



THE SOCIAL IMPACTS OF A BED BUG INFESTATION

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SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

Living conditions—the social and material circumstances that Canadians are exposed to in their homes, workplaces, and communities—constitute a primary determinant of the health of the population.

(Dennis Raphael, 2009)



MAIN QUESTIONS:

What are the social impacts of a bed bug infestation on residents of Winnipeg's inner-city communities?

What do bed bugs mean for people who are socially and economically marginalized?



METHOD:

Twenty-six interviews conducted in the winter and spring of 2009:

- 16 inner-city residents
- 2 landlords and 1 property manager
- 5 inner-city agency workers

- One of the SSHRC/CURA-funded projects conducted as part of the “Transforming Aboriginal and Inner-city Communities” research alliance of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives–Manitoba (CCPA–MB)

<http://www.manitobaresearchalliance-tiac.ca/>



“Nothing was cleaned. Nothing. The place was like really gross and disgusting. Like, if you would have seen it you would have told the guy basically to ‘take it and stick it where the sun don’t shine’ and walked away. But we had no choice, basically. That was because of my burn and everything.”

(George)



“Each time he sloughed us off. ‘Well, we’ll do it next week’ or ‘We’ll do it next month.’ And when I couldn’t deal with it anymore—I couldn’t sleep, I was basically sleeping on just a white sheet in the middle of the floor just so I can see if there’s any bugs climbing on me or coming near me—when I got to that point that’s when I contacted Landlords and Tenants and told them the situation.” (George)



“Because of the operations and everything I was going through, most of my leg was still all unhealed. The skin grafts would still be constantly bleeding. And a couple of times I looked when I changed my dressings. I’d find them in my dressings. Like, I actually found bed bugs inside the dressing. And I’m like ‘Eeuw. They’re going straight after the blood that was dripping out of my leg.’” (George)



“This has been one heck of a learning experience, how to deal with this. And even though you get help through Landlord and Tenants or the Health Board, it’s still just affected, you know, you’re being eaten alive by these bugs and your family is being destroyed. Your kids can’t sleep. Your wife can’t sleep. You have to get rid of all your furniture and start everything over again. And you get hard times from your landlord. It’s just so stressing. I think I’ve grown at least a hundred white hairs this year alone.” (George)



“You have to buy something that’s all worn out, and a spring that you’re sleeping on—a spring that you feel—that’s what we’re sleeping on right now.”

“It’s hard to replace things, especially when you’re on social assistance.”

(Sarah)



“They are very hard to deal with these landlords, and especially when you don’t know how to talk for yourself, especially when you don’t know how to stick up for yourself, your rights and everything. Yeah. They just want to give you a hard time or fight with you on that.”

(Sarah)



Lilly: “Why does social assistance have anything to do with me getting bed bugs?”

Property Manager: “Well, if you’re on social assistance you can get bed bugs from the office because you can get them from the chairs.”



HEALTH PROBLEMS:

- “I couldn’t sleep, eat or nothing ... And I **lost weight**. My girlfriend is really worried about my weight now.”
- “I can’t remember the last good night’s sleep I’ve had.”
- “When they bite me I get an **allergic reaction** on my body.”
- “I developed an **infection**. I had to get antibiotics. They were all over me and they were just, like, really infected. Now I’ve got scars all over.”
- “Every time they spray certain people get sick in my building. They get **headaches**, they get **breathing problems**, and they get really sick for about four days.”



LOSING ALL OF YOUR BELONGINGS

- “It’s just like a **house fire**, you know, where you have to start all over.”
- “I had to **throw everything out**. And it was, like, really hard—and really stressful.”
- “I was down to **no furniture**. I was down to nothing. Nothing in the living room, couple of chairs, coffee table, a lamp. No bed, sleeping on the floor.”
- “The word is out on us, hey, that if I put on there that I’ve been three years in Manitoba Housing, most rental agencies know that we have bed bugs now. So they’ll tell you ‘If you move in here you can’t bring anything with you. **You got to buy totally new stuff.**’”



SOCIAL STIGMA

- “When I told my friends that I had bed bugs and, like, they didn’t want to come over because of the bed bugs.”
- “I think if a person is to talk to somebody else they’d say ‘Oh, don’t let that guy in the house. He’s got bed bugs. Don’t let him in.’ That’s why I don’t think people are talking. That’s what I fear.”
- “I hate being marked, like, **blacklisted**. Like, people think we’re going to infect you or something.”



SOCIAL ISOLATION

- “I was always afraid to go somewhere, because what if I drop a bed bug somewhere?”
- “I don’t want people to come to my house, ‘cause I’m scared to get them.”
- “I didn’t realize how much it has an impact on you. It **isolates** you. It **damages relationships.**”
- “Believe it or not, it’s caused **feuds** between people in my building. It’s caused **fight**s. Actually there are people that are not talking to each other, that don’t talk to each other anymore.”



IMPACT ON IDENTITY

- “I felt really, really **dirty** because of those bites all over.”
- “I felt **degraded**. I felt **sick**. I felt just, like, burn everything. Just burn it and get rid of it.”
- “I’m becoming **obsessed** too. Like, I’m washing, continually washing clothes—with money I don’t have—all the time, over and over.”
- “People ask me, ‘Do you got AIDs or something? Do you got bugs?’ You got bites and you got marks all over you. Think about that. All the **stigma** that comes with that. I’ll tell you the truth. It really bothers me.”
- “The way I see it, it looks, it seems like there is no light at the end of the tunnel. I just feel so **beat**. ... I just feel, like, **cornered**.”



RESPONSE OF SOME LANDLORDS

- “My landlord didn’t believe me that I had bed bugs.”
- “I told the caretaker and I kept on bugging him. And they didn’t want to do anything about it. So I just kept on phoning and phoning to see who I can contact to do anything about it.”
- “If you’re branded with bed bugs you can’t get a place in a good agency. You’re going to have to go to one of these slum lords if you move out.”



AWARENESS OF THE SOCIAL STIGMA

The tenants' response "tends to be fairly meek, apologetic, and as if they're feeling embarrassed about letting us know. So at first contact I assure them that it has nothing to do with them, it's a worldwide problem, it's becoming a bigger problem in Winnipeg ... that it's not any indication of whether they're good people or dirty people, it's just a bug that comes and something needs to be done about it once it's there."

(Landlord)



CO-OPERATION IS ESSENTIAL

Landlords: are legally responsible for getting rid of an insect infestation on their properties.

Tenants: are legally responsible for keeping a unit in a state that complies with health standards and so must not prohibit the landlord from taking the necessary steps in meeting their obligation under the Health Act.



PUBLIC EDUCATION:

- More accurate knowledge on how bed bugs behave will help to dispel **myths** (cleanliness is not the issue) and reduce the **social stigma** that both tenants and rental agencies experience
- More accurate knowledge about effective **treatment** and **prevention** strategies will assist in reducing the incidence of bed bug infestations



PROTOCOLS FOR INFESTED FURNITURE

- “You should see all the mattresses and bed bugs behind my apartment—old mattresses, blankets. And you still see people, you know, going through the dumpster, taking clothes, like they’re shopping. Like, my God. I told one guy, like ‘You’re bringing, people are bringing bed bugs in here.’”
- “I saw a caretaker last year. He was taking in furniture like you wouldn’t believe and giving it away. He worked for Manitoba Housing. They’re full of bed bugs there. All those caretakers take all that furniture and they give it to people, they sell it.”
- “This guy was giving out furniture, giving out clothing, went right in the dumpster taking the garbage out, giving it to people, thinking he was helping people but he was giving away bed bugs.”



NAMING AND FRAMING THE PROBLEM: BED BUGS ARE SERIOUS THREAT TO PUBLIC HEALTH

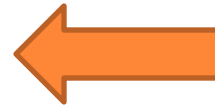
Encountering Bed Bugs



Social stigma, Social
isolation, Stress



Compromised Health



**Social and
Economic
Marginalization**
(lack of resources
and control over
living conditions)



Thank you for listening!

