



UNWANTED GUESTS:

**HOW OTTAWA UNCOVERED AND
ADDRESSED THE PROBLEM OF
HOME TAKEOVERS**

ABOUT HOME TAKEOVERS

What is a home takeover?

A home takeover happens when someone enters a home and refuses to leave. Unlike a home invasion, where someone forces their way into a home to hurt or rob the resident, a home takeover can start when a person invites a neighbour, friend or family member into their home.

Although it may begin innocently, a home takeover can evolve quickly or over time. The guest may take control of the space and make the victim feel guilty when they ask for money to cover expenses. The guest often starts acting in ways that make the victim feel uncomfortable or threatened. Often, home takeovers include illegal activity, such as drug or sex trafficking.

The resident no longer feels safe in their own home. Home takeovers can include financial, physical or emotional abuse. They almost always put the victim at risk of losing their home.

Why are home takeovers so challenging?

People who fall victim to home takeovers are often disconnected from neighbours, friends, family members and available services. They typically live in rental or social housing, but we find that vulnerable homeowners (especially seniors) can also be victimized. These factors make people easier to target; it also means they likely don't have the support network to help them end the situation.

Neighbours or landlords may not notice the warning signs or realize that something is wrong until the situation has escalated. In some cases, the perpetrator is also the person the victim trusts the most. This is especially challenging, because before victims can get the help they need to end a home takeover, they must start by trusting someone else.

HOME TAKEOVERS ARE NOT NEW TO OTTAWA. MOST FRONTLINE WORKERS HAVE REPORTED ENCOUNTERING A HOME TAKEOVER SITUATION, BUT UNTIL RECENTLY, THERE WAS NO COMMON DEFINITION OR PREFERRED APPROACH IN PLACE TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM.

Who is at risk?

Home takeover victims share some common traits. They are usually people who live alone and who are vulnerable for one or more of the following reasons:

- mental health issues
- problematic substance use
- advanced age
- developmental or physical disabilities
- involvement with gangs or illegal drugs
- isolation
- recent homelessness

Every situation is different

Each home takeover situation is unique and requires support that considers the victim's circumstances, needs and strengths. Here are a few examples to illustrate:



JEAN-PIERRE

Jean-Pierre is a 72-year-old widower. Sometimes he gets lonely, so when his older son comes to stay while he looks for a job, Jean-Pierre is happy. But he soon becomes frustrated that his son eats all of the food in the house, keeps asking for money and never seems to look for a job.



ALEX

After two years on the streets, Alex has moved into his own place. His ex-girlfriend came over to check out his apartment and now she won't leave. Some days she's nice, but she can also be really mean. Mostly, she uses the apartment to party and do drugs with friends that Alex doesn't like much.



NYALA

Nyala is depressed and dealing with anxiety after a traumatic incident. Her friend offers her drugs to cheer her up in exchange for a night or two on her couch. Soon, people are coming to her apartment at all hours to buy drugs. Nyala feels trapped and doesn't know how to get help.

HOW OTTAWA ADDRESSED THE PROBLEM

For years, landlords, social workers, law enforcement and agencies that serve vulnerable populations have encountered complex situations that do not fall easily within one jurisdiction and require a more compassionate response. In 2013, Crime Prevention Ottawa (CPO) commissioned research to define the scope of the problem, identify trends and outline mitigating factors. As a result of this research, CPO created a new term to name the problem: home takeovers. We initiated a project to uncover and address the issue. This involved:



Giving the problem a name

CPO worked with community and safety partners to spark discussions on the issue and develop a shared definition. This has allowed service providers and residents to raise awareness of the problem and develop a common approach to solving it.



Providing a forum for collaborative work between partners

Because each home takeover situation is unique, solutions require input from various agencies and service providers. CPO created and led a Home Takeovers Steering Committee to facilitate discussions about the trends, barriers and best practice approaches to address the issue. The Ottawa-Carleton Association for Persons with Developmental Disabilities (OCAPDD) was an early champion of the collaborative home takeovers work and took on coordination of the project. The committee currently includes 16 organizations in Ottawa.



Producing home takeover videos

Together, we produced eight YouTube videos that illustrate what home takeovers can look like. The videos present realistic situations that were developed with residents with lived experience of home takeovers.



Offering presentations and training sessions

We developed and delivered training sessions to help people understand what a home takeover looks like, what warning signs to watch for, and how to take action if they suspect a problem. The training has evolved to provide sessions that allow organizations to spread awareness internally and with the clients they serve.



Developing tools for service providers and residents

We distributed the home takeovers research paper and developed printed information cards, flyers, posters, and self-assessment guides for tenants and landlords.



Sparking institutional change

Ottawa Police Service and other municipal and social services partners now use the term "home takeovers," understand the underlying issues, and have developed customized approaches to addressing the problem. Training sessions allow agencies to continue to recognize and address the problem even as their staff changes.

RESULTS

The home takeovers initiative has yielded impressive results:

Shared language

The term “home takeovers” is now more commonly used and understood by tenants, landlords and service providers in Ottawa and beyond.

Resources for service providers

Organizations that work with marginalized people vulnerable to home takeovers now have access to a variety of print, digital and social media resources to help prevent or address these situations. Landlords and community partners have information and tools to share with their residents.

Awareness and engagement

The training and information materials allow residents and landlords to recognize the problem and become actively involved in developing solutions. All Steering Committee member organizations have incorporated home takeover resources into their organizational culture.

Stronger partnerships

Through the Steering Committee, agencies and service providers come together regularly to deal with home takeovers.

Comprehensive solutions

Training provides tools and strategies to allow stakeholders to change the way they work together, better assess home takeover situations and implement big picture solutions.

Extended reach

Training trainers allows agencies to reach a broader audience. This allows staff to share knowledge and resources with colleagues and ensure continuity by training new staff.

Information on underlying issues

Research, training and ongoing discussions have allowed stakeholders to identify and share the broader issues that impact home takeovers. There is an increased understanding of the link between pro-social relationships and prevention.

Home takeovers: What we achieved (by the numbers)

15

**HOME TAKEOVERS RESOURCES
CREATED**

23,761

**PRINT RESOURCE MATERIALS
DISTRIBUTED**

157

TRAINING SESSIONS

3,473

PEOPLE DIRECTLY BENEFITED

5,486

**VIEWS OF THE HOME
TAKEOVERS TRAINING VIDEOS**

35,754

PEOPLE INDIRECTLY BENEFITED

Other achievements

- Increasing public awareness about home takeovers through media interviews
- Participating in the 'Seniors focus' home takeovers webinar with Elder Abuse Ottawa
- Speaking on home takeovers at the National Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness Conference
- Providing support and expertise to print and mail resources, book spaces and facilitate registration support for city-wide training

Community successes

OTTAWA POLICE SERVICE

Following home takeovers training, the Police Reporting Unit of the Ottawa Police Service has revised the protocol on how to effectively respond to calls related to home takeovers.



CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

The Canadian Mental Health Association, an important strategic partner, now offers home takeover training to all new staff as part of their orientation programming.



OTTAWA COMMUNITY HOUSING

As a direct result of the collaborative work done to address home takeovers, OCH built its capacity to work with victims of home takeovers. This allowed for a direct and positive shift to take place when supporting vulnerable tenants.



It's a very important project. We are getting the word out to workers who saw the problem and didn't have words to put around it, or who didn't realize what help was available from different agencies. We are role modelling a group approach to a complex problem. I've seen how successful it can be.

Donna van den Oever, Resource Centre Service Specialist, Options Bytown

LESSONS LEARNED

The whole Ottawa community has benefited from a broader awareness of home takeovers, their underlying causes and the development of strategic solutions. Here are the key lessons learned:

Define and name the problem

When staff and residents have a shared name for the problem, they can begin to develop strategies to prevent and resolve it.

- Involve stakeholders and residents in developing a definition of the problem and a common language.
- Inform and educate residents, landlords, service providers and key partners through materials and training sessions.
- Develop customized training sessions that respond to the particular needs of residents and service providers.

Work together

Home takeovers usually take a long time to resolve and solutions can involve multiple partners. It's important to look beyond the usual suspects and include a variety of partners.

- Engage neighbours, friends and families, who can be key allies in identifying and preventing home takeovers.
- Strengthen partnerships and encourage groups to collectively problem solve home takeover situations.
- Offer service providers regular opportunities to exchange ideas and solutions to addressing home takeover situations.
- Incorporate a resource and information transfer approach to encourage capacity building throughout partner organizations.

Pay attention to quality of life

Home takeovers require a comprehensive, compassionate approach that considers the victim's socio-economic reality, strengths and support systems.

- Remind residents that they have the right to feel safe in their own home.
- Identify the societal issues that impact individual situations, such as affordable housing, aging, isolation, mental health issues, poverty, racism and substance abuse.
- Develop and strengthen positive social relationships.
- Acknowledge the impact of home takeovers on residents who have experienced trauma.
- Recognize that home takeovers also impact the neighbours of the home that has been taken over.

“When home takeovers first emerged as a real problem, we knew the issue was complex and deep rooted. It's predominantly men preying on vulnerable people. A home takeover is one of those traumatic incidents that needs more than a police response. Now, we work with landlords, neighbours, residents and community partners for education and awareness. Real solutions also involve giving victims the support and services they need. The outcome has been very positive.”

Inspector Ken Bryden, Community Relations, Ottawa Police Service

IMPACT IN OTTAWA AND BEYOND

Leading the fight against home takeovers

Crime Prevention Ottawa's work on home takeovers, conducted in close collaboration with our community partners, is gaining traction in other cities across Canada.

The research conducted in 2013 continues to serve as the foundational document for Canadian home takeovers initiatives. Since presenting the project at the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness Conference in 2017, our groundbreaking work on home takeovers has received buy-in from cities across Canada. Community groups in Toronto, Alberta, British Columbia and Saskatchewan, as well as the city of Thunder Bay, have adapted CPO's home takeovers materials and used our research to develop their own initiatives. The Steering Committee's work was also featured in media coverage on CBC Radio in Ottawa, Thunder Bay, Winnipeg and nationally.

Although home takeovers still exist in Ottawa, awareness of the problem and proven strategies to address it now mean that victims of home takeovers can get help from a variety of sources.



HELPING JEAN-PIERRE

Jean-Pierre had been faithfully paying rent on time for years. When his payments suddenly started coming in late, his landlord suspected something was wrong. He contacted Jean-Pierre's daughter who was his emergency contact. She visited her father to discuss the situation. Together, they developed a plan to help Jean-Pierre stop lending money to his son, make his payments on time, and keep his home.



HELPING ALEX

Alex's social worker visited the apartment to see how he was settling in. Alex seemed stressed and less cheerful than usual, even though he had reunited with his ex. The social worker checked with the landlord and neighbours to find out more. She privately discussed her concerns with Alex, who asked for help in asking his girlfriend to leave.



HELPING NYALA

The security officer in Nyala's building began receiving complaints from Nyala's neighbours about people coming in and out of her apartment at all hours. When he spoke to Nyala, she seemed unhappy but afraid to say too much. He discussed the situation with his supervisor, who connected with police and social services to get her friend out and give Nyala the support she needed.



Spreading the word about home takeovers allows us to have the conversation aloud and develop strategies with key stakeholders. Before this project, we treated the symptoms. Now, we have the training and network we need to share stories, understand best practices, work together and find lasting solutions that respect the tenant's situation. This project has been essential in improving the living situation of our most vulnerable people.



Trent Smith, Ottawa Community Housing



Home takeovers partners: The Ottawa Steering Committee

Action Logement; Aging in Place; Canadian Mental Health Association; Connecting on Disability and Abuse; Crime Prevention Ottawa; Eastern Ottawa Resource Centre; Nepean, Rideau & Osgoode Community Resource Centre (Elder Abuse Response and Referral Service); Elder Abuse Ontario; Options Bytown Non-Profit Housing; Ottawa Community Housing; Ottawa Police Service; Ottawa Public Health; Ottawa-Carleton Association for Persons with Developmental Disabilities; Housing Services (City of Ottawa); Salus Ottawa; Youth Services Bureau.

CRIME PREVENTION OTTAWA

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