

Report on
the Census of Families with
Children
Living in Single Room Occupancy
Hotels
in San Francisco

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and
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By:
The Citywide Families in SROs Collaborative

“The children don’t have a space to play.”

“Having to share bathrooms that are very dirty.
The danger of the hotel catching fire. There are many drunks and drug-addicts.”

“I don’t want people to look down on me for living in a hotel.”

*-- Responses of families when asked what were their
greatest concerns about living in a residential hotel*

“You kind of had to feel bad for them because of how they were living.
A small room with no bath or kitchen and a bunch of children cramped into a room.”

“The majority of the families worried that the hotel would catch on fire and
that they wouldn’t be able to get out.”

“The families say that they live in hotels by necessity,
because they don’t have papers, money, or work.”

*-- Responses of outreach workers describing their
impressions of families in hotels*

Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	3
Goals and Methodology	5
Summary of Findings	8
Personal Testimonies	13
Conclusion and Recommendations	16
Attachments	19
A: Census Form	21
B: Interview Form	22
C: Tenant Rights Guide	23
D: Outreach Worker Job Description	35
E: Summary of Trainings	36
F: Results of Census and Interviews	37
G: Map of all San Francisco SROs	44
H: Map of Chinatown SROs	45
I: Map of Tenderloin SROs	46
J: Map of Mission SROs	47
K: Map of SOMA SROs	48
Who we are: A Description of the Citywide Families in SROs	
Collaborative	
Member Agencies	49

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Citywide Families in SROs Collaborative came together late in 2000 to address the problem of an increasing number of families with children living in Single Room Occupancy Hotels (SROs) in Chinatown, Tenderloin, Mission, and South of Market (SOMA). The Collaborative decided that in order to gather important information about families in SROs and respond to their needs, a census of families in SROs was necessary as well as a citywide network reflecting the racial, language, cultural, and other demographic diversity of the population.

The eight-agency Collaborative, comprised of the Chinatown Community Development Center, Chinese Progressive Association, Community Tenants Association, Coalition on Homelessness/ Hogares Sin Barreras, Homeless Prenatal Program, Mission Agenda, Mission Housing Development Corporation, and St. Peter's Housing Committee, developed a proposal to conduct a census and interview families with children living in SROs. The project was funded by the Department of Public Health early this year, and began in late April.

Goals and Methodology

Sixteen outreach workers from the four neighborhoods were hired and paid stipends to conduct the census and interviews. Most of the outreach workers were themselves SRO residents, and the team as a whole, spoke six relevant languages. They spent eight weeks counting families in all of the city's SROs, and four additional weeks conducting in-depth interviews with 195 families. At each interview, outreach workers distributed information regarding tenant rights and available resources for families and children.

The Collaborative conducted tri-lingual trainings in Chinese, Spanish, and English for the outreach worker team. Trainings focused on leadership and outreach skills development.

Summary of Findings

- 1) Over 40% of all San Francisco SROs have at least one child living in them.
- 2) Over 450 families and 760 children were found to be living in San Francisco SROs.
- 3) The majority reside in Chinatown (62%), followed by the Tenderloin (13%), Mission (11%), South of Market (4%), and Other Parts of San Francisco (11%).
- 4) The average SRO family consists of 3.4 people and has lived in their 10 x 10 room, without a kitchen or bathroom, for over four years.
- 5) Two out of three families have more than one adult. Three out of four of these adults are employed, and still families cannot afford to move out.
- 6) The majority of SRO families (approximately 85%) are immigrants of color whose first language is not English.
- 7) After rent and food costs, the average family has \$290 in their pockets to make ends meet, with averages as low as \$63 in the Mission and \$37 in the Tenderloin.
- 8) In the Tenderloin and SOMA, many families cycle between SROs and homelessness.

- 9) Half the parents reported that living in an SRO had caused health problems for them and their children.
- 10) Eighty percent of children in SROs are between the ages of newborn and twelve, with many having spent their entire lives there.
- 11) Almost all families report that insufficient income and the lack of affordable housing keep them from moving into better housing.
- 12) Families in SROs often do not know about, and lack access to, public services.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the Citywide Families in SROs Collaborative recommends:

1) *Protect, improve, and increase low-income affordable housing in San Francisco*

Recommendations include building more low-income housing for families with children, advocating for more state and federal funding for affordable housing, promoting and funding tenant empowerment and eviction prevention efforts, and developing creative solutions for protecting and expanding existing affordable housing such as master leasing underutilized or sub-standard apartment buildings.

2) *Improve the conditions of SROs and minimize the health and safety hazards to children*

Recommendations include increased inspections and punitive measures to achieve code compliance in SROs, strengthening building and housing codes to account for children's health needs in SROs, and supporting and funding community-based tenants' rights and fire prevention education.

3) *Improve living wage work opportunities for low-income families*

Recommendations include adopting a Living Wage Ordinance, supporting worker rights education, and expanding job training programs that meet the needs of SRO parents.

4) *Improve accessibility and availability of family and children's services that are multilingual, culturally competent, and sensitive to undocumented and documented immigrants*

Recommendations include creating a wide array of health, education, and community-building services designed for SRO families and their children including a peer-based and community-based SRO Families Outreach Team, and ensuring that all services have language and cultural accessibility and are provided regardless of immigration status.

Conclusion

The families who have been hardest hit by San Francisco's affordable housing crisis are largely working, immigrant families from communities of color. The vast majority of these families are not informed of and lack access to services. The census and interviews made clear that the lives of these families have been significantly impacted by their lack of appropriate kitchen and bathroom facilities, living in cramped, unsanitary, unstable,

and unsafe environments, not having space for children to play or study or for parents' privacy, and multiple health problems caused by living in SROs. Families identified that the lack of affordable housing options and insufficient income are the largest barriers to moving into more appropriate housing.

Families in SROs need decent, affordable housing. For years now, too many parents and their growing children have been forced to deal with a dangerous and debilitating environment for their everyday lives. Not only do they need services to address immediate problems, they also need to be empowered to advocate for their rights and to develop long-term solutions.

It is time to listen to the voices of these families, and make their needs a priority.

Introduction

Several years ago when the high-tech boom swept into San Francisco, a wave of gentrification and redevelopment began to displace communities and many of their long-standing residents. It was low-income families, many of them immigrants, who were among the hardest hit. Amidst the housing crisis, these families were faced with limited options, often forced to choose between relocating into the tiny room of a Single Room Occupancy residential hotel (SRO), a shelter, or worse, onto the street. With no other real alternative, more and more families sought housing in SROs.

The over 400 SROs are located primarily in the low-income Asian, Latino, and African-American communities within the Chinatown, Tenderloin, Mission, and South of Market (SOMA) Districts. Community groups who work with families in SROs hear repeated and appalling complaints: filth, rodent infestations, drug abuse and dealing in their SROs, abusive and unresponsive managers who deny them their rights to repairs and gouge their rent, and poorly lit, non-ventilated, cramped rooms in which they are forced to conduct all aspects of domestic life. Despite the recent decline in the high-tech industries and the real estate market, there has been little to no effect on the housing market for the vast majority of families in SROs. As such, they continue to live in SROs under these conditions.

In the winter of 2000, the newly formed Citywide Families in SROs Collaborative initiated the proposal of a census and survey of families in SROs. The community organizations that came together were the Mission SRO Collaborative (Mission Agenda, Mission Housing Development Corporation, and St. Peter's Housing Committee), the Chinatown SRO Collaborative (Chinatown Community Development Center, Chinese Progressive Association, and the Community Tenants Association), the Coalition on Homelessness (based in the Tenderloin District) and its project organization Hogares Sin Barreras (based in the Mission District), and Homeless Prenatal Program (based in the SOMA District). This Citywide Families in SROs Collaborative represented the first trilingual, multiracial community collaboration working to improve the lives of families with children in SROs.

The necessity of building a citywide collaboration was clear: as separate entities, individual organizations were unable to address the long-term needs of the families in SROs that were increasingly seeking their assistance. From Chinatown to the Mission, and from the Tenderloin to the SOMA, families in hotels were reporting similar problems to the Collaborative member organizations. Managers refused to address much-needed repairs, to clean the bathrooms, to reduce drug-traffic, to address rodent infestations. Families were barely able to make ends meet with rents often as high as \$800 a month and more for a single room with no amenities. Many families were targeted for eviction due to their having children in the hotel. Others were the victims of the illegal practice known as "musical rooms," whereby managers force tenants to move-out every 21 to 28 days in order to prevent their establishing permanent tenancy. Families feared fires in their hotels, and rightfully so; over the past four years, fires in eleven hotels have burned out 840 rooms and killed three tenants (Sullivan 6/27/01: San Francisco Chronicle A15).

It was clear to the Collaborative from the beginning that SROs were no place for families, and certainly not for children.

The Collaborative was faced with the challenge of how to continue to provide assistance to the increasing number of families in SROs and improve SRO conditions, while at the same time strategize around the creation of other more appropriate housing options. The benefits of conducting a citywide census and survey enabled us to:

- gather information to identify the needs of families in SROs and to plan for the creation of services and affordable housing for these families
- establish relationships with and begin to build awareness among families in SROs
- develop the leadership skills of outreach workers, some of whom are SRO tenants with families
- build and strengthen the multi-lingual, multi-cultural partnership of peer outreach workers and community organizations from the four neighborhoods working for decent affordable low-income housing.

Meanwhile, based on increasing city and community concern, a Families in SROs Workgroup chaired by the Department of Public Health (DPH) was formed in the Spring of 2000. The Workgroup, partly initiated by Collaborative members, had begun to meet regularly to address families' concerns. The Workgroup became a committee of the Board of Supervisors' SRO Health and Safety Task Force and completed a comprehensive study and report on families in SROs released in April 2001. The report details the effects of living in an SRO on families and their children. It makes both short and long-term recommendations for the improvement of their living conditions.¹

The Workgroup and the Task Force also backed the idea of a community-led, citywide census. The Collaborative's proposal was quickly adopted by DPH early this year. It was with DPH's financial, technical, and informational support that the project was underway by late April and completed in August 2001.

What follows are the results of a five-month effort on the part of the Citywide Families in SROs Collaborative to 1) do a point-in-time count of families in SROs, 2) identify their needs and demographic characteristics of families living in SROs, 3) develop the leadership skills of SRO families, and 4) to strengthen the links among community housing advocates, family service providers, City agencies, and the families in SROs throughout San Francisco.

¹ San Francisco Families in SROs Workgroup. *Report on Families with Children Living in Single Room Occupancy Hotels in San Francisco*. A report presented to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, their SRO Health and Safety Task Force, and the City and County of San Francisco Departments in April, 2001.

Goals and Methodology

The Census project was designed to be more than a simple fact-finding operation. As important as gathering statistics on families with children in SROs was the empowerment of families in SROs to improve their housing situations in the immediate and long-term. In this light, the Collaborative's four initial goals were:

- 1. To conduct a comprehensive point-in-time count of families with children residing in over 400 SROs located mainly within the four targeted neighborhoods.*
- 2. To conduct a total of 200 in-depth interviews with 200 randomly selected families residing in SROs throughout the four neighborhoods.*
- 3. To provide information about relevant community and government resources to the 200 families participating in the interviews.*
- 4. To train and support sixteen low-income SRO residents of the targeted neighborhoods in peer outreach and advocacy.*

The Collaborative was successful in achieving its goals, intertwining data gathering and community empowerment. The results in each area are as follows:

Census

The outreach workers spent eight weeks conducting a census of families living in SROs in five areas of San Francisco: Chinatown, Tenderloin, Mission, SOMA, and Other (consisting of hotels scattered between and outside of the aforementioned areas.) Approximately 480 addresses were visited, based on a list of SROs from the Department of Building Inspection. The purpose of the census was to conduct a comprehensive point-in-time "count" of families living in SROs in which both hotel managers and residents were asked the approximate number of families with children currently residing in the hotel. In addition to the number of families, information was gathered regarding each family's number of adult women and men, number and ages of children, ethnicity, and preferred language.² Completed hotel outreach forms were submitted to the project coordinator, who compiled and sorted the data.

The DPH played a key role in providing the census team with a letter to hotel managers describing the purpose of the census, and urging them to cooperate in furnishing requested information. Likewise, outreach workers obtained DPH photo identification as proof of their relationship with the City.

Interviews

The following four weeks were spent conducting in-depth interviews with families in SROs. While, 200 interviews had been planned, 195 interviews were completed. Due to

² For a copy of the form used by outreach workers, see Attachment A.

the disproportionate number of families in the Chinatown area, the majority of families interviewed lived in Chinatown.

The 195 families were randomly selected from the pool of those who had identified themselves as interested participants during the census. Families were compensated for their time with gift certificates to Safeway. Through the interviews, families were asked to specify caregivers' sources and amounts of monthly income, their monthly food and rent costs, the sex, age, and school of dependent children, whether or not they had any dependent adults, the family's residency history, barriers to moving into a better housing situation, health impacts of the family's current housing situation, where they received medical care and how often, whether or not any member of the family had a disability, and several other related questions.³ Completed interview forms were submitted to the project coordinator, who then compiled and sorted the data.

Distribution of Materials

One of the key tenets of the census project was community empowerment. As such, not only did the outreach workers interview families, they also informed families of their rights as tenants and of a number of community organizations that could be of service to them. Each of the 195 families interviewed received a Tenant Rights Guide in English, Spanish, or Chinese, which contained information on tenancy, repairs, and visitor policies, among other topics, as well as contact information for various community and City agencies.⁴

Description of the Outreach Team

The peer outreach team consisted of sixteen workers. They were all low-income, the majority of whom were themselves SRO residents and/or had families. Together they comprised a unique citywide team, unprecedented in its SRO Family focus. Residing in the various neighborhoods in which they worked, outreach workers were Chinese, Vietnamese, Latino, African-American, and Caucasian women and men who spoke Cantonese, Mandarin, Toisan, Vietnamese, Spanish, and English.⁵

The tri-lingual trainings (in Cantonese, English, and Spanish) conducted by collaborative staff for outreach workers were one of the most exciting and rewarding aspects of the project. During four trainings spaced throughout the project, workers received training in community organizing and outreach, public speaking, tenant rights, and the socio-economic changes affecting the housing crisis.⁶ The benefits were felt in two directions; outreach workers gained important skills to strengthen their interest in community work, and staff had the opportunity to hear from outreach workers about their own situations and the situations they witnessed in the SROs, their thoughts on the housing crisis, and their ideas for generating social change. Both groups benefited from the rare opportunity to share across languages, cultures, and communities.

³ For a copy of the form used by outreach workers, see Attachment B.

⁴ For a copy of the Tenant Rights Guide distributed to families, see Attachment C.

⁵ To see a copy of the outreach worker job descriptions in the original employment agreement, see Attachment D.

⁶ For a description of trainings conducted with outreach workers, see Attachment E.

Description of the Collaborative

The Citywide Families in SROs Collaborative, itself tri-lingual, multi-cultural, and comprised of staff representatives from the Chinatown, Tenderloin, Mission, and SOMA districts, provided oversight and direction for the project. Responsibilities were split between the eight participating organizations. A project coordinator was hired to assemble census and interview data, coordinate trainings, process pay checks, facilitate communication among Collaborative organizations and staff, and compile reports. One to two staff members in each of the four neighborhoods directly supervised outreach workers, offered support and helped problem-solve. Collaborative staff met weekly to discuss the progress of the census and interviews, troubleshoot, and plan for trainings. The months spent working together cultivated a strong level of trust and sharing among the organizations.

Note on Methodology

As a 43% sample of all families counted, the families interviewed were representative of the population identified in the census. Thus, in calculating the numbers presented in the Results of Census and Interviews (Attachment F) of this report, findings from the interviews with 195 families were applied to the 453 families counted in the census. That is, the percentages noted in Results of Census and Interviews are actuals from interviews, while the numbers noted therein were calculated by multiplying the percentages and rates to the 453 families.

Summary of Findings

1) Over 40% of all San Francisco SROs have at least one child living in them.

San Francisco's Single Room Occupancy (SRO) residential hotels are housing of last resort to thousands of low-income people. Originally intended for single working adults, SROs have increasingly housed adults with special needs. In approximately the last five years, we have seen more and more families with children move into SROs. These families and their children, hard hit by the housing crisis, have been shut out of the traditional housing market and have been forced to turn to SROs.

2) Over 450 families, and 760 children, were found to be living in San Francisco SROs.

The outreach team identified 453 families living in the 392 active residential hotels they were able to make contact with.⁷

These numbers are an undercount for the following reasons:

1. Despite the outreach team's best efforts, there were 11 additional hotels at which no contact was made with managers or tenants, whether because outreach workers were unable to locate them or because they found no response upon arrival. At several of these, managers simply refused to let outreach workers speak with hotel tenants, and asked that workers take them at their word that no families resided there. In general, even though managers were informed that the intention of the census was simply to count families and not to inspect or report on individual hotels, many remained skeptical, and several refused to cooperate.
2. Many hotel tenants live in isolation from other tenants, keeping largely to themselves. When asked, tenants were often unaware of whether any families with children resided in their hotel, especially as a family may have been several floors away. While outreach workers confirmed with at least two tenants the number of families in the hotel, it is probable that families were not counted simply because tenants were not aware of them.
3. Furthermore, the transience of many families in and out of hotels, particularly in the Tenderloin and SOMA, means that our point-in-time census could not capture the real number of families who either have lived or soon will live in an SRO. For instance, 13 (7%) of the 195 families interviewed had lived in their SRO less than 28 days. If we take this to mean that, at any given time, 13 families are new to SROs in San Francisco, then up to 143 families (13 families x 11 months) in addition to those the Collaborative has counted may cycle through SROs every

⁷ Of the initial 493 hotels visited, 82 were found to be potential conversions. That is to say, they appear to no longer serve as active residential hotels, but rather as tourist hotels, commercial space, or apartments. Among the remaining 411, outreach workers were unable to locate two hotels, and unable to make contact at nine of them. In addition, eight of the hotels contacted were not currently in use, whether they had suffered fire damage, or were otherwise under construction. The findings in this report thus pertain to the remaining 392 hotels.

year. Moreover, families may live in hotels for part of the month until their money runs out, and then move out to shelters or the streets. These families may not have been counted based on the time during the month that their hotel was visited.

3) The majority reside in Chinatown⁸ (62%), followed by Tenderloin⁹ (13%), Mission¹⁰ (11%), South of Market¹¹ (4%), and Other Parts of San Francisco¹² (11%).

4) The average SRO family consists of 3.4 people and has lived in their 10 x 10 room, without a kitchen or bathroom, for over four years.

Perhaps what is most distressing is the sheer lack of space that families in SROs have in which to raise their children. The 453 families the Collaborative identified are comprised of 1,534 individuals whose average family size is 3.4. Children in these families lack the space to play or do homework, and parents lack any sense of privacy. Bathrooms are shared with other tenants, as are kitchens, if a hotel has one at all.

It is not hard to imagine the difficulties for parents and children to focus on their goals. For parents, obtaining or maintaining employment, becomes that much harder when the day-to-day living activities are strained. For children, learning through play and keeping up with homework, becomes compromised. These impacts are detailed in the Families in SROs Workgroup Report (Workgroup, 2001).

5) Two out of three families have more than one adult. Three out of four of these adults are employed, and still families cannot afford to move out.

Only thirteen percent of families in SROs receive any kind of government assistance. Almost half of caregivers have full-time jobs, with an additional 25% working part-time. Even with two jobs per household, these families are only able to afford a hotel room in today's housing market.

In the midst of a housing crisis and tremendous gentrification pressures on lower income neighborhoods, hundreds of families are getting evicted and displaced from their homes. Rents are prohibitively expensive, and there is greater competition for fewer apartments. Families that would otherwise find apartments or other housing situations are forced into SROs to keep a roof over their heads.

⁸ For this census, we defined Chinatown as the region bordered on the north by Broadway St., on the west by Mason St., on the south by Sutter St., on the east by Kearny St., and on the northwest corner by Columbus Ave.

⁹ The Tenderloin District was defined on the north by Sutter St., on the west by Van Ness Ave., on the southeast by Market St., and on the east by Montgomery St.

¹⁰ The Mission District was defined on the northwest by Market St., on the west by Dolores St., on the south by Cesar Chavez St., on the east by Potrero, and roughly on the northeast by 12th St.

¹¹ The SOMA was defined on the northwest by Market St., on the southwest roughly by 12th St., on the southeast by Berry, 3rd, and Harrison Sts., and in the northeast roughly by the Embarcadero.

¹² Many of the hotels in what the Collaborative termed Other Parts of San Francisco lie between Chinatown and the Tenderloin.

6) The vast majority of SRO families (approximately 85%) are immigrants of color whose first language is not English.

Ninety-six percent of families in SROs are people of color. Approximately 65% percent are Asian, 16% are Latino, 10% are African-American, 2% are Pacific Islander, and 3% are of mixed ethnicities. The remaining 4% are White. Accordingly, the preferred language for 85% of caregivers is a language other than English. The preferred language of 70% of caregivers is an Asian language, 59% Cantonese, 1% Mandarin, and 10% Toison. Fifteen percent prefer Spanish. Only 15% of caregivers prefer English.

As immigrants, families in SROs are doubly challenged. They may be simultaneously ineligible for government assistance and unable to find jobs in which they were proficient in their home countries. Furthermore, they come up against the barriers of language, race, and culture in the United States. They often must accept work that is low-wage and unstable, while bearing the brunt of the housing crisis.

7) After rent and food costs, the average family has \$290 in their pockets to make ends meet, with averages as low as \$63 in the Mission and \$37 in the Tenderloin.

The average income per household is \$1,316 per month, 40% of which typically goes to rent, and 38% of which goes to food for the family. On average, families have only \$290 left at the end of the month as disposable income. In the Mission District, this average is \$63, in the Tenderloin \$37, and in the SOMA, it is actually negative, as 12 families reported having more costs than income. While this may have been due to inaccuracies in accounting for all sources of income, it is also likely that families reported rent per month while they actually rent by the week, unable to afford an entire month in an SRO. Ultimately, this discrepancy may suggest the difficulties many families face in making ends meet that often lead them to homelessness.

The lowest reported incomes also corresponded to those families who had been in their hotel the shortest amount of time. For instance, the average income reported by families living in their hotel less than 28 days was \$667, as opposed to the overall average of \$1316. Had other transient families been counted, overall averages such as these would have dropped significantly.

8) In the Tenderloin and SOMA, many families cycle between SROs and the streets, shelters, and friends/relatives.

Families living in SROs must be looked at within the overall context of poverty and the lack of affordable housing in San Francisco. Of the 13 families who had lived in their SRO for less than 28 days at the time of the interviews, five had previously lived in a shelter, four had lived on the street, and two had lived in their cars. These families, and the estimated 143 more who may pass through an SRO sometime this year, are truly just one step away from homelessness. The prevalence of homelessness and the prevalence of families now living in hotels are connected phenomena, often involving the same families cycling in and out of SROs in an unending search for stability. These families, in their transience, are the most invisible and were the most likely to have been missed in our census and under represented in the interviews. For example, they may have moved out of the SRO after the census count and before the follow up interviews.

9) Half the parents reported that living in an SRO had caused health problems for them and their children.

Nearly half of the families (48%) reported that their health had been negatively impacted by living in an SRO. The most common complaint (63%) was of breathing and respiratory problems, followed by insufficient light (27%), infections due to unsanitary conditions (15%), and sleep deprivation due to noise in the hotel (13%). It should be noted that this was an open-ended question, meaning that families repeatedly responded similarly without prompting.

The Collaborative's findings are consistent with those of the Families in SROs Workgroup. For example, the report notes the particularly high incidence of TB in SROs along with "high rates of recent or current hospitalization for all causes" (Workgroup, 2001:13). Whether due to the lack of ventilation, the lack of light, the filth in the shared bathrooms, or the noise, the health of families in SROs is clearly being compromised.

Many of the health hazards with which SRO residents contend are a mere matter of neglect of maintenance and upkeep. Tenants are often uninformed about their rights to even request repairs. Families, for fear of being evicted due to having children living in the hotel, are less likely to risk complaining. As such, the unsafe living environments persist.

It was not a surprise that families did not report mental health concerns, although it is assumed that both the families' and children's psychological and emotional health would be significantly affected by the conditions in which they live. Due to cultural issues and privacy concerns, it was expected that families would not be forthcoming about this information.

10) Eighty percent of children in SROs are between the ages of newborn and twelve, with many having spent their entire lives there.

The effects on the health and development of young children living in SROs are particularly striking and cause for concern. While the vast majority (80%) of the 760 children living in SROs are between the ages of zero and twelve, 40% are between the ages of 0 and 5. Thus, many children have lived their entire lives sharing with their family the spatial equivalent of a single bedroom.

As pointed out in the report by the Families in SROs Workgroup, children in hotels are more likely to lack proper nutrition due to the difficulty in obtaining, preparing, cooking, and keeping food in the hotel. Without kitchen facilities, families are unable to prepare low-cost nutritional meals for their children, and often resort to fast food. Children are further at risk for improper physical and psychological development. In the dim cramped quarters of the family's room, a child does not have enough space for play or other normal physical activity, and is likely to be affected by caregivers' depression, anger, and general stress in coping with the living situation (Workgroup, 2001:18). Growing up under such conditions, these children are unable to reach their true potential, both in terms of their physical and psychological well-being.

11) Almost all families report that insufficient income and the lack of affordable housing keep them from moving into better housing.

Practically all families (96%) stated that they needed more space, whether in the form of separate bedrooms or a space for their children to play and to study. The vast majority would like to live in an apartment, with one family reporting that even a studio would be an improvement over what they have now. Ninety percent of families reported that insufficient income kept them from being able to move out, while 61% attributed this to the lack of affordable housing. Other barriers include move-in costs (19%), eviction histories (7%), and credit problems (6%). Whether stated in terms of insufficient income or a lack of housing, it is ultimately the lack of housing with affordable rents for low-income and working families that prevent them from moving into a better housing situation.

While we cannot be absolutely certain, the interviews suggest that evictions and displacement from the housing market may be a significant factor behind the stream of families into SROs. Seventeen percent of responding families reported that, before coming to live in an SRO, they had lived in an apartment or house, and we must ask why they ever left. Families reported an average of 5.2 years since having lived in a “stable and safe” living situation, which coincides roughly with the beginning of San Francisco’s high-tech boom and the resulting gentrification pressures. It is thus quite plausible that families experiencing the brunt of San Francisco’s recent demographic shifts find themselves with no other option than to move into an SRO. At the same time, San Francisco has failed to provide these families with any other real alternatives.

12) Families in SROs often do not know about, and lack access to, public services.

As immigrants, the majority of SRO families are unable to tap into those public services that provide a crucial safety net for other poor families. Housing is one of the areas in which they are at a particular disadvantage. For those without documents, families are ineligible for federally funded low-income housing. They further may be disqualified based on having insufficient income. The fact that so many are forced to live in SROs to provide shelter for their families evidences our society’s failure to provide appropriate alternatives. It is this lack of housing available to both documented and undocumented immigrants at low and very low-income levels, which must first and foremost be addressed.

Yet even when families are eligible for affordable housing, the process of applying is lengthy and difficult. The 28% of families who reported being on a waiting list will probably wait years before an opening becomes available, if it does at all. Furthermore, where housing and other services are available, families are not likely to be aware of them, often due to the sheer lack of information in languages other than English. Outreach workers regularly reported with surprise the families’ lack of awareness about available services, community advocacy organizations, and their rights as tenants. This is an area in which short-term remedies, such as outreach and referrals, could play a significant role.

Personal Testimonies

Tenants

While the interview forms provided a wealth of information, what was missing were the concerns of families in their own words. As such, the Collaborative decided to add the following questions to the interview session with families. Below are some of their responses:

“How did you come to live in an SRO?”

“by necessity because I couldn't find an apartment.”

“because of the lack of affordable housing.”

“I was evicted.”

“I was having problems with my manager and had to move out.”

“What are your biggest concerns about living in a residential hotel?”

“that the hotel will catch on fire and I won't be able to get out.”

“that the room is very small, there's no kitchen, and a lot of strangers pass through.”

“the infections, and that someone will burn down the hotel.”

“There's no room for the children to study.”

“The children don't have a space to play.”

“Having to share the bathrooms that daily are very dirty. The danger of the hotel catching fire. There are many drunks and drug-addicts.”

“We can't receive visits from relatives after 6pm.”

“I don't want people to look down on me for living in a hotel.”

Any other comments?

“We are living in the basement. The environmental situation is bad. I hope to have better living conditions such as two or three bedrooms to let my children have a better learning environment.”

“Currently we are 3 generations living in one unit. We would like to have a home of two bedrooms, or even better to have 3 bedrooms. I want to have a more spacious place for my children.”

“I’m waiting for a fire.”

Outreach Workers

Upon completing the project, Collaborative staff asked the team of outreach workers for impressions of life for families in the hotels which were not captured by either the census or the interviews. Below are several of the questions they were asked, followed by their responses.

“What were your impressions?”

“Poverty which the government does not desire to make public. It’s easy going into an SRO, but hard to get out into better housing. I was shocked! Some people are forced to live like dogs.”

“I saw a lot of poverty in the majority of the hotels. The families have everything – the bed, their clothing, and their food – all in the same small room. The children don’t have space to play.”

“I felt families were looking for safety in the environment they lived in, as well as better housing for themselves and their kids.”

“The families we visited, most of their rooms are so narrow...only about ten feet by eight or nine. They sleep on bunk beds. There’s no room to put a desk for their children to do homework. They have a small folding table for dining and homework. The young children have to go down the hallway to use the bathroom.”

“You kind of had to feel bad for [the families] because of how they were living. A small room with no bath or kitchen and a bunch of children cramped into a room.”

“I found that quite a few families living in SROs don’t know that there is low-income housing available. They think SROs are all they can afford. Language is also a problem for some of them. Some have to hold a few jobs just to survive in SROs and have no time to search for options.”

“There are so many people that know nothing of the organizations...The little that my co-workers and I knew, we shared with them.”

“What did the families say?”

“The majority of the families worried that the hotel would catch on fire and that they wouldn’t be able to get out.”

“The families we interviewed that have toddlers said that it’s really tough living in SROs because they have a small burner to cook with that’s dangerous to children.”

“The families say that they live in hotels by necessity, because they don’t have papers, money, or work.”

“Most families said they don’t have enough earnings to move into a better home. Rents are so high nowadays.”

“When they heard that we could help them, they were very happy and very kind to us.”

“The families were happy to see us it seemed. And they didn’t mind expressing how they felt, which was angry and frustrated.”

Outreach workers were then asked for their impressions of the work itself.

“How did you feel doing this work?”

“Very good that I was helping the people.”

“I felt very bad more than anything for the children.”

“I felt bad but I directed them to the offices and encouraged them to support us and not stop.”

“I had mixed feelings mostly for the families with kids I really cared and had concerns about. I felt I was doing something meaningful.”

“What aspects of the project did you enjoy?”

“Being with different races in a project in which everyone was equal.”

“Presenting important information to the government of which the government has implied it would rather lend a deaf ear, or suppress the facts that people are living like dogs.”

“To be able to share with my people and to feel that in some way I could help them or encourage them to be able to live better.”

“I enjoyed helping the community and low-income families to have a chance for a better living environment. They shared with us their work and are happy (some) that they have a chance, although it’s not 100% guaranteed.”

“I enjoyed talking with families and their children. Seeing the smiles on the faces of kids made me happy that I could give a little hope.”

“I enjoyed getting to know more people, talking with people and their children about my work, handing out a lot of tenant rights guides, and directing people, and I enjoyed the work that we are finishing up.”

“I personally enjoyed going hotel to hotel because I got to see what they looked like from the inside and I was surprised in a few of them. I also enjoyed seeing the people and talking with them.”

“I enjoyed everything and learned about some real life stories.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Citywide Families in SROs Collaborative recommends the following to address the needs of San Francisco's vastly underserved families living in residential hotels:

1) Protect, improve, and increase low-income affordable housing in San Francisco

Indisputably, San Francisco needs more affordable housing. The Collaborative calls for the City do the following: build low-income housing that is appropriate for families with children, protect and improve the existing affordable housing stock, advocate for more state and federal funding for low-income housing, establish community land trusts to secure sites for permanent affordable housing for low-income people, and support and fund tenant empowerment efforts so that tenants themselves are able to advocate for more affordable housing for families.

These recommendations are consistent with those of the Families in SROs Workgroup, whose report states the need to “assure parents residing in SROs and their advocates sit on all housing committees,” “expand the number of permanent housing units planned for ‘very low income’ families,” and “assure ‘very low income’ families living in SROs can compete in the low-income housing market” (Workgroup, 2001:24-25).

It could be years, realistically, before families are able to move out of SROs into decent, affordable housing. The Collaborative recommends that, in the meantime, the City ensure that loans for upgrades are provided to all SROs that qualify as non-profit housing. In Chinatown in particular, many family-owned SROs may be eligible for non-profit status and could benefit significantly from access to such loans. The Collaborative also recommends acquiring or master leasing underutilized or sub-standard apartment buildings in order to bring them up to code and set up family housing programs. The City could explore the feasibility of legalizing and upgrading the thousands of “in-law” housing units all across the City, and work to relocate families from the SROs to these units.

Yet, the problem of families living in SROs is bound to increase if we do not take action to stem the flood of evictions sweeping San Francisco and forcing families to move. As such, we need to work to stabilize families and prevent their being evicted in the first place. The Collaborative recommends that the City invest in its long-term interests by funding and otherwise supporting community organizations that do stabilization and eviction prevention work, and by setting aside emergency funds for families facing eviction or displacement.

While this initiative focused on the needs of families in hotels, the City must similarly focus attention on all very low-income families in need of decent, affordable housing. The Collaborative thus recommends that the City fund a similar community led effort to gather information on families who are living on the streets, in shelters, or in transitional housing. If not, we will miss the larger issue, and many of the same families who cycle in and out of residential hotels.

2) Improve the conditions of SROs and minimize the health and safety hazards to children

SROs clearly do not provide an ideal living situation for families with children. However, until more low-income affordable housing becomes available, they are an alternative to the streets and shelters. Conditions must improve immediately in the SROs in order to minimize health and safety hazards for all SRO tenants, but especially for the children.

Many of the health hazards faced by families and children could be prevented if the Department of Building Inspection (DBI) and the Department of Public Health (DPH) were to implement routine SRO inspections and punitive measures for SRO owners who do not comply with mandated maintenance or repairs. The Collaborative agrees with the recommendations of the Workgroup that the City “increase responsiveness and accountability of SRO hotel owners” and “responsiveness and accountability of City inspectors, planners, and enforcement,” and that landlords be forced to live in chronically sub-standard SROs (Workgroup, 2001:30). As part of this effort, the Collaborative recommends that DBI and DPH elicit family evaluations of hotel conditions, in order to ensure that inspections are addressing the priorities of SRO families.

The Collaborative recommends that the Department of Public Environmental, Mental, and Physical Health release a set of specific recommendations for the health needs of families and children in SROs, and that these recommendations be quickly incorporated into DBI inspections and the building and housing codes. For example, guidelines must be strengthened regarding light, ventilation, unit and bathroom sanitation. Out of concern for the quality of air within SROs that lack proper ventilation, the Collaborative recommends that the City make it a high priority to regulate industrial/manufacturing sites in the surrounding areas, and that new sites meet the highest environmental standards for children’s health and safety.

Moreover, families and children need information and education about their rights to live in a clean and safe environment, and their landlords’ obligations to provide this. They also need training and support to address habitability concerns as they arise, how and where to report problem, and where to receive additional support or counseling. The Collaborative recommends continued support for community programs that provide these multilingual and multicultural services that empower tenants to monitor and promote healthy and safe conditions in their SROs.

In addition to the strategy outlined above for improving hotels’ general habitability, the Collaborative wants the current SRO housing stock protected, along with the safety and well-being of its residents, by establishing an SRO Fire Prevention and Education Unit of the San Francisco Fire Department. Establishing a dedicated unit to work with the community would enhance the fire prevention and education efforts that have been implemented over the last two years. The rash of SRO fires in San Francisco in recent years that have devastated SROs and displaced hundreds of people, including families and children, cannot be allowed to continue.

3) Improve living wage work opportunities for low-income families

The fact that so many families can only afford to live in an SRO is a sign of the proliferation of low-wage jobs in the current economy. The Collaborative supports the Board of Supervisors' adoption of a Living Wage Ordinance, and wants to see it expanded beyond city workers and non-profit workers contracted with the city.

In addition to this ordinance, the Collaborative wants to see workers empowered to demand wage increases and benefits. Currently, many are unaware of their rights as workers and are readily taken advantage of. The Collaborative recommends that the City take steps to fund workers' rights education, advocacy, and organizing so that workers can ultimately have greater control over their own employment situation.

Of course, workers' rights are meaningless if people lack access to work. The City needs to increase job training that is multi-lingual, provides childcare, and is available to all regardless of their immigration status. Similarly, the City must prioritize hiring local low-income applicants for all city-funded projects following the first source hiring ordinance.

These recommendations are supported by the Workgroup's recommendation that the City "develop housing policies to support economic stability and development of families," for instance "develop[ing] incentives for builders and contractors who train and hire tenants in the improvement or building of their dwellings" (Workgroup, 2001:26).

4) Improve accessibility and availability of family and children's services that are multilingual, culturally competent, and sensitive to undocumented and documented immigrants.

Consistent with the Workgroup recommendations, the Collaborative proposes the following short-term solutions to improving the lives and mental health of SRO families and children:

Nearby kitchen facilities should be allocated to SRO families for use in cooking regular meals. After school and summer programs for children in SROs should be created to provide opportunities for play, learning, and healthy social development. Childcare programs should be established and expanded in order for SRO parents to have greater flexibility in their scheduling. Culturally appropriate materials that are designed to help families and children cope with mental health issues arising from living in a hotel should be developed and distributed. There should be increased capacity and resources in the communities to provide easy-to-access mental health and drug treatment services. Community organizations that help tenants fight social isolation and build community in their hotels, foster SRO tenant and family dialogue, and organize such events as community dinners, holiday celebrations, and children's outings, should be supported.

Also in line with the Workgroup recommendations, the Collaborative strongly urges that a multilingual and multicultural peer-based and community-based SRO Families Outreach Team be established. This Team would work with families and their children to link with existing and new services, to navigate the complicated social service and

health systems, to connect with other families and children living in SROs, and to become educated and empowered about their rights and options. The Team, including peer outreach workers, would support families to cope with their multi-layered challenges, and to get involved as leaders and advocates.

The larger issue of the lack of language and cultural accessibility that has kept many residents of SROs at a fundamental disadvantage in finding work, housing, and other services must likewise be addressed. The availability of the Section 8 housing application forms in English only is just the latest example of how a large portion of city residents are denied equal access to public housing. The Collaborative recommends that the City of San Francisco implement an equal access ordinance addressing the need for multilingual forms and documents, more culturally competent front line staff, and translation services for non-English speakers.

In addition to language and cultural barriers, the city must address the huge barrier posed to many of its residents who are not documented. The Collaborative recommends that an equal access ordinance also put an end to discrimination based on documentation, ensuring, for instance, that all eligible applicants, regardless of their immigration status, have access to public housing and social services. The Collaborative also wants to see legislation adopted that creates a local subsidy to offset the recent anti-immigrant exclusions in federal public housing eligibility requirements.

Overall, more services and improved access to appropriate services are needed to help families and children cope with the multiple stressors of living in SROs, connect with other families and children in similar circumstances for support and empowerment, and set and achieve their goals.

Attachments

