

Factual – Measured - Critical

### How Spare are Bedroom-Tax Rooms?

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With effect from April 2013, the UK government changed the rules governing 'housing benefit' <https://www.gov.uk/housing-benefit> reducing the amount that people on low incomes can claim to assist with their rent. One change affected people below retirement age living in housing rented from social landlords, council or housing association owned property, with one or more 'unoccupied' bedrooms. Their eligible rent was reduced by 14% for one empty room and 25% for two or more. Opponents dubbed the policy a 'bedroom tax', a description now widely used.

Now both a person living alone and a couple occupying a two bedroom home are deemed to have one unoccupied room. The stated rationale for the policy is to address housing shortage by encouraging a better match between occupants and rooms. However, the trend towards more people living alone would have to be reversed or many more one-bedroom homes would need to be built for such a fit to be possible (There are of course people other than those discussed here who are adversely effected by the 'bedroom tax' disabled people and couples not wishing to share a room, would be two such examples).

Recent research provides insight into the uses of those apparently unoccupied rooms. Reflections here draw on secondary analysis of the Scottish Household Survey, a large random sample of Scottish households, and on interviews with a sample of 140 men and women aged 25-44 year old, from those identified as living alone, one-person households, in large urban, remote small town and rural areas in the Scottish Household Survey. This ESRC funded research *Rural and Urban Solo Living* was conducted with my colleagues Fran Wasoff and Roona Simpson and publications include the book *Living Alone* (Palgrave, 2013). I am also drawing on earlier research, *Cool with Change*, conducted with Gill Hight on children's experience of living through family change including their father setting up home alone elsewhere.

Not surprisingly people who live alone are more likely to live in a one-bedroom property than people living with others, but those who do so are a minority, even among those who live alone. Among people of working-age, about two-thirds of those who live alone have two or more bedrooms. This is not just because the housing stock has relatively few one-bedroom homes, although that is an important factor, but also because of the popularity of the spare room.

Research on people age 25-44 identified as living alone found most of them talking about how the spare room was important in sustaining their personal relationships. For example, among young women, spare rooms were sometimes used to enable a friend to join them on a 'night out' without worry about getting home safely. Among the geographically mobile men and women living some distance from the place they grew up, the spare room was used to host longer visits from parents, siblings and friends. Without a spare room, either the guests must find the cost of bed and breakfast or a holiday let, something that not all

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can afford, or somebody had to sleep in makeshift arrangements in a living room or kitchen. These examples begin to show how the spare room can be a key part of maintaining a hospitable home and social connection to friends and family for the growing population of people living alone.

The population of working-age people living alone in the UK is diverse and includes people with low incomes and affluent high earners. Among men living alone, the proportion who are relatively disadvantaged - living on benefit and in social housing, sometimes with serious health problems and in areas of multiple deprivation - is higher than among men living with others. Rates of occupancy of council housing are high among people living alone, particularly men in urban areas.

The Scottish Household Survey for 2011 shows that among working-age people living alone in urban areas 40% of men and 31% of women are renting from public or social landlords. The equivalent figure for those in rural areas are 27% for men and 23% for women. The council occupiers in our interview sample had typically been on a housing list for years before getting a home, had taken the first home offered and whether it had two bedrooms or one was not necessarily of their choosing.

People move in and out of living alone but the longer people live alone, the more comfortable it tends to feel. If a spare room helps people to lead socially rich lives in young and middle-age adulthood, this may also impact on how they feel living alone in older age. Another category of people who are obviously potentially disadvantaged by the 'bedroom tax' are families with parents on low incomes in council housing who are not designated as their children's main carer, but are using a spare room to create a space for their child or children.

Some sense of the difficulties is conveyed by fathers living alone and by the accounts of children living through the family change of parental separation. There are many fathers and a few mothers who are living alone yet actively parenting school-age children primarily living elsewhere. They typically want their children to be able to stay overnight, and a common pattern is to have children every other weekend. Some organise their home mainly as a home for their children, designating the spare room as the child or children's room and describing themselves as keeping it ready for them.

Parents parenting across households who do not have a spare room typically express regret and frustration at its absence and complain of the impact on their relationships with their children. Interviews threw up graphic accounts of difficulties of hosting and entertaining children in a small one-bedroom home. Some described the possibilities of tensions between children in enforced close proximity, for example, blow-up beds taking up the floor space: 'yes, it's like a war zone in here at weekends sometimes'. Then there were parent's accounts of their own makeshift sleeping arrangements when a child occupies the only bed.

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Children are often seeking reassurance that they are still important to the parent who now no longer lives with them. In this context a spare room or its absence might become both a symbolic and a material representation of a child's home and relationship. The absence of the spare room might materialise a child's uncertainty about their continued place in their parent's life and the feeling that the relationship cannot be taken for granted. A non-resident father without a spare room, then, might rightly feel under particular pressure to demonstrate his children's significance in his life by heroic efforts on each visit. On the other hand, the spare room as the child's room – complete with a resident pile of clothes, shoes and toys – might materialises the idea of a home or at least a home-from-home and the child's place in their second-home and parent's life. The spare room contributes to children and their non-resident parent, usually their father, sustaining positive relationships and its absence makes this more difficult in obvious, nuanced and subtle ways.

The promotion of radically different forms of housing is not on the government's agenda, but is time to rethink how to address 'under occupancy' in ways that support families and relationships conducted across households and also address 'carbon footprints'? Advocates of co-operative housing might argue that it is possible to devise forms of housing that combine exclusive occupancy of a low-rent, highly energy-efficient low carbon homes with their own front door and free or minimal cost access to rooms for visitors.

Could housing-allocation and room-booking policies be developed in a framework of collective responsibilities enabling all to sustain socially rich lives backed up by access to a spare-room as needed and for friends, family and especially for regularly visiting children - thus enabling them to feel they have a secure place in the lives of their parent?

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