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FAST FACTS

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The Scandalous Truth about Bed Bugs

Various media reports have recently warned travellers to carefully check luggage and other gear for bed bugs that may have returned with them from international travel. The advice given to reduce the likelihood of a bed bug infestation is to jam a high-powered vacuum cleaner nozzle into every little crack and crevice throughout one's home – from the items one travelled with to wooden and fabric furniture, bed mattresses, and floor baseboards – and to wash and dry all washables at the hottest temperatures possible. Local pest control professionals have been quoted as saying that requests for bed bug fumigations have rapidly increased of late, with calls even coming from five-star hotel proprietors and homeowners in upscale neighbourhoods. The pest-control industry highly recommends taking action immediately upon spotting the problem and insists that vigilant follow-up fumigations are necessary to prevent re-infestation. Indeed, since the banning of DDT, bed bugs have become a serious and prevalent household problem across North America, as other treatment alternatives prove far less effective at dealing with the problem.

Although one would never know from reading recent media reports, the most scandalous aspect of bed bugs is *not* that they are now a problem for many average Canadians. What *is* scandalous is that

bed bugs stubbornly continue to be a curse in the lives of the poor. The scandalous truth about bed bugs in Winnipeg is that they are but one of many symptoms of poverty.

Bed bugs are more than benign nuisances. Though not believed to transmit diseases, if left untreated bed bugs will eventually take their toll on a person's physical and emotional health. Their bites cause rashes, severe itching, infections, scars, and sleeplessness. The stigma of bed bugs causes intense feelings of shame (often leading victims to isolate themselves from others), anxiety, stress, and insomnia. Bed bugs can and do cause serious psychological illnesses. Thus, bed bugs are another in a long list of barriers that marginalize and exclude the poor from full social and economic participation in Winnipeg society.

Because bed bugs are indiscriminate in their choice of hosts, it would be reasonable to question their connection to poverty *if* one did not take into account the following factors that come to bear on the poor: (1) inadequate and limited choice of shelter accommodations, (2) lack of income, (3) constrained control over one's environment, and (4) weak regulatory standards for rental properties.

The majority of Winnipeg's impoverished live within inner city neighbourhoods, usually in privately-owned rental apartment buildings



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 for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
 MANITOBA OFFICE

309 - 323 Portage Avenue
 Winnipeg, MB R3B 2C1
 T 204.927.3200 F 204.927.3201
 ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca
 www.policyalternatives.ca

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or Manitoba Housing Authority public/social housing. It is dispiriting that much of the rental stock in inner city neighbourhoods has been allowed to deteriorate to woeful conditions, such that many residents must accept what is available, despite the inadequacies of many units – including the presence of bed bugs. While there has been some media coverage of bed bug infestations in Manitoba Housing Authority complexes, the problem is not restricted to these buildings. Bedbugger.com, for example, lists a number of Winnipeg addresses where, according to tenants, the problematic insects can be found. Number two on the ‘hit’ list are rooming houses.

Closely connected to the issue of shelter inadequacy is the fact that these individuals are living below Canada’s low income cut-off lines, or LICOs, commonly known as Canada’s ‘poverty lines.’ When incomes – whether from government transfer payments or poor-paying employment – fall short of meeting household needs, Winnipeg’s impoverished have scant resources to cover the cost of well-maintained rental units. They can barely afford to pay what the market is asking for shoddy accommodations, never mind the better-kept properties. Many individuals are forced to rent units in sub-standard apartment buildings and rooming houses or other single occupancy arrangements where bed bugs are also known to reside. Ironically and sadly, unacceptable conditions such as this are leading anti-poverty and community development workers to advocate for closure and/or demolition of these buildings.

A third factor linking bed bugs to poverty is limited control: Inner-city renters have very limited control over the maintenance of the buildings they live in, including the fumigation schedule of the rental unit and/or property when bed bugs are found to be present – if indeed, there is fumigation at all. Complete annihilation of bed bugs requires fastidious and repeated regular inspections and treatments of the ‘infected’ unit(s), and usually

entire buildings if fumigation is to be successful. This is a costly endeavour, one that is controlled by the property owner and usually mediated by a caretaker or property manager. Renters have no control, other than to prepare their units for fumigation.

Fourth and finally, the Winnipeg by-law that regulates unsanitary and hazardous conditions, including pests and other nuisances, is disturbingly vague. Whether one considers the past “Maintenance and Occupancy By-Law, No. 4903/88” (<http://www.winnipeg.ca/clerks/pdfs/bylaws/4903.88.pdf>) or the “Neighbourhood Liveability By-Law” (<http://winnipeg.ca/CLKDMIS/Documents/DocExt.BL/2008/2008.1.pdf>) that just replaced it on November 1, 2008, bed bugs are considered unsanitary and not “allowed” to exist in rental dwellings. However, the past By-Law, which stated, “No owner shall permit the existence of...bed bugs...in any dwelling or part thereof,” identified the party responsible for ridding a dwelling of bed bugs, but was obviously not enforced. And, now the replacement By-Law reads, “The owner *and occupant* [emphasis added] must ensure that nuisances and unsanitary conditions are not created or allowed to exist...” It is foolhardy to believe that the new by-law - known as the “Neighbourhood Liveability By-Law” - will address the bed bug plague hitting inner-city rental addresses. Rather, the onus to remedy existing and new infestations will now fall not only on already-negligent inner-city landlords, but also on those renters least able to incur the cost and burdens of fumigations and follow-ups.

So, the scandalous truth is that bed bugs are all about poverty. Until policies are created to deal head-on with the issue, poverty in Winnipeg will remain just that: a scandalous truth.

Jil Brody recently completed her BSW and is presently on contract at CCPA Mb.



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