

ROOMMATE ABUSE



An Overview

What is Roommate Abuse

Roommate abuse refers to a pattern of harmful, controlling, or intimidating behaviors perpetrated by one roommate against another within a shared living environment. This form of abuse exploits the shared living space and can escalate to various forms of violence, such as bullying, exerting power, isolation, victimization, or physical harm (Craig & Pepler, 2003).



Roommate

A [roommate](#) refers to people who share a rental unit, which could mean sharing common areas like living rooms and kitchens while having separate bedrooms, or in some cases, sharing bedrooms as well. The term is used broadly to cover various co-living arrangements (ACTO, 2023).

When viewed through the lens of gender-based violence (GBV), roommate abuse constitutes a form of interpersonal violence that exploits the vulnerabilities and safety needs of survivors who may already be navigating the impacts of trauma, housing insecurity, or systemic marginalization.

Roommate abuse may include, but is not limited to:

- [Psychological or emotional abuse](#), such as intimidation, manipulation, or threats.
- [Economic abuse](#), including control over shared expenses, withholding rent contributions, or leveraging housing instability to exert power.
- [Gender-based harassment or discrimination](#), including sexist, homophobic, transphobic, or sexually harassing behavior.
- [Interference with autonomy](#), such as restricting access to guests or support networks.
- [Physical abuse and coercion](#), especially when a survivor attempts to assert boundaries or seek help.
- [Harm](#) to property or loved ones.

The Impact Of Roommate Abuse on GBV Survivors

Roommate households in Canada have grown by approximately [54%](#) since 2001 (Stat Can, 2022) and are currently the fastest-growing household type. Between 2023 and 2024, available rental listings data shows a [78%](#) increase in shared accommodations (Kassam, 2024). In Ontario, [the growing housing affordability crisis forces many survivors of Intimate Partner Violence \(IPV\) to choose between safety and affordability \(CCHR, 2024\)](#), leaving survivors with limited viable housing options. Survivors escaping violence often have to settle for whatever housing they can find, including roommate arrangements (ACTO, 2025).

For many, this results in unsafe living conditions. As one survivor described:

“

My safety was at risk just because it was the cheapest option I found on Kijiji, but I didn't realize that it was someone who [had] just come out of jail. Someone who was on parole. It was two men.

They looked harmless when I went to check out the place and because it was so cheap, and I thought like, okay, I have to save right now, I'm just going to take it. But it wasn't safe for me because at 3 am in the morning, I would hear knocks on my door

- Lived Experience Interviewee (LE07)

Situations such as these end up compounding the trauma survivors have already been subjected to by their abuser. In ACTO's report, [“The Journey to Housing Stability For Survivors of Gender-Based Violence”](#), [17% of lived-experience survey respondents reported harassment or abuse from a roommate](#). The interviewees who faced roommate abuse shared they had to endure the situation, because they could not afford to leave.

One lived-experience interviewee was subjected to violence after she disclosed to her roommates that she was transgender and in the process of a name change:

“

One time I made the mistake of trying to be honest with my roommates and be like, “Hey, look, if you started seeing mail under my name, my proper name, that's for me, right?”

Next [thing], the guy knew. I was being told that I was sub-human and had a friggin' kitchen knife taken out at me. (LE02)

- Lived Experience Interviewee (LE02)

She endured months of harassment and was afraid to tell anyone else what was happening. She only left her rental unit after collapsing due to sleep deprivation.

Similarly, an Indigenous-led service provider interviewee shared that [Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+ survivors had been forced to leave their rental units](#) due to ongoing racism, homophobia, and false reporting from neighbours and roommates:



We've had neighbors and roommates that are consistently racist and homophobic where we've placed LGBT people or Indigenous Two-Spirit people. They've been systematically attacked by [them].

And then just some, some neighbors are just really difficult in [the] community to live with, you know, there'll be constantly phoning police and making reports calling Children's Aid Society (CAS), saying that the children are being abused when they're not.

- Service Provider (SP40)

Types of Roommate Living Arrangements

In Ontario, there are several types of roommate arrangements. Here are some of the most common options:

Joint Tenants

A joint tenancy is the most common co-living arrangement. In this arrangement, all tenants are listed on the same lease agreement. In [ACTO's research](#), service-provider interviewees noted that survivors who had abusive roommates were especially vulnerable when they had a joint tenancy.

It is important to note that joint tenancies cannot be unilaterally severed, and survivors can be held responsible for issues within the unit even after they leave. It also is not legally permissible for survivors to remove the person causing harm from the lease without creating a new lease (ACTO, 2025). One service-provider interviewee explained:



I've had clients trapped in roommate situations and they can't get out of them, because they won't sever the lease, they won't...they can't, you know, get rid of the roommate, because everybody's on the lease. So, they can't just say it's an unwanted guest. And they can't move... they can't just kick the person out. Or they wouldn't even be able to afford the place... there's too many rooms for them to be there by themselves....And I've had people then go live in parks and choose to live in a tent because they can't stand being where they are.

- Service Provider (SP37)



Lease Agreement

Under Ontario's Residential Tenancies ACT (RTA), a [lease agreement](#), also called a tenancy agreement, is a contract between a landlord and tenant for the right to occupy a residential rental unit. It can be written, oral, or implied agreement (Government of Canada).

Tenants In Common

This arrangement involves two or more tenants sharing the same unit, each with a separate lease agreement. Each tenant pays their portion of the rent directly to the landlord.

Unlike a joint tenancy, if one tenant fails to pay their rent, only that individual is held responsible, the other tenants are not liable for the missed payment (ACTO, 2023).

Occupant

Occupants are individuals who consider the unit their primary residence, but, unlike a tenant, are not listed on the lease as a tenant, and do not sign the lease. They may be listed as occupants, but because they are not tenants, they are not formally responsible for paying rent to the landlord, and they lack legal tenant protections (ACTO, 2023). An occupant could be a family member, a friend, or their significant other (RentPrep, 2024).



Maya's Story Begins...

Safe Isn't Home

My name is Maya, I'm 27 years old and I live in Scarborough, Toronto. I recently escaped an abusive relationship with my partner. I was fortunate to secure and spend several months in transitional housing for gender-based violence survivors.

I recently landed a job as a program coordinator for a violence against women organization and am now transitioning to a shared apartment with Claire, a woman I met through a community housing program.

At first, my new roommate Claire seemed supportive. She asked me thoughtful questions about trauma, said all the right things about boundaries and healing, and even accompanied me to a few community events for survivors.

I found comfort in feeling understood by my roommate. I thought I'd finally landed somewhere safe where I could rebuild my life.



But things changed quickly...

Maya's Story Continued...

Claire began questioning my comings and goings subtly at first. Claire would say “Just checking in, making sure you’re not with someone dangerous again.” On one particular evening, I stayed out late seeing friends, and Claire grew cold and accusatory, saying “You’re reckless. Some people never learn,” shaking her head. I began shrinking back into silence, feeling judged for trying to reclaim a normal life.



Soon, Claire began moving my things without asking, rearranging our shared space and claiming more of it for herself. When I objected, Claire said she was just trying to make the space more functional. Claire also started going through my mail, citing concerns about my decision-making.

When I tried to assert boundaries, Claire weaponized my trauma by saying,



I began to isolate and stopped inviting friends over. My therapist noticed signs of trauma: sleeplessness, hypervigilance, shame.

The very home that was supposed to offer healing had suddenly become a cage.

Maya's Story Complete.

The worst came one night when Claire, in a heated argument, shouted that I was “lucky” anyone even offered me housing after what I’d been through. I froze, the words stung with the same tone my abuser once used to strip me of my agency and worth.



I eventually reported the situation to my housing caseworker, who helped me relocate to an affordable self-contained studio unit. Yet even in my new space, I sometimes flinched at knocks on my door, or found myself second-guessing. The re-traumatization ran deep, but I reminded myself each day to be patient with my healing.



Roommate Abuse Dynamics Highlighted in Maya's Story

- **Coercion and Control:** Claire masked controlling behaviors as concern and responsibility.
- **Harassment:** Claire used tactics of emotional manipulation, invasions of privacy, and shaming.
- **Re-traumatization:** Claire repeatedly echoed tactics Maya experienced in her past abuse, making her relive trauma.
- **Discrimination:** Claire judged Maya based on her history of GBV, implying she is incapable or undeserving of independence.
- **Boundary Violations:** Claire disrespected Maya’s physical and emotional boundaries, while framing this as care.

Policy Recommendations

- 1 Implement tenant protections for roommates/guests in shared housing:**
Address gaps in traditional tenant laws to better protect survivors from this form of interpersonal harm.
- 2 Develop clear protocols:**
Require shelters, landlords and housing providers to implement intake screening, accessible mediation services, and clear incident protocols that reinforce survivor safety and well-being in shared housing.
- 3 Expand the provision of choice-based housing options:**
Increase the range of community housing options, such as single units and, where feasible, gender- or identity-specific accommodations to better support survivors' safety, protection, and needs.
- 4 Establish training for housing providers:**
Mandate trauma-informed training for providers and landlords to better respond to resolving roommate-related conflict.



In summary, survivors escaping violence often have limited housing options and may end up in shared accommodations out of necessity. Research demonstrates that roommate conflict can lead to lasting mental, physical, and behavioral problems including anxiety, hyper-isolation, depression, re-traumatization and more (Katrina et al., 2023). Without targeted protections for roommate living situations, survivors may face further displacement, mental health impacts, or barriers to healing.

For further insight into roommate abuse tailored to survivors of gender-based violence, refer to ACTO's [“The Journey to Housing Stability for Survivors of Gender-Based Violence”](#), June 2025 research report.

Glossary References

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