

Boarding Houses

Low-cost Housing Option

A Boarding House is a form of accommodation where rent is collected for the use of a single room, where other facilities such as a kitchen, toilet and living areas may be shared. The single room may be provided on a single or shared basis. Meals and other services such as laundry may or may not be included.¹

In comparison to a tenant in a rented share house, a resident of a boarding house does not have 'exclusive possession' of the property, and the landlord or his agents retain unrestricted access to, and use of, the premises.² Boarding Houses are also known as 'Rooming Houses' or 'Lodging Houses'.

The South Australian Residential Tenancies Act (1995) defines a Rooming House as:

A residential premises in which:

- ◆ rooms are available on a commercial basis for residential occupation, and
- ◆ accommodation is available for at least three persons on a commercial basis.³

The boarding and rooming house sector performs a distinct role in the rental market. It is an important low-cost housing option (often in inner-city areas), and a source of housing for some of the most marginalised people in the community.

People with disabilities, mental illnesses or other circumstances which prevent them from successfully negotiating the private rental market often require accommodation options that they can access more quickly than public housing. The significant reduction of institutional accommodation has led to an increased demand for boarding house accommodation, while at the same time, urban development and problems of economic viability of boarding houses are causing a decrease in their numbers.

As many residents are on very low incomes, may have a disability and have few other housing options, the unregulated nature of the boarding house sector can exacerbate exploitation, substandard living conditions and inadequate accommodation.⁴

SNAPSHOT 2

JULY 2004

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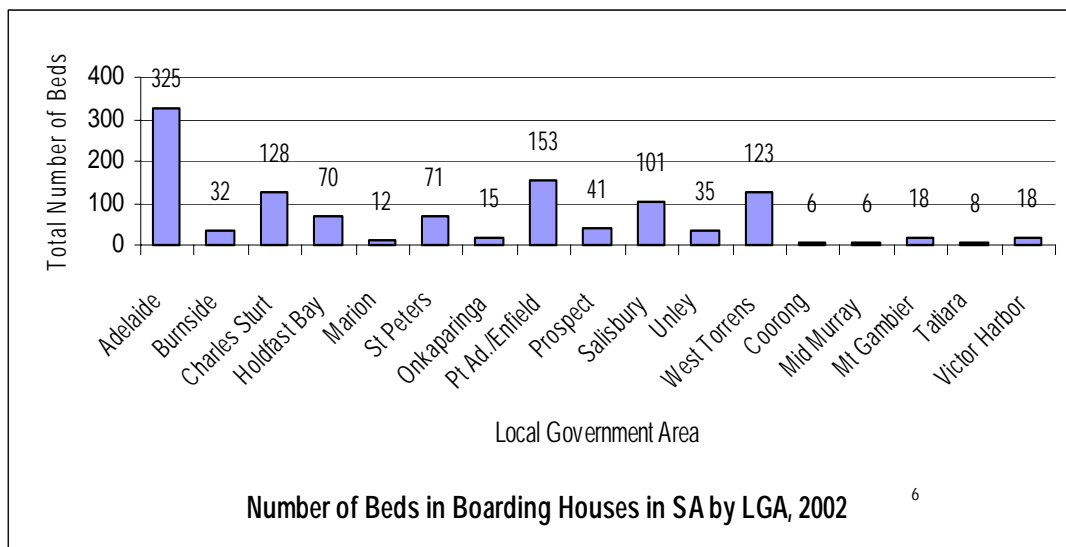


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Number of People Living in Boarding Houses

According to research conducted by the SA Department of Human Services (DHS), as of January 2002 there were 115 boarding houses in South Australia, with an estimated resident population of 1,160. 106 of these were located in the Adelaide metropolitan area, housing approximately 1,100 people, and 9 were located in country areas, housing approximately 60 people. However, some boarding houses may not have been identified in the above research, as there is no requirement for boarding houses to be licensed in all council areas.⁵



The Local Government Areas with the highest percentage of boarding house beds were:

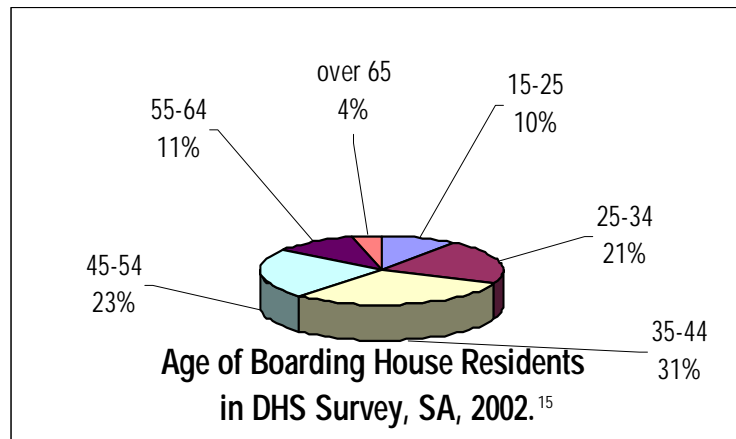
- ◆ Adelaide (28%, 325 beds).
- ◆ Port Adelaide Enfield (13.2%, 153 beds).
- ◆ Charles Sturt (11%, 128 beds).
- ◆ West Torrens (10.6%, 123 beds).⁷
- ◆ Local Government Areas in country areas which have boarding houses include: Coorong, Mid Murray, Mount Gambier, Tatiara, Victor Harbor.⁸
- ◆ Contact Shelter SA for a listing of 102 lodging, boarding and guest houses within Metropolitan Adelaide. This list may not be current, and Shelter SA recommends that an accurate and current listing be established and made available to interested parties.
- ◆ Most boarding houses (64%) were premises with between 3 and 8 residents, 23% housed 9-19 residents, and 12% housed 20 or more residents. One inner-city boarding house, the *Afton*, houses 100 residents.⁹
- ◆ Standards of the boarding houses varied greatly, especially among those that were privately owned. Roughly a quarter of the properties were in a poor condition, and it was common for outhouses, sheds and garages to be used as bedrooms.¹⁰
- ◆ 54% of the residents surveyed stated that there was no common area or lounge in their boarding house, and that the toilet, bathroom, laundry and kitchen were either "poor" or "fair".¹¹

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Characteristics of Boarding House Residents

A study of 140 boarding house residents in South Australia (DHS,2002) provided the following profile of boarding house residents:

- ◆ The majority were male (92%).¹²
- ◆ The majority were born in Australia (82.1%). 12.9% were born in another English speaking country, and 5% were born in Non-English speaking countries. ¹³
- ◆ The age range was from 17-74 years with the about one third of residents being 35-44 years old. ¹⁴



- ◆ Most were single: 59% had never married, 21% were divorced, 11% were separated, 4% were married (registered and defacto), and 5% did not disclose their marital status. ¹⁶
- ◆ 75% received Centrelink benefits (35% Newstart, 32% Disability Support Pension, 7% Age Pension, 2% other allowances or benefits, 1% Youth Allowance), 19% received wages, and 6% had other income sources. ¹⁷
- ◆ 83% have lived in boarding houses for 12 months or longer, though not necessarily the same boarding house, (only 27% had been in the same boarding house for 12 months or longer).¹⁸
- ◆ 58% had experienced primary or secondary homeless (i.e. slept rough, stayed temporarily with friends, lived in a caravan or stayed in an emergency shelter) prior to living in the boarding house.¹⁹
- ◆ 17% had been homeowners, 80% had been in private rental accommodation and 24% had been in Housing Trust accommodation, at some stage prior to living the boarding house.²⁰

Boarding Houses and Homelessness

- ◆ People who live in boarding houses for 13 weeks or longer are classified as 'tertiary homeless' by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, as this type of accommodation is deemed to be below 'minimum community standards': that is, *they do not have a separate bedroom and living room, they do not have bathroom and kitchen facilities of their own, their accommodation is not self-contained, and they do not have security of tenure provided by a lease.*²¹
- ◆ However, this definition of homelessness is viewed by some as *imposing the 'Australian dream' of a traditional house and garden, without acknowledging or validating other housing aspirations.* ²²

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Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages to residents of a boarding house can include:

- ◆ affordability (average of \$74 per week in DHS survey)
- ◆ no need to pay a bond (in some cases)
- ◆ inclusion of utilities in the rent charged (in some cases)
- ◆ no need to have furniture, bedding or cooking equipment
- ◆ having a location providing access to a range of services and facilities
- ◆ proximity to public transport and shops
- ◆ possibilities of companionship and friendship due to communal living arrangements.

Disadvantages to the residents can include:

- ◆ lack of privacy
- ◆ problems/conflict with other residents
- ◆ low standard and cleanliness of facilities
- ◆ having to share facilities, (and room in some cases)
- ◆ small size of room
- ◆ lack of rights and protection under the Residential Tenancies Act
- ◆ insecurity of tenure
- ◆ concerns for personal safety
- ◆ having to deal with the landlord. ²³

Footnotes

1. *Boarding House Reform Discussion Paper, Commonwealth Department of Housing and Regional Development, 1994*
2. *It's No Palace. Boarding Houses: The Sector, Its Clientele and Its Future*, DHS, 2003, p. 5
3. *South Australian Residential Tenancies Act*, Section 3
4. *National Overview of Boarding Houses in Australia*, National Shelter, Nov. 2000) p.5,10,11
5. *It's No Palace*, DHS, 2003, p.23 - 24
6. *Ibid*, p.24.
7. *Ibid*, p.24
8. *Ibid*, p.24
9. *Ibid*, p.25
10. *Ibid*, p.29
11. *Ibid*, p.40
12. *Ibid*, p.32
13. *Ibid*, p.32
14. *Ibid*, p.33
15. *Ibid*, p.33
16. *Ibid*, p.33
17. *Ibid*, p.34
18. *Ibid*, p.34—35
19. *Ibid*, p.36-39
20. *Ibid*, p.36
21. *Counting the Homeless 2001*, p.1-2, Chamberlain and MacKenzie, ABS, Nov. 2003
22. *Homelessness Discussion Paper*, Dec. 2002, Social Inclusion Unit, p.5
23. *National Overview of Boarding Houses in Australia*, National Shelter, 2000, p.43-44, and *It's No Palace*, DHS, 2003 p.44
24. *It's No Palace*, DHS, 2003, p.15-16
25. *Ibid*, p.51-56
26. *Ibid*, p.2
27. *Reducing Homelessness in South Australian*, Social Inclusion Board, July 2003. p.8-9
28. Information provided by the SAHT
29. Boarding House Taskforce, Terms of Reference

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The Decline of Boarding House Stock

Boarding house stock has been declining significantly since at least 1978. For example, in 1978 in the City of Adelaide, there were 88 boarding houses providing accommodation to 1,597 people. By 1988 this had declined to 45 boarding houses accommodating 529 people, which further declined to 21 properties housing 325 people by 2002. Boarding house stock in metropolitan Adelaide as a whole declined by 50% from 1978 to 1988, and then by a further 40% from 1988 to 2002.²⁴ (Comprehensive statistics are not available which makes further analysis difficult).

This decline is expected to continue due to a range of factors including:

- ◆ increasing costs, especially electricity and insurance
- ◆ increase in property values, making selling an attractive proposition
- ◆ increasing complexity of residents
- ◆ long-standing owners retiring, with no-one interested in taking over the family business.²⁵

Legislation regarding Boarding Houses

Regulation in the area of boarding houses in South Australia is complex. There is no single Act providing coverage, and regulation is spread across the following Acts: *The Residential Tenancies Act (1995)*, *The Local Government Act (1934)*, *The Public Health and Environmental Health Act (1989)* and *The Development Act (1993)*. There are concerns about inconsistencies, gaps, coverage, enforcement and effectiveness.²⁶

The *Residential Tenancies (Rooming Houses) Regulations 1999*, which are part of the *Residential Tenancies Act (1995)*, provide some degree of protection to both proprietors and residents. However, Shelter SA considers that the current regulations are inadequate and need to be improved in a number of important areas. For further information, please refer to *Shelter SA's Submission to the Review of the Residential Tenancies Act*, (Feb. 2003, p.40-53), which can be accessed at: www.sheltersa.asn.au.

Regulations under the *Residential Tenancies Act 1995* provide minimal protection, but even these rights are not often accessed by residents because they may be unaware that they have rights, may have difficulty understanding the legislation, or be fearful of losing their accommodation if they seek to exercise their rights.

To address the need to inform rooming/boarding house residents of their rights and responsibilities, Shelter SA has produced a booklet *Rooming Houses: a guide for residents*, and will conduct an educational campaign, in conjunction with the office of Business and Consumer Affairs. Shelter SA also advocates for the establishment of an independent community-based Tenants' Advice and Advocacy Service whose role would include providing



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Recent Government Initiatives

Social Inclusion Initiative

In response to recommendations from the Social Inclusion Board, the South Australian Government has included the following as part of its response to reducing homelessness:

- (1) *Increase the supply and improve the amenity of boarding house style accommodation by :*
 - ◆ *upgrading publicly owned boarding houses, starting with the Afton.*
 - ◆ *developing a program to finance, develop and maintain 200 budget priced serviced apartments. (\$25,000 in new funds in 2003-04)*

- (2) *Establish an outreach service to support homeless people to access and maintain boarding house style accommodation (the focus will be on addressing issues which prevent good housing outcomes and assisting with the transition to independent accommodation where appropriate). (\$166,000 has been allocated in 2003-04 to commence the implementation of this program)²⁷*

South Australian Housing Trust

As of June 30th 2004, the SA Housing Trust owned 8 boarding houses which are leased to community agencies that accommodate a range of single adults in congregate living arrangements. Two of the boarding houses are in Glenelg, and 6 are in the City of Adelaide. *Afton House* is an example of a large boarding house (98 beds), but the other 7 boarding houses are smaller, providing accommodation for between 6 and 20 persons each.²⁸

Boarding House Taskforce

In July 2003 a Boarding House Task force was established to advise the Housing Minister about recommendations on areas such as:

- ◆ Addressing gaps in legislation and governance issues.
- ◆ Increasing the supply of boarding house stock, stemming the loss of more boarding houses and improving the amenity of current boarding houses.
- ◆ Improving and assisting with management practices.
- ◆ Introducing and monitoring standards of accommodation, amenity and access to support service.²⁹

A report from the Boarding House Taskforce was sent to the Minister for Housing in February 2004.

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Shelter SA Position Statement 2 Boarding/Rooming Houses

- 2.1 Shelter SA considers that boarding/rooming houses are an important low-cost housing option and that strategies need to be developed to stop the loss of existing boarding house accommodation.
- 2.2 Shelter SA calls for an increase in the supply of boarding houses across the state. Therefore Shelter SA supports the initiatives of the Social Inclusion Board in this regard. Shelter SA also supports the acquisition and management of additional boarding houses by the SA Housing Trust or Community Housing Organisations.
- 2.3 Shelter SA calls for the establishment and monitoring of minimum standards for boarding houses. It is acknowledged that such standards may put further pressure on to owners of boarding houses, and therefore Shelter SA recommends that grants or interest free loans be made available to assist owners to improve the standards of their boarding houses.
- 2.4 Shelter SA calls for the establishment of a register of boarding houses, including a central database to show current vacancies.
- 2.5 Shelter SA believes that where boarding houses do close, there should be a coordinated response to prevent residents from experiencing primary or secondary homelessness.
- 2.6 Shelter SA calls for changes to be made to the *Residential Tenancies Act*, (or the creation of another specific legislation), to provide greater legislative protection for Boarding House Residents. (Refer to the *Shelter SA's submission for the Review of the Residential Tenancies Act* for more details).
- 2.7 Shelter SA calls for the establishment of a Tenants' Advice and Advocacy Service, managed by a non-government organisation, to assist all renters, including boarding house residents, to understand and exercise their rights and responsibilities.
- 2.8 Shelter SA calls for an ongoing educational campaign to be conducted about the rights and responsibilities of boarding house residents and proprietors.
- 2.9 Shelter SA supports the establishment of an outreach service to support homeless people to access and maintain boarding house style accommodation (as per Social Inclusion Initiative Action Plan for Reducing Homeless).
- 2.10 Shelter SA recognises the unmet housing needs of women and young people, and encourages the supply of a range of appropriate housing, including boarding houses, for women and young people.



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References and Further Information

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*Homelessness Discussion Paper.** (Dec. 2002, Social Inclusion Initiative).

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*Proprietors Guide to Rooming Houses.** (Office of Business and Consumer Affairs, undated)

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*Rooming Houses: A Guide for Residents.** (Shelter SA, 2004).

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*Shelter SA's Submission for the State Housing Plan.** (June 2003, p.71-73).

Available at www.sheltersa.asn.au

*Shelter SA's Submission to the Review of the Residential Tenancies Act.** (Feb. 2003, p.40-53).

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*The Peoples' Voices: Interviews with Residents of the Afton Boarding Houses.**

(Video produced by Shelter SA, August 2003, and presented at the National Housing Conference, Nov. 2003).

(* denotes that this reference is available in the Shelter SA library).

