in the inner suburbs, as were many of the unregistered rooming houses. It is likely that community rooming houses are spread more evenly between Inner Melbourne and the inner suburbs than is indicated in Table 6.3.

### Table 6.4 | Size of not-for-profit rooming houses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large (20 or more bedrooms)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (10 to 19 bedrooms)</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small (4 to 9 bedrooms)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was also considerable variation in the size of community rooming houses. Table 6.4 shows that one-third (31 per cent) accommodated 20 or more people. Another two-fifths (42 per cent) had between 10 and 19 bedrooms. Field visits revealed that most of the larger and medium-sized properties were either modern purpose-built dwellings or renovated properties in good order. One-quarter (27 per
of the community rooming houses were small properties. Their condition was more variable.

6.4 Summary
This chapter has described the range of buildings that are now used as rooming houses. First, there are traditional, purpose-built rooming houses that are often in poor condition. Then there are boarding houses that operate in properties that were originally designed for other purposes. Many of these are large, older style houses (or mansions) that have been converted into rooming houses. Field visits were also undertaken to a wide range of dwellings, including two former nursing homes now operating as rooming houses; a fire station converted into a boarding house; a number of rooming houses above shops (known colloquially as ‘shop tops’), two factories operating as boarding houses; three purpose-built community rooming houses; and a former nurses’ home. Some of these rooming houses were in Inner Melbourne but others were in the suburbs. However, most suburban rooming houses are small, family homes that cannot be distinguished from other houses in the same street. There are also larger family houses in the suburbs that accommodate eight or more people, as well as houses awaiting demolition. It is the sheer diversity of rooming houses that explains why census collectors often misclassify them.
7 LIFE IN A BOARDING HOUSE

Some writers have argued that the boarding house sector needs to be protected and strengthened to provide a buffer against primary homelessness (Kliger, 2003). For example, National Shelter (2000, p. 5) notes that:

Persons displaced from boarding houses have few choices: either they become homeless and live on the streets or they live in informal arrangements which can be overcrowded and insecure.'

This is called the ‘safety net’ argument. There is a sense in which the safety net argument is convincing. Most people in boarding houses cannot afford accommodation in the private rental market, and rooming houses are the ‘last stop’ before the streets.

However, the safety net argument also implies that rooming houses provide basic accommodation that is only slightly below the community standard of a small self-contained flat (Reid, Griffin and Murdoch 2005, p. 324):

Reservations have been expressed about the inclusion of the ‘tertiary’ homeless in the Census count … boarding house residents are closer to the accepted norm of culturally defined housing standards’.

It is claimed that many boarding houses ‘offer informal welfare support as well as providing rooms’ and their demise would have ‘a range of important non-housing social impacts’ (Greenhalgh et al. 2004, p. 47). According to Greenhalgh and her colleagues: ‘… boarding houses also provide accommodation for a number of people who could afford more expensive housing but who choose boarding house living’. National Shelter (2000, p. 5) notes that: ‘Many longer term residents identify affordability, location and companionship as positive factors influencing their choice to stay in boarding houses’.

This chapter investigates the safety net contention that rooming house accommodation is only slightly below the community standard of a self-contained flat. First, it examines the material conditions in boarding houses, and then it looks at who uses rooming houses. Finally, it asks about social relationships in boarding houses.
7.1 Material conditions

In a group household the tenants are joint parties to one tenancy agreement that gives them access to the whole property. In a rooming house the residents have access only to their own bedroom and have shared access rights to communal areas such as bathrooms and kitchens. What are private rooming houses like? Traditional boarding houses are examined first, and then suburban rooming houses are described.

A housing worker in a welfare agency visited a traditional rooming house accommodating 41 people. She described it as ‘a rabbit warren of a place’. Another worker reported that a traditional boarding house had been blacklisted by her agency, because of the condition of the property and the standover tactics of the owner.

One respondent in the Pathways study described a private boarding house that provided dormitory accommodation:

It was a dilapidated old house built in the 1940s. I walked in and on the left there was a room with four bunk beds in it. On the other side, there was another room with three bunk beds. Through some sliding doors there were two more people. There were rooms everywhere …

Another informant in the Pathways study described a rooming house in the inner city which had formerly been two large houses:

Well, there were 30 something people in there! Don’t get me wrong, I appreciated a roof over my head. But the rooms were tiny. I stayed there with my partner for two years. It was like doing time.

Someone else said: ‘My room was so small you couldn’t swing a cat around’.

A traditional rooming house in an inner suburb was inspected with two council officials. The three-storey building accommodated 40 people. It appeared that the property had not been re-decorated for 20 or 30 years. One vacant bedroom was inspected. The room was shabby and there was an unpleasant odour. The shared kitchens were primitive with ancient stoves, few cupboards and little bench space. The communal bathrooms were in poor condition, with holes in some walls and missing taps. The linoleum in the public hallways was so worn that there was no pattern left.

Conditions in suburban rooming houses appear to be more variable. One council inspector said, ‘The good ones are well-finished, regular houses, but the bad ones are very bad indeed’. A university housing officer reported: ‘The properties range from
‘fine’ to ‘very poor’. I have been to some that are very nice and to others that are ‘hell holes’.

A rooming house in an outer suburb was inspected with two officers from the Tenants Union. The small brick veneer dwelling accommodated four households containing six people: a middle-aged man in one bedroom; a woman in another bedroom; a couple in the third bedroom; and a young woman with a child in the lounge room. The six people shared the small kitchen which had a table and three chairs. The refrigerator did not work and the extractor fan above the stove was out of order.

According to the CEO of a large welfare agency:

There are some rooming houses that are purpose-built, but there are others that are really terrible. I’ve been to some that have holes in the walls … no heating, no carpets, really run-down’.

Another informant inspected a rooming house in a ‘middle class’ suburb:

There were 14 bedrooms, including some that had partitions. There were three rooms added underneath the house where the garage would have been. It was really disgusting inside. A single room was $180 per week. The tenants did not want to speak ‘on the record’, as they had nowhere else to go.

Many council officials reported that rooming houses are often established in properties that are awaiting demolition: ‘Most are three and four-bedroom homes and a lot having a short life span. The owner may be waiting for a permit to demolish and they are rented out short-term’. These owners are usually unwilling to spend money on repairs and aim to maximise the return on the property until the time it is demolished.

In other cases, an entrepreneur will rent a property that is scheduled for demolition and operate it as rooming house for a short period of time, again attempting to maximise returns. A council officer said:

Many of the properties are at the end of their life. You can rent a property for $300 per week, but you can get $1000 per week if you rent out rooms. You don’t spend money on repairs.

It needs to be stressed that there is variation in the conditions in boarding houses. One community rooming house was inspected that accommodated 11 people. Each tenant had a single room which included a kitchenette. The house
and furnishings were in excellent order and there was a communal lounge with a television and comfortable chairs.

The conditions in traditional rooming houses are nowhere near as good as the conditions in some community rooming houses. According to Terry Bartholomew (1999, p. 2): ‘[Traditional rooming houses] offer low-cost accommodation with a bare minimum of facilities … now most have become decrepit’. The findings from this study are consistent with that judgment.

There is also a great variation in the conditions in suburban rooming houses. Some are reported to be in good order, but council officers report that many are in poor condition. There are also thought to be a substantial number of unregistered rooming houses that operate illegally. Overall, it seems fanciful to claim that boarding house accommodation is only slightly below the community standard of a self-contained flat.

### 7.2 Who lives in rooming houses?

Some council officers reported that there were mainly poor people in the rooming houses. However, others, such as a Council officer from the Inner South, reported that there were students in some rooming houses: ‘Yes, there are students in boarding houses, particularly near the university and the TAFE College.’

Welfare staff were contacted in six TAFE colleges and asked whether any of their students were living in rooming houses. All six had little knowledge. One said:

We have a data base for students where properties are advertised. Yes, there would be some rooming houses on it. I’m afraid I don’t know much about it … students are expected to look after themselves.

Council officers reported that it was overseas students studying at TAFE colleges who were in rooming houses.

Ten housing officers were interviewed from Melbourne’s eight universities. All 10 knew about students in boarding houses. Most were concerned that some rooming houses provide substandard accommodation. One said: ‘There are rooming houses all over the place. They vary quite a lot but there are some really bad ones.’ Another said:
I have been to quite a few of them around here. They are regular suburban houses … Occasionally the garage will be used as a bedroom. Sometimes they have sheds out the back which can be bedrooms as well.

Housing officers reported that it was mainly overseas students who were living in rooming houses, as well as some interstate students and young people from regional Victoria. Most people thought that the numbers were increasing: ‘There are hundreds in rooming houses around our campuses. The numbers have probably doubled in the six years I have been here’ and ‘It is particularly an issue for international students … There’s been a huge increase in the last two years’. However, no-one had any statistical information.

Some council officials reported that the rooming houses in their municipality only had poor people in them: ‘Most of them are poor people, disadvantaged people. It’s mainly people on low incomes … No, there aren’t any students’. Another said: ‘It is mainly poor people – you know, people with mental health issues, people who have come out of jail, and people like that’. Staff in welfare agencies expressed similar views:

It’s poor people who are in the rooming houses. There are lots of people with mental health issues, and drug and alcohol problems. We deal overwhelmingly with poor people, not students’.

Many housing officers drew attention to the fact that most poor people in boarding houses are either singles or couples. This is because welfare agencies prefer to send families to motels if they have sufficient funds: ‘Where possible we try to send families to motels. It costs about $700 per week out here (an outer Eastern suburb)’ and ‘It costs about $900 per week to put a family in a motel in this area (inner Northern suburb). Of course, sometimes we have to use rooming houses’.

What should be concluded overall about who lives in rooming houses? An experienced council officer expressed the following judgment:

Look, rooming houses are used as crisis accommodation and they take poor and disadvantaged people. There are some people with mental health issues. Some have drug and alcohol issues. There are also new migrants in them, some asylum seekers, people from broken relationships, and some older people. There are also students in boarding houses near the universities. A lot of them are overseas students.

This is probably a reasonable assessment in the absence of reliable quantitative information.
7.3 Relationships

One of the things that people most dislike about boarding houses is that kitchens and bathrooms are shared with other tenants. People often want to use communal facilities at the same time and this is a breeding ground for disputes. One respondent in the Pathways project said there was only one stove in his boarding house: ‘At 5.30 pm everybody wants to eat. How can 12 people use one stove?’ He also said that nothing could be left in the fridge because it would ‘disappear’. According to another informant: ‘We might have a kitchen but there are no pots and pans and the stove hardly works. How am I supposed to cook?’

Many respondents in the Pathways project complained about the cleanliness of communal bathrooms: ‘The showers were disgusting. The baths were disgusting. The toilets were filthy … I would not wish my worst enemy to live in a place like that.’ Another informant said: ‘I went to the room with the communal toilets. There was an inch of water on the floor and no toilet paper in any cubicle’. One tenant reported being scared when she was using the bathroom: ‘Someone kept banging on the door. I could tell he was pissed off … I was thinking who’s waiting outside for me’. Disputes over the use of communal facilities are common and some residents are scared to use communal facilities at busy times.

Earlier, it was pointed out that there has been a large increase in the number of rooming houses in recent years. This has brought many new rooming house providers into the industry. Some are people who own properties that they operate as boarding houses. Others are people who have mortgages on their properties. Many are speculative entrepreneurs who are renting dwellings, and then operating them as rooming houses (‘head leasing’). Experienced operators usually vet potential tenants, but new operators rarely do this. According to a Housing officer in the Northern suburbs:

They are just inexperienced. Most of them just want to get as many people in as possible. They don’t think about who will get on with whom. When you have people with alcohol and drug issues, mental health problems and anger management issues, then it can be a volatile mix if you put them all together in the same house.

One consequence of the ‘volatile mix’ is that there is a lot of conflict in boarding houses. Another consequence is that many people are shocked when they first go to a rooming house. One female in the Pathways study said: ‘I can tell you it was a shock to the system … It was a place where you’re too scared to stick your nose outside your door … there were
needles everywhere, it was horrible’. According to a male respondent: ‘Well, you had to share
with 17 people all trying to bloody wash at the same time … People would bang on your door
at night … It was just a nightmare’.

A third consequence of the ‘volatile mix’ is that some people move frequently
from one boarding house to another. A final consequence of the ‘volatile mix’ is that
some people make fine distinctions between rooming houses. For example, Fay said:
‘The conditions are better here because I can cook in my room … I only have to worry
about the bathrooms and the toilets’.

### 7.4 Summary

This chapter set out to investigate whether boarding house accommodation is only
slightly below the community norm of a small self-contained flat. It has been shown
that there is considerable variation in the quality of accommodation provided in
boarding houses. Some rooming houses are clearly better than others, and
community rooming houses are much better than privately run operations. It has also
been shown that many people are shocked when they first go to a rooming house,
and boarding house residents aspire to self-contained accommodation just like the
rest of the community. Of course, many boarding house residents may come to think
of their single rooms as ‘home’, or think that their current boarding house is better
than their last one. Nonetheless, boarding house accommodation is significantly
below the community norm of a self-contained flat. Most people dislike sharing
communal facilities with strangers.
8 CONCLUSION

8.1 How much change?
This report has identified various changes in the boarding house population. The most important change is that the number of people in boarding houses in Melbourne has increased from about 3700 on Census night 2006 to 12,500 in 2011. Much of this growth has been in suburban Melbourne and many of the new rooming houses are smaller properties accommodating between four and nine people.

Of course, the 2011 estimate used a different method from that employed in 2006. It is possible that the Census undercounted boarding houses in 2006 and this explains some of the difference between the 2006 and 2011 figures. However, evidence from the interviews indicates that there has been a substantial increase in the boarding house population. Many council officers reported a large increase in their own municipality and they often quoted figures to illustrate this point. University housing officers did not have figures, but all of them referred to an increase in students using rooming houses.

The census is the most important source of data that we have about the general population, and the primary use of census data is to identify trends. The ABS reported that there were 3000 people in boarding houses in Melbourne in 2006. If that figure was about right, then there appears to have been a fourfold increase in the boarding house population between 2006 and 2011 (from 2946 to 12,568). CTH 2006 reported that there were 3700 people in boarding houses. If that figure was right, then it is closer to a threefold increase (from 3739 to 12,568). If the census undercounted the boarding house population in 2006, then the increase may be less than this. Unfortunately, it is not possible to test this proposition because local councils did not start registering rooming houses until 2008. On the available evidence, it has to be concluded that the boarding house population in Melbourne increased roughly three to four times between 2006 and 2011.

8.2 Tenants
Who has moved into the rooming houses? There is no easy answer to this question, but some clues can be obtained from examining the disposable income of various household types. Table 8.1 estimates the percentage of income spent on rent by various household groups (column 6) and records their disposable income after
paying rent (column 7). Rental estimates are based on the median rent for an appropriate property for each household. The data is for Melbourne (September quarter, 2011).

Table 8.1 | Rent and disposable income* by household type, Melbourne (September quarter 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Income source</th>
<th>Accommodation</th>
<th>Median rent</th>
<th>Income*</th>
<th>% spent on rent</th>
<th>Disposable income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Couple (2 children)</td>
<td>AWE**</td>
<td>3 BR house</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>1309</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person (21+)</td>
<td>Newstart</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent (1 child)</td>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>2 BR flat</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Aged pension</td>
<td>1 BR flat</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Austudy</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Income includes Commonwealth rent assistance, family tax benefits and pharmaceutical allowances. Amounts are rounded to the nearest dollar.

** Average weekly earnings.

Source: Adapted from Tenants Union of Victoria (2011, p. 3)

Table 8.1 shows that a couple with two children on average weekly earnings spent 26 per cent of their income on rent, leaving them with $969 in disposable income to pay for all other household expenses. However, four groups were in a much more precarious financial position: single parents, aged pensioners, people on Newstart, and students on Austudy.

Single parents spent 67 per cent of their income on rent and were left with just $175 to cover all other expenses. Single people on Aged pensions spent 69 per cent of their income on rent, leaving a disposable income of $134. A Newstart recipient spent 58 per cent of his/her income on rent, leaving just $128. Students on Austudy spent 69 per cent of their income on rent, leaving $79.

Most people in dire financial circumstances use a range of strategies to get by. A single parent with a child may share a two-bedroom apartment with another adult, reducing her rent to $175 per week and increasing her disposable income to $350 per week. An elderly man or woman with a disposable income of $134 per week may deliver advertising material or take on other marginal employment to secure additional income. A student with a disposable income of $79 per week may share his/her room with a partner to reduce accommodation costs or work in the underground economy. Most poor people are resilient in the face of adversity and
they do not become homeless. Nonetheless, a minority of people on welfare payments ‘tip over’ into the rooming house population.

Researchers have suggested that some older people are now at risk of losing their accommodation (Morris, Judd and Kavanagh 2005; Morris 2007; McFerran 2010; Sharam 2011). This is accurate. Housing workers who were interviewed knew of older people in rooming houses. In most cases, the elderly person’s partner had died and the pensioner could not afford to rent a flat on his/her own. They had ended up in a rooming house.

Welfare agencies try to send families to motels rather than boarding houses, but they know this is not always possible: ‘We are dealing with many more families these days. Sometimes we have no alternative but to send them to rooming houses’ (Team leader, Inner East).

It is the deteriorating situation in the private rental market that also explains why some students are in rooming houses: ‘The housing market is so bad that a single room is all that some students can afford’ (University housing officer). The second change in the boarding house population is that it has become more diverse.

### 8.3 Overall picture

Is the boarding house population increasing in other states? The answer is probably ‘yes’, but it seems likely that the increase will have been higher in some places and lower in others. Table 8.2 estimates the disposable income (after paying rent) of single person households on Parenting benefits, Newstart, Aged pensions and Austudy in the eight capital cities. The data is for the September quarter, 2011. There were no households on these benefits who had a disposable income above $255 per week in any capital city across Australia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 8.2</th>
<th>Disposable income* after paying rent, by household type, capital cities (September quarter 2011)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adelaide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person (21+) Newstart</td>
<td>$168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent (1 child) Parenting</td>
<td>$255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person Aged</td>
<td>$204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person Austudy</td>
<td>$119</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Income includes Commonwealth rent assistance, family tax benefits and pharmaceutical allowances. Amounts are rounded to the nearest dollar. The calculations for this table are provided in Appendix A.

Source: Adapted from Tenants Union of Victoria (2011).
Table 8.2 shows that people on a Parenting benefit with one child had a disposable income of $255 per week in Hobart and Adelaide, but in the other state capitals their disposable income was between $75 and $175. In Brisbane, Canberra, and Perth, people on Newstart benefits had a disposable income of $106 to $118, but it was below $100 per week in Sydney and Darwin. The financial position of people on Aged pensions was more variable, ranging from an income of $244 per week in Hobart, to $134 per week in Melbourne and Perth, to $19 per week in Sydney. Young people on Austudy did badly everywhere. The structural factors that cause some people on welfare benefits to become rooming house tenants are apparent in all states and territories. The situation looks bad in Brisbane and Perth, serious in Darwin and Canberra, and dire in Sydney.

There is a way of estimating the overall picture. According to CTH 2006, 17.3 per cent of the boarding house population was in Melbourne on Census night 2006. According to the ABS (2011), the figure was 17.5 per cent. There is no compelling reason to think that this proportion has changed significantly since 2006. If Melbourne’s boarding house population was 12,568 in 2011, then the national boarding house population was about 70,000.

Will the 2011 Census identify this increase? The answer is probably ‘no’, because 75 per cent of registered rooming houses in Melbourne were small dwellings accommodating four to nine people. Field visits across Melbourne revealed that most of these boarding houses looked no different from other properties in the same street. Census collectors misclassify these dwellings for reasons that we now understand. The ABS method of counting the boarding house population is fundamentally flawed.

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1 The calculation is 3739/21,596 x 100 = 17.3 per cent.
2 The calculation is 2946/16,828 x 100 = 17.5 per cent.
3 The calculations are: 12,568 x 100/17.5 = 71,817; 12,568 x 100/17.3 = 72,647.
## APPENDIX A: Calculations for Table 8.2

### ADELAIDE

**Table A1 | Rent and disposable income by household type, Adelaide (Sept qtr. 2011)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Income source</th>
<th>Accommodation</th>
<th>Median rent</th>
<th>Income*</th>
<th>% spent on rent</th>
<th>Disposable income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single person (21+)</td>
<td>Newstart</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent (1 child)</td>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>2 BR flat</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Aged pension</td>
<td>1 BR flat</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Austudy</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Income includes Commonwealth rent assistance, family tax benefits and pharmaceutical allowances. Amounts are rounded to the nearest dollar.

Source: Adapted from Tenants Union of Victoria (2011).

### BRISBANE

**Table A2 | Rent and disposable income by household type, Brisbane (Sept qtr. 2011)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Income source</th>
<th>Accommodation</th>
<th>Median rent</th>
<th>Income*</th>
<th>% spent on rent</th>
<th>Disposable income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single person (21+)</td>
<td>Newstart</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent (1 child)</td>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>2 BR flat</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Aged pension</td>
<td>1 BR flat</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Austudy</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Income includes Commonwealth rent assistance, family tax benefits and pharmaceutical allowances. Amounts are rounded to the nearest dollar.

Source: Adapted from Tenants Union of Victoria (2011).

### CANBERRA

**Table A3 | Rent and disposable income by household type, Canberra (Sept qtr. 2011)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Income source</th>
<th>Accommodation</th>
<th>Median rent</th>
<th>Income*</th>
<th>% spent on rent</th>
<th>Disposable income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single person (21+)</td>
<td>Newstart</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent (1 child)</td>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>2 BR flat</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Aged pension</td>
<td>1 BR flat</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Austudy</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Income includes Commonwealth rent assistance, family tax benefits and pharmaceutical allowances. Amounts are rounded to the nearest dollar.

Source: Adapted from Tenants Union of Victoria (2011).
### DARWIN

**Table A4 | Rent and disposable income by household type, Darwin (Sept qtr. 2011)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Income source</th>
<th>Accommodation</th>
<th>Median rent</th>
<th>Income*</th>
<th>% spent on rent</th>
<th>Disposable income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single person (21+)</td>
<td>Newstart</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent (1 child)</td>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>2 BR flat</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Aged pension</td>
<td>1 BR flat</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Austudy</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Income includes Commonwealth rent assistance, family tax benefits and pharmaceutical allowances. Amounts are rounded to the nearest dollar.

Source: Adapted from Tenants Union of Victoria (2011).

### HOBART

**Table A5 | Rent and disposable income by household type, Hobart (Sept qtr. 2011)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Income source</th>
<th>Accommodation</th>
<th>Median rent</th>
<th>Income*</th>
<th>% spent on rent</th>
<th>Disposable income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single person (21+)</td>
<td>Newstart</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent (1 child)</td>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>2 BR flat</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Aged pension</td>
<td>1 BR flat</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Austudy</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Income includes Commonwealth rent assistance, family tax benefits and pharmaceutical allowances. Amounts are rounded to the nearest dollar.

Source: Adapted from Tenants Union of Victoria (2011).

### MELBOURNE

**Table A6 | Rent and disposable income by household type, Melbourne (Sept qtr. 2011)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Income source</th>
<th>Accommodation</th>
<th>Median rent</th>
<th>Income*</th>
<th>% spent on rent</th>
<th>Disposable income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single person (21+)</td>
<td>Newstart</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent (1 child)</td>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>2 BR flat</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Aged pension</td>
<td>1 BR flat</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Austudy</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Income includes Commonwealth rent assistance, family tax benefits and pharmaceutical allowances. Amounts are rounded to the nearest dollar.

Source: Adapted from Tenants Union of Victoria (2011).
### PERTH

**Table A7 | Rent and disposable income by household type, Perth (Sept qtr. 2011)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Income source</th>
<th>Accommodation</th>
<th>Median rent</th>
<th>Income*</th>
<th>% spent on rent</th>
<th>Disposable income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single person (21+)</td>
<td>Newstart</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent (1 child)</td>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>2 BR flat</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Aged pension</td>
<td>1 BR flat</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Austudy</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Income includes Commonwealth rent assistance, family tax benefits and pharmaceutical allowances. Amounts are rounded to the nearest dollar.

Source: Adapted from Tenants Union of Victoria (2011).

### SYDNEY

**Table A8 | Rent and disposable income by household type, Sydney (Sept qtr. 2011)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Income source</th>
<th>Accommodation</th>
<th>Median rent</th>
<th>Income*</th>
<th>% spent on rent</th>
<th>Disposable income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single person (21+)</td>
<td>Newstart</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent (1 child)</td>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>2 BR flat</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Aged pension</td>
<td>1 BR flat</td>
<td>415</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>Austudy</td>
<td>2 BR flat (shared)</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Income includes Commonwealth rent assistance, family tax benefits and pharmaceutical allowances. Amounts are rounded to the nearest dollar.

Source: Adapted from Tenants Union of Victoria (2011).
References


