

HOUSING

STUDENT SLUMS

Vermin, broken locks and unethical landlords are a few of the trials faced by students looking for affordable housing, but some schools are trying to make things better

BY MARK BROWN • There are familiar sights in most student neighbourhoods. Typically, these areas close to campus are filled with old, ramshackle homes, overgrown yards, discarded furniture and perhaps a student or two unconscious on a front lawn. But near York University, the student hood looks instead like a typical, well-maintained upper-middle-class Toronto neighbourhood, filled with tightly wound streets and large, modern brick homes.

As far as off-campus housing goes, it seems, on the surface at least, like a student paradise. And yet, according to *Maclean's* annual student survey, York's students were the most critical of their off-campus rental options, with 12 per cent describing their rentals as poor and another two per cent describing them as awful. Allison Pirnat is one of the disenchanted. The third-year human resources student has a litany of complaints about housing options near York, but the simplest deficiency is the most jarring: she can't lock her front door.

Welcome to student living.

Going away for school is an exciting time, but many students are not fully prepared for the substandard places they reluctantly call home. Mouldy and musty rooms, cramped spaces, faulty locks, poor ventilation, suspect wiring and stained and burn-marked carpets are among the common fixtures of many student rentals. The problems don't end there. Some will encounter quarrelsome and inattentive landlords who count on students not knowing their rights or being unwilling to fight back. Rough rentals have always been part of university life, but schools and cities are now trying to make housing safer and more comfortable.

"Housing affordability for post-secondary students is an ongoing challenge, and most especially in larger cities with higher housing



Pirnat's apartment, above, has a long list of problems, including the fact that she can't lock her front door. Biro's basement, right, has ongoing mould issues and dangling wires.

costs, like Toronto," says Barbara Joy, the director of media relations for York.

Meanwhile, students not only put up with bad conditions, but return to these same rentals for the duration of their schooling. Experience tells them no matter how hard they look, they are unlikely to find anything better—at least at a price they can afford.

AN UNKEMPT FRONT yard—unusual for York Village—offers the only clue that the place Pirnat has called home for the past two years is a student rental. The front door opens to a small foyer, with two wooden doors on adjacent walls, each secured by a flimsy bronze doorknob lock. The basement has three bedrooms, a bath and kitchen. There are six more bedrooms upstairs, including a pair carved from a dining and living room.

One of those bedrooms doesn't even have an exterior window, according to Pirnat. Instead, the landlord installed sliding glass above the door frames in the hall to allow ambient light in.

Pirnat never even saw the house before she moved in. When she couldn't get time off her summer job, she sent her mom to York

to scope out places. The listing claimed the house predominantly targeted female renters and was exclusively for students, but she says it was mostly hosting men in their 30s and 40s. To the best of her knowledge, none were students.

As many as 10 people lived in the house last year, says Pirnat. Under Ontario provincial law, any home renting to more than four individuals is a rooming house. While rooming houses are legal in parts of the city, such areas do not exist near any of Toronto's post-secondary institutions, according to Toronto Fire Services deputy chief Jim Jessop.

Between 2010 and 2016, eight fires in illegal rooming houses claimed the lives of 10 people in Toronto. At least half of those fires were in areas near York University and Humber College, says Jessop. Despite these deaths, Toronto Fire continues to find dangerous rooming houses around colleges and university campuses. In the past 22 months, Toronto Fire has issued notices to the owners of 35 rooming houses near York and Humber. It's a challenging situation, given the demand for student housing.

And they're not going away. If anything, Toronto's Affordable Housing Action Plan

2010-2020 calls for an increase in multi-tenant homes, albeit ones that are properly licensed. There hasn't been a fire in a licensed rooming house since 2010, and with home and rental prices so high, rooming houses fill an important gap in the marketplace, particularly for students, seniors, new immigrants and low- or moderate-income individuals.

More licensed multi-tenant homes won't hurt, but Luisa Sotomayor, an assistant lecturer in environmental studies at York University, fears students will still fall through the cracks. Many of the existing rules and regulations designed to protect renters don't really apply to students, explains Sotomayor, who is part of a team of researchers from four Toronto-area schools studying student housing. She points to rules that prevent landlords from raising rents by more than a set amount per year. Since students are more likely to sign an annual contract and move on, they don't benefit from these protections.

In the meantime, concerns remain over illegal rooming houses, many of which are safety hazards. The most common deficiencies are the absence of smoke alarms, carbon monoxide alarms and the required number of exits, says Jessop.

One of the worst offenders Jessop can

recall wasn't far from where Pirnat lives. "What stands out most in my mind is the sheer number of individuals who were living on the third floor and in the basement without a second exit," he says. There were 17 students crammed into the house. "That candidly appalled me."

No one knows how many student rooming houses there are in Toronto, but a recent report from Winnipeg by Councillor Janice Lukes suggested there were more than 150 around the University of Winnipeg. That's a lot considering Winnipeg is a more affordable city than Toronto, and that the school is a fraction of the size of Toronto's big schools.

Security is another major concern near any campus, and the neighbourhood around York is no exception. Almost a quarter of students living off campus expressed some level of concern about the safety of their neighbourhood. York Heights, an area that encompasses York University and the village, had 97 break and enters in 2016.

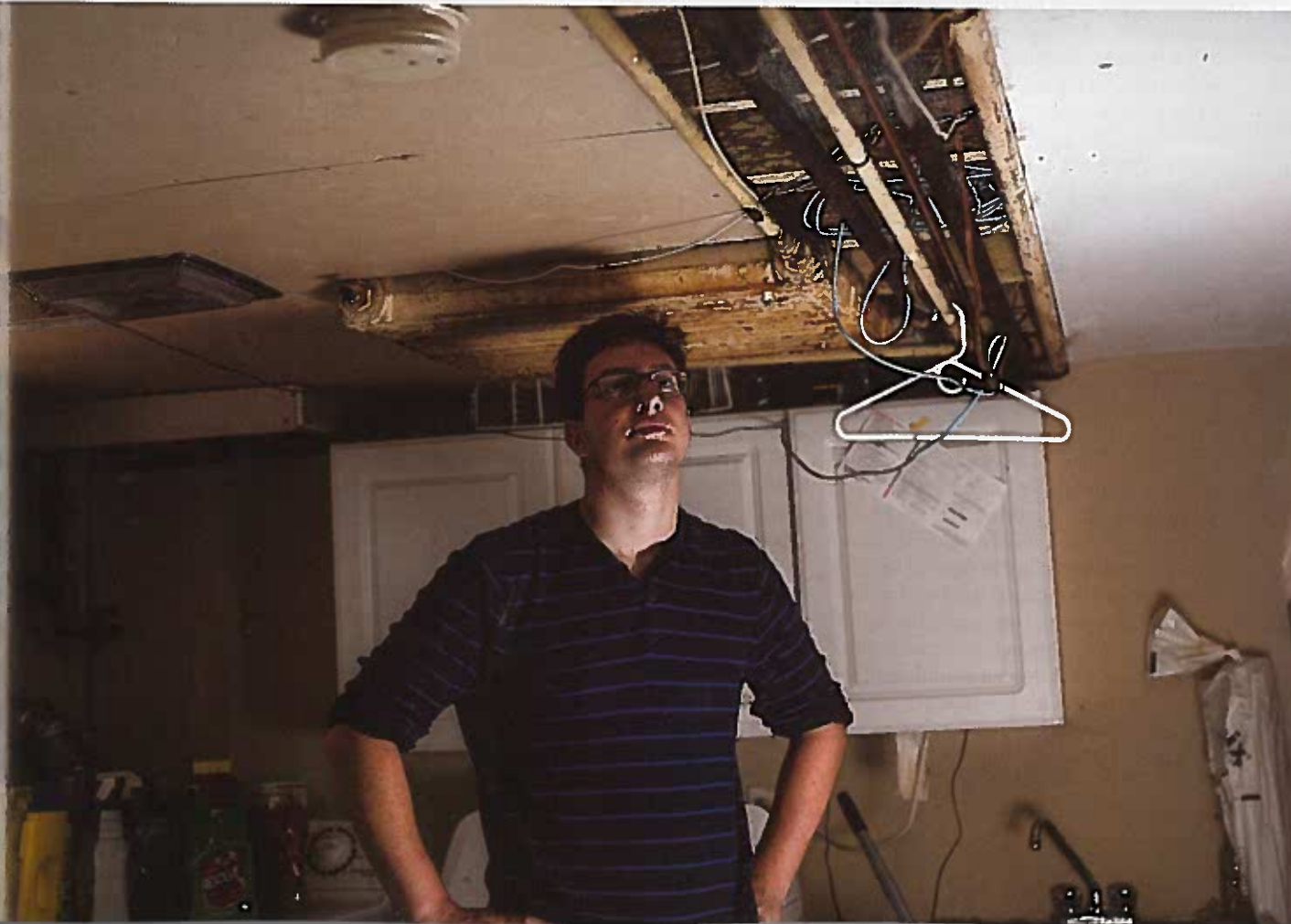
Figures like that make Pirnat's inability to lock her front door with a deadbolt even more alarming. While it can be locked from the inside, keys don't work in it anymore. Given that anyone who locks the door must be willing to go downstairs and unlock it, the entry

never gets locked. The landlord has resisted changing it because it would mean printing nine new keys, Pirnat says.

As frustrated as Pirnat is with her rental, the place doesn't seem all that bad to the casual observer. But many of the problems only reveal themselves after living there for a while, such as how the reconfiguration of the house disrupts air circulation, resulting in wild temperature swings from space to space.

In the bathroom, the grout is spotted with mould. On-site laundry facilities that were promised never arrived. And she's often asked to help new tenants move in—all for \$550 a month.

SUBPAR OFF-CAMPUS STUDENT housing is not a problem unique to York. According to the *Maclean's* annual student survey, more than 10 per cent of students who live off-campus describe their rentals as substandard or poor. Their most common complaints are with the state of repair, including everything from appliances to plumbing, and cleanliness, including issues with pests. And as Jeremy Biro at McMaster can attest, escaping the student hood doesn't mean you'll avoid these problems. The house Biro rents out with up to eight others is in a well-kept area



on the opposite side of campus from where most student rentals are. It's on a street lined with trimmed hedges and perfect gardens that runs straight to the main gates of campus. But being in a nicer part of town doesn't mean a better house.

An old bar fridge, used mattresses and discarded furniture are strewn across the backyard. Inside, grease and dirt blacken a white oven in the kitchen and surrounding tile floor. It's a mess, but not unlike what you'd expect from an unsanctioned fraternity house (McMaster doesn't allow frats, so it's not an officially registered organization).

As messy as the property is, most of the problems are found in the basement. "It's a short, kind of sketchy basement," he says. Two of the three rooms below ground are tiny, and one of them gets mould on the walls every few years.

In a shared common area in the basement, occupants dodge wires that dangle at neck level. This is a particular concern for Biro given there is a flood at least once a year due to overflowing toilets and outdated plumbing.

And because the frat manages the rentals, the landlord shirks his responsibility to clean between tenants, says Biro. He feels the landlord should be doing more, but adds that he isn't sure what is required. "There is no way for us to know what our rights are and when we are being taken advantage of," he says. "I believe some of the things that I don't like are well within his rights, but I'm pretty sure a lot of them are not."

SOME STUDENTS MAY not know if they are being taken advantage of, but Veronica Hendrick-Lockyer isn't one of them.

For the past 14 years, Hendrick-Lockyer single-handedly raised four kids while living below the poverty line. Throughout that time, she dedicated herself to helping other at-risk mothers and children. But it was a three-bedroom rat-and-cockroach-infested apartment in Toronto's east end that nearly drove her to give up on her dream of getting a degree.

Finding a place that was big enough to accommodate her, her four adult kids, a dog and a cat was an exhausting task. She had no credit rating, and without a signed lease, her son was unable to enrol in high school. She was desperate by the time she found a place. Needing to move in right away, she agreed to the landlord's demands for three months' rent and a security deposit even though she knew those payments were illegal.

Despite being more than an hour and a half by bus and subway from York, it was the best of the affordable options available to her. She looked closer to the school, but



Biro's shared house features a pile of old mattresses and discarded furniture in the yard

she describes the places she could afford as terrifying. "Around York is the scariest I've ever been in," she says. "They were showing us places where people were still in them with garbage and filth all over the floors."

Other students might have caved to the landlords, but Hendrick-Lockyer isn't the type to back down. In the two years she's lived in the apartment, she has endured intimidation from the landlord's representative.

Power was illegally cut off one May when she was told she never paid her bill. In court, she was accused of damaging new carpet when no such work was done. When the landlord's representative visits her unit, he seems more interested in her possessions than looking at the problems, she claims. And she came home to eviction notices plastered in the hallway of her building and on her door when she was slightly behind on her rent.

When Hendrick-Lockyer isn't battling her landlord in court, she is at war with cockroaches and rats. She bleaches her kitchen countertops every morning and stores all her food, right down to her spices, in the fridge in an attempt to keep pests away.

It's been hard on Hendrick-Lockyer's family too. Her daughter, Sammantha, who is a recent graduate of a program run by Seneca College at York, says the family's living arrangements kept her from enjoying university to its fullest. "I felt like I couldn't connect with a lot of my peers because my problems are completely different from my peers," she says, although

she's not using poverty as an excuse. "If I'm not working toward something, I'm going to be living in poverty for the rest of my life."

Now that her two daughters are ready to live on their own, Hendrick-Lockyer hopes to find a spot in residence where she and her son can live with their dog, Junebug. She credits her program director and staff from the university for helping her get through some of the challenges she faced in her rental.

UNIVERSITIES WRESTLE WITH how to address off-campus housing, especially since it's a matter they have little control over. Yet they recognize it has a significant effect on the student experience. Pirnat, for one, doubts she would have gone to York had she known more about the lack of affordable and high-quality off-campus housing options.

To better understand this challenge, Ryerson, the University of Toronto, York and OCAD U have just launched a comprehensive two-year study into student housing in a project dubbed StudentDwellTO. This study follows up on the concerns identified in an earlier report on student travel behaviour. Among the findings of the transit report was that the amount of hardship students are willing to endure to stay close to class increases when campuses are more isolated. This is a particular

'There is no way for us to know what our rights are and when we are being taken advantage of'

challenge for York, given its situation in the north of Toronto (although the school hopes the subway extension that's about to open will alleviate that concern).

York is one of several schools that offer support programs to help students

learn their rights as tenants. Starting this fall, the university is also going into its residences to educate students about what they can do to protect themselves when they enter the off-campus housing market. It also goes door-to-door in student neighbourhoods to provide useful information and recently opened an 812-bedroom housing building, run by a third party, to give students more options.

Toronto Fire Services is getting more proactive too. Starting next spring, Toronto Fire will launch a pilot project at Humber College to teach students about the fire code. "We are trying to arm the individuals and parents with the information they need as they leave residence," says Jessop.

The question is whether students will take advantage of these programs. Despite their complaints, Pirnat and Biro both say they have no intention of moving. ♦