

Home Takeover: A Review of the Literature

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Introduction

Home takeovers have been observed by service providers and residents in and around Owen Sound, Ontario, but the phenomenon has not been studied or quantified at the local level. In the absence of formalized local knowledge about home takeovers, this literature search was conducted to inform the development of a multi-stakeholder Home Takeover Response Framework, as part of a pilot project specifically aimed at supporting low-income tenants living in rent-geared-to-income (social) housing in Owen Sound. The question guiding the research asked, *what, if anything, is known about best practices in the prevention of, response to, and recovery from home takeovers among low-income tenants?* A complete search strategy summary is found in Appendix A.

Defining Home Takeovers

The term home takeover describes a situation in which a legitimate tenant or home owner is forced to accommodate unwanted guests in their home (The Dream Team, n.d.; Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2020). A home takeover begins when a perpetrator exploits a vulnerable individual's unmet social, economic, and personal needs by initially offering to fulfill these needs in exchange for access to the property. Benefits conferred to the legitimate occupant are reduced over time, and ultimately they find themselves unsafe physically, financially, or psychologically because of the presence of others in their home that they may or may not be able to remove (Weissman et al., n.d.; Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2013). There are several terms used to describe these occurrences, but home takeover is used in this paper due to its applications in the Canadian context.

Much of the peer reviewed literature (5 of 6 articles reviewed) around this issue is set in the United Kingdom (UK), and focuses on a particular form of home takeover called cuckooing. Cuckooing involves criminal takeovers of the homes of vulnerable individuals for use in drug distribution (Spicer, 2021), and is "a term signifying an unwelcome or unwanted intruder after the nest invading tendencies of cuckoo birds" (Spicer, Moyle & Coomber, 2020, pp. 302). Cuckooing has become associated with a drug supply model called County Lines in the UK, which involves urban drug suppliers expanding their markets into rural regions (Spicer, 2021; Spicer et al., 2020; Holligan, McLean & McHugh, 2020; Moyle, 2019).

Spicer et al. (2020) highlight four typologies of cuckooing as part of an analysis of the practice and the experiences of those affected:

- 1) The first typology is called *parasitic nest invading*, and occurs when the perpetrator invades the home under false pretenses or with force. Individuals with vulnerabilities such as mental illness, disability or old age are often the targets affected by this form of cuckooing.
- 2) *Quasi-cuckooing* is the second typology and involves some willingness and consent for perpetrators to enter the home. Many of the targets are under the impression that the arrangement involves "reciprocal renting" (i.e., paying rental fees in drugs). Despite mutual benefits, targets eventually become uncomfortable. Perpetrators may also use deception or false pretense to take over the home. For example, they do not fully reveal their full intentions for staying or suggest that their stay would be time limited.
- 3) The third typology *coupling* involves sexual relationships with female residents as part of the process of gaining access to the home. The power and desire for love, as well as substance dependency keep targets compliant.

- 4) The last typology is *local cuckooing beyond county lines*, the focus of which is on local cuckooing where perpetrators use and exploit other people's homes within their own communities as a means to protect themselves from law enforcement. Perpetrators may use the home to sell or store drugs, store firearms and weapons, or grow cannabis. In this case, the targets may even be the parent(s) of the perpetrator.

Who is involved?

There are two parties to a home takeover: the person or people taking over a unit, and the rightful occupant of that unit. Given the focus on cuckooing in the UK context, from which much of the literature in this review is derived, perpetrators are predominantly seen as engaging in home takeovers to support their business interests in the illicit drug market (Spicer, 2021; Spicer et al., 2020; Holligan et al., 2020; Moyle, 2019). In the Canadian context however, two distinct sub-groups of people have been identified as committing home takeovers. Firstly, and similar to the above, is the business predator who commits home takeovers in order to make money, typically through illegal activity and potentially involving organized crime (The Dream Team, n.d.). Conversely, there is the vulnerable perpetrator who engages in home takeover to fulfill their own unmet socioeconomic needs (*ibid.*).

People who are targeted in home takeovers have vulnerabilities that perpetrators can see and exploit. Perpetrators are most likely to target people who use substances, have disabilities or mental health problems, are immigrants, or were recently/formerly homeless (Spicer, 2021; Spicer et al., 2020; Holligan et al., 2020; Moyle, 2019). People with substance use disorders are disproportionately targeted in home takeovers because of the social exclusion, deprivation, and criminalization they face as a result of stigma related to their substance use (Spicer, 2021). Women, single mothers and low-income women with children are also identified as vulnerable to home takeovers (Moyle, 2019; Holligan et al., 2020; The Dream Team, 2015). Elderly people may also be targeted (Spicer et al., 2020; Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2013), and this population is especially vulnerable to victimization through financial exploitation (Spicer et al., 2020). Having prior life experience of neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse, as well as lack of safe, stable home environment now or in the past increases vulnerability to home takeover (Leister Safeguarding Adults Board, n.d.). Findings from a Toronto study suggested that many tenants are unaware that their personal vulnerabilities make them more susceptible to a home takeover, and they are unable to avoid or escape the perpetrator due to lack of supports and resources (The Dream Team, 2015). Seen across the aforementioned vulnerabilities are the predisposition to loneliness, isolation, marginalization, lack of sense of belonging (The Dream Team, 2015; Holligan et al., 2020).

How it Happens

The circumstances of each individual home takeover are unique, however they do share some common features. Often a property is occupied (i.e., has someone residing within) when home takeover occurs. Occupants are often coerced or threatened into allowing access to the residence (Spicer et al., 2020), which may look like the perpetrator establishing a relationship with the occupant or offering something that person needs in order to access their home (Leister Safeguarding Adults Board, n.d.). The perpetrator may initially offer money, a sense of belonging (Holligan et al., 2020), or fulfill other previously unmet social/economic needs of the target. The perpetrator may also exploit the target's substance dependency in order to enter the home by offering free drugs at first, only to later force the target into participating in the criminal activities for the benefit of the perpetrator (Spicer et al., 2020).

As above, in most cases, people who are committing home takeovers target those who are the most vulnerable in society. While a home takeover may begin under the pretense of mutual benefit, the benefits conferred to the target early in this relationship are reduced or become outweighed by harms over time. It is also possible that an abandoned or unoccupied property may be taken over (Spicer et al., 2020), though that is not the focus of this review.

Harms and Impacts of Home Takeover

The consequences of home takeover are numerous. Direct consequences of a home takeover may include eviction, loss of housing, criminal charges, financial cost, safety issues, theft, and loss of control of their home. People who have their homes taken over can be exposed to an array of threats, violence, coercion, abuse and exploitation, all of which are associated with serious mental and physical health impacts (Smith, 2017; The Dream Team, 2015; Spicer et al., 2020; Holligan et al., 2020; Moyle, 2019). When a perpetrator engages in illegal activity within the unit that has been taken over, the rightful tenant is put at risk of illegal act eviction, which sees a tenant evicted irrespective of their level of involvement or non-involvement with the criminal activity because those activities are occurring within their home (Smith, 2017). Eviction can be catastrophic to a vulnerable tenant, particularly if they lose their place in subsidized housing. More personally, a target may experience consequences such as loss of their dignity, self-esteem, self-control and power (Dream Team 2015; Spicer et al., 2020). Also documented in the cuckooing literature are incidences of sexual exploitation and forced labour (Spicer et al., 2020). Children and youth are not excluded from these harms and may be exploited to support the drug trade (Spicer et al., 2020; Holligan et al., 2020; Moyle, 2019), made to commit thefts, store illegal goods, or take action against debtors (Spicer et al., 2020; Holligan et al., 2020). For children, the home and neighbourhood are crucial in development and mental health. Comeau et al. (2021) suggest there is an association between inadequate housing and the impact on child mental health.

Negative impacts of home takeovers go beyond those experienced by the individual targeted. Crime Prevention Ottawa (2020a) notes that home takeovers are often reported as co-occurring with dangerous, disorderly, and noisy conduct that interferes with the well-being of neighbours. Mental health problems in children appear to be exacerbated by living in neighbourhoods characterized by high levels of antisocial behavior (i.e., violence and victimization) (Comeau et al., 2021). Neighbourhood antisocial behavior such as increasing violence or victimization whether it is directly through personal experience or indirectly by witnessing the experiences of others, may elicit fear and stress in children or encourage “maladaptive” behaviours as a result of peer influences (Comeau et al., 2021).

Preventing Home Takeovers

Efforts to prevent home takeovers involve consideration of various factors and require personalization to client needs. Prevention may focus on both actions taken by service providers and actions taken by people potentially vulnerable to home takeover. Crime Prevention Ottawa (2013) recommends that service providers identify tenants with vulnerabilities that make them more susceptible to home takeovers early, at the outset of their tenancy if possible. Support services that clients are being connected to should address their unique vulnerabilities and assist them in maintaining a safe and positive home environment (Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2013; 2020a) on an ongoing and long term basis (Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2013; The Dream Team, n.d.). A good relationship between a client and their worker is also protective (Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2020; The Dream Team, n.d.). Information sharing

agreements that allow various services to communicate about particular clients can support prevention (Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2013; 2020b). Successful prevention efforts will look different based on the perspectives of the various service providers involved; a social worker may be interested in keeping their client safe and out of trouble, while police may be more concerned with appropriate criminal sanctions where the law has been broken (Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2013). Success may also be defined by the client achieving their own goals with regard to maintaining their home.

There are several actions that clients can take, supported by the appropriate services, to keep themselves safe from home takeovers. Firstly, clients need to be aware of the risks and consequences of home takeovers, as well as know how to keep their home safe (Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2020a). Building client capacity to avoid home takeovers may include: discussing what home takeovers are, what they look like and how to avoid them; helping the client make a plan around their goals for their home and how to achieve them (Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2020; The Dream Team, n.d.); and providing resistance training for setting personal boundaries (Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2020b; The Dream Team, n.d.). If client vulnerabilities include substance use, education about how to safely use substances in their home may be helpful (Crime Prevention, 2020b). Ensuring that the individual feels part of a larger community reduces isolation, and thus vulnerability. Community can mean many things, so clients should be encouraged to participate in a community they identify with (Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2020b; The Dream Team, n.d.). Finally, an emergency plan co-created by a tenant and their support worker can be made proactively for use in case of later warning signs (The Dream Team, n.d.).

Identifying Home Takeovers

Although challenging to recognize, having flags for early identification of home takeovers may help get interventions implemented before perpetrators become established (Spicer et al., 2020). People with personal connections to a target, such as a neighbour, friend, or family member are well positioned to act as resources in identifying home takeovers. Warning signs may include changes in who accesses the property, including increases in people entering and leaving, increases in cars or bikes outside, people coming and going at strange times, and uncharacteristic presence of young people at the property (The Dream Team, 2015; Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2020a; Leister Safeguarding Adults Board, n.d.). Change in tenant behavior may also indicate the occurrence of a home takeover, but can take several forms. For example, if the person who lives there has not been seen recently or, when seen, they have been anxious or distracted that may be a warning sign (Leister Safeguarding Adults Board, n.d.; Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2020a; Weissman et al., n.d.). Other concerning changes include: unexplained new money, clothes, or mobile phones; excessive receipt of texts or calls, relationships with controlling/older individuals or groups; gang association or isolation from social networks; self-harm or significant changes in emotional well-being; or unexplained injuries (Leister Safeguarding Adults Board, n.d.).

Home takeovers can be difficult to identify, especially for service providers. A service provider may have reason to suspect a home takeover if they notice an individual isn't checking in as they normally would, is noticeably absent from the unit, or becomes reluctant to have the worker into their home (Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2020a). If allowed access to the unit, its contents may suggest that there are more people staying in the unit than are known to reside there, or in some cases, the takeover perpetrator may be present (*ibid.*). The landlord or property manager may receive an increase in complaints about the unit, particularly with regard to excessive visitors and noise (*ibid.*). Finally, while warning signs listed above may be indicative of a home takeover, they may alternatively be suggestive of other unmet

needs, particularly when exhibited by vulnerable community members (Leister Safeguarding Adults Board, n.d.). Providing support in response to such needs being exhibited by community members is, as discussed above, protective against potential future home takeover (*ibid.*).

Responding to Home Takeovers

Efforts to intervene in and resolve home takeovers require situation-specific tailoring. Actionable strategies for on-the-ground response are drawn primarily from the grey literature and focus predominantly on resolving the situation in the favour of the target, with due attention to safety and protecting the tenancy (Weissman et al, n.d.; Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2020a The Dream Team, n.d.). The target's circumstances, needs, and strengths require consideration in the formation of a response (Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2020a; 2020b). The target's conceptualization of their situation, as well as their willingness to collaborate with service providers and supports will also impact the intervention approach.

Practically, intervention can begin as soon as a takeover is identified. Supporting the person being targeted to understand that they are experiencing a home takeover can increase their willingness to participate in remediation efforts. People may also be motivated to participate in resolution by considering how something they care about is being affected. If the target and service provider have had earlier conversations about home takeovers, referring to the plans, goals and boundaries set previously may also promote and guide action. If there have not been earlier conversations, the tenant should be educated about their rights, responsibilities and consequences they could face if the situation goes unresolved. In any case, meeting privately to discuss the takeover in a place that the perpetrator or others will not overhear is protective of the target's safety (The Dream Team, n.d.).

Perpetrators may be motivated to leave a unit if they find it is becoming less and less comfortable. Service providers, including police and landlords, can work together to achieve this aim. Service providers may post notices around the neighbourhood or drop fliers at each unit that indicate suspicious activity is being watched, without singling out the unit of concern (The Dream Team, n.d.). Service providers or landlords may work with police/security to increase security measures with security cameras or safety audits (*ibid.*). Service providers may also visit the home at different times of day, citing an artificial noise complaint as the reason for the visit, if needed. In consultation with the target, service providers may also issue official-looking letters with messages that the unit is being watched or that the tenancy is at risk. Crime Prevention Ottawa (2020a) cautions that this approach should be used judiciously if there is not intent to follow through on threatened action, as called bluffs may embolden the perpetrator.

Planning for recovery is the final part of the response process. The target should be central to the development of their own recovery plan. Depending on the needs of the target, recovery may be centred on making their home liveable again by changing locks, repairing any damage, cleaning, and making a plan to replace essentials that were stolen or destroyed. Arrangements to deal with any financial implications, such as rent arrears, will need to be made. Crucial to the recovery process is putting plans in place to prevent the individual from being re-victimized: having friends, family, and/or a support worker check in regularly, and ensuring the factors that made this individual vulnerable to predation are mitigated. In extreme situations where the target's safety continues to be threatened or

they are very fearful the predator may return, consider seeking out other housing options (The Dream Team, n.d.).

Analysis and Discussion

Much of the literature reviewed focused on considerations for acute response to home takeovers, as well as proximate prevention and recovery. However, considerations at a broader scale do warrant some mention. With regard to how home takeovers happen, causes have been identified as the housing crisis, for example Comeau et al.'s critique of Canada's National Housing Strategy as insufficient to address need, socially constructed marginalization, and constrained choice (Moyle, 2019). On the last point, for example, Moyle (2019) argues that vulnerable adults victimized in cuckooing enter into risky financial relationships with perpetrators because they have no real alternative to support their substance use disorder. Moyle (2019) suggests that a policy response may therefore include multiagency efforts to build resilience and equip vulnerable populations with tools to exit exploitive relationships. Similarly, Comeau et al. (2021) call for policy change and preventative efforts that respond to personal safety and security as basic human rights, as well as ensure that families have access to adequate and affordable housing in neighbourhoods free from violence and victimization.

Conceptualizations of a complicit victim of home takeover are common. A form of victim blaming, this promotes fear and takes away from efforts to have targets report their exploitation or seek support from service providers (Weissman, 2016). Moreover, Spicer et al. (2020) call for a shift away from criminalizing people who are victimized, even if they do not fit the idea of a perfect victim (i.e. have some degree of complicity, use substances, or are known to police). Spicer et al. argue that "responses based on criminalization that compound exclusion are unlikely to prove beneficial to the individual or to a wider response to reducing this form of drug market exploitation" (2020, pp. 318). Attention to root causes of vulnerability, early intervention, and a multiagency policy response could build resilience among those who experience structural vulnerabilities (Moyle, 2019). Weissman et al. (n.d.) call for a paradigm shift away from victim-blaming and toward understanding and responding to the complex array of factors that create conditions that facilitate home takeovers.

There are limitations to the supports that can be offered by service providers. In the case of unmet needs related to substance use, the current legal context disadvantages service providers because they cannot meet this need directly, whereas a perpetrator are perhaps less likely to be concerned with the confines of the law (Crime Prevention Ottawa, 2013). Crime Prevention Ottawa (2013) states that service providers should acknowledge the demand for addictive substances created by giving samples away for free, though does not offer explanation for how this may be actioned. Similarly, while building community and fostering a sense of belonging among residents is possible, service providers are unable to meet needs related to more intimate interpersonal relationships.

In the UK cuckooing literature, there is a strong emphasis on shifting the role of police. Policing unlikely to prevent cuckooing, thus exploration of and response to vulnerabilities that make people susceptible to cuckooing is a more promising approach (Spicer, 2021). Spicer (2021) conceptualized the police response to cuckooing in the United Kingdom as a deviancy amplification spiral model in which the focus on and response to cuckooing by law enforcement amplified the problem, as opposed to resolving it. This finding reflects the results of a Toronto study, which suggest that police obligation to work within the law results in criminalization of both perpetrator and target (Weissman et al., n.d.). The same study

found that neither tenants nor service providers saw law enforcement as having the necessary tools to effectively manage home takeovers alone (Weissman et al., n.d.). Moreover, Spicer (2021) surmises that conventional police response is unlikely to prevent cuckooing, and suggests instead greater consideration of the structures that make people vulnerable and working to moderate those factors. Crime Prevention Ottawa (2013) recommends improved consistency of police response to home takeover situations, as well as communication between police and other service providers.

There are some indications in the literature that the needs of vulnerable perpetrators also require attention in addressing home takeovers (Weissman et al., n.d.), although how to do this is not made explicit. While it does stand to reason that mitigating vulnerability-producing systemic barriers for both targets and perpetrators would reduce the need to enter into exploitive relationships in order to meet various needs, evidence to that effect was not found in this review.

As stated above, the peer reviewed literature examined herein is almost exclusively (5 of 6 articles reviewed) focused on home takeovers in the United Kingdom (UK), therefore many of the findings of this review are based on grey literature. Local context and emerging evidence are crucial in informing a local response.

Conclusion

Home takeover is an exploitive practice that harms both the individuals targeted and their broader communities. Home takeovers occur as a result of unmet social, economic and personal needs of either the perpetrator, the target or both. Addressing the systemic barriers that create vulnerabilities for both targets and perpetrators is protective against home takeovers. It is crucial that all potentially vulnerable targets, the services providers around them, and their personal connections are aware of home takeovers, recognize the threat they present, and know the warning signs. Consideration of the unique vulnerabilities of tenants is essential to developing appropriate mechanisms for prevention, intervention, response and recovery. Regardless of the specific approach taken, addressing home takeovers requires cooperation and collaboration from service provider agencies. A multi-agency response is imperative to reduce the impact of home takeovers.

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Appendix A: Search Strategy Summary

A literature scan was conducted by a public health librarian to compile evidence to inform the development of an intersectoral Home Takeover Response Framework, as part of a pilot project specifically aimed at supporting low-income tenants living in rent-geared-to-income (social) housing.

Databases searched included: PsycINFO, EMBASE, Academic Search Premier, AgeLine, Child Development & Adolescent Studies, CINAHL Complete; CINAHL with Full Text, Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials, Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, Cochrane Methodology Register, Environment Complete, Health Business Elite, Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts, MEDLINE, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, SocINDEX with Full Text, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), Cochrane Clinical Answers and GreenFILE.

Several key words were used in the scan related to the population of interest including but not limited to cuckooing, home takeover, and hostile takeovers. The search was broadened to include the following concepts; victims, or extortion, or exploitation, low income housing, Canada, unwanted guest/squatters and criminal/illegal. Links to grey literature resources were included in the search. Results were limited to articles published in the English language, between 2010 and 2021. The literature search was completed on October 19, 2021.

The original search yielded 155 results before removing duplicates. After removing duplicates, 97 results remained. Two public health staff reviewed the titles and abstracts of these articles and as a result, 10 were deemed potentially relevant and were identified for full article retrieval, of which 6 were included for final review.

Studies set in countries outside of Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom were also removed. Internet searches for grey literature were completed, in addition to manual searches for resources identified or referenced in included articles that appeared relevant.

In total, the selected peer-reviewed studies (6) and references from grey literature (8) were used to inform the creation of this document. Due to time constraints, the quality of each piece of literature included was not assessed using a critical appraisal tool.