

Unison Housing  
Research Lab



**What's changed? Comparing occupancy patterns at Unison  
Housing between 2014 and 2016 with tenancies that  
commenced in 2017.**

Guy Johnson, Susan McCallum and Juliet Watson

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### **About the Unison Housing Research Lab**

The Union Housing Research Lab is a unique education and research collaboration between RMIT University and Unison Housing. The Lab is located in the Social and Global Studies Centre, one of two research centres in the School of Global, Urban and Social Studies (GUSS). The Lab was established in 2017 and is funded for five years to develop and implement a collaborative teaching program and undertake innovative policy and practice relevant housing research informed by the experiences of services users and providers.

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The aim of the Unison Housing Research Lab **Research Report** series is to develop a clearer understanding of who Unison works with, and identify areas where systems development is required. This series involves deep analysis of administrative data collected by Unison Housing to drive decision making.

The Lab also produces a **Think Piece** series. This series critically examines theories and evidence that are influential in the areas of social housing and homelessness, and that are pertinent to Unison's mission, policies and practice.

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## INTRODUCTION

In early 2019 the Unison Housing Research Lab (the 'Lab') released a research report examining occupancy patterns at Unison Housing. The report, *Who stays, who leaves and why?* (2019) focused on tenancies that commenced between 2014 and 2016. This report identified four groups at risk of early tenancy loss – young people, Indigenous households, residents who were homeless or in institutional accommodation prior to allocation, and those in rooming houses. It recommended that Unison strengthen relationships with key support agencies that work with these groups, as well as considering ways to improve data collection, particularly of the circumstances and social characteristics of tenants.

Subsequently, the 'Lab' and Unison agreed to produce an annual update of occupancy patterns at Unison. The purpose of the annual reports, of which this is the first, is to provide a concise examination of changes in occupancy patterns using the most recent data available, and to highlight opportunities for further research or policy and practice development. Our interest in occupancy patterns is largely focused on 'early exits' given early loss of a social housing tenancy is often associated with negative social and economic outcomes for tenants, landlords, and communities (Wiesel and Pawson 2015, Wiesel et al. 2014). Hence, efforts to reduce early tenancy loss have the potential to yield significant social and economic benefits.

In the first report we examined exits from three tenancy cohorts – those that commenced in 2014, 2015 and 2016.<sup>1</sup> The analysis focused on the 18-month period following tenancy commencement. In this report we reduce the observation period to 12 months. This is purely for pragmatic reasons: a 12-month observation window means the data is available to us 6 months earlier. Based on our earlier report we are confident that a 12-month observation period is sufficient. Consequently, this report examines data from the 313 tenancies that commenced in 2017.

It is also worth noting that in the earlier report we framed the analysis in terms of decay rates –the proportion of tenancies that end within a specified period. However, much of the material we presented spoke to retention rates - the proportion of tenancies that remain intact after a specified period. The two terms are different sides of the same coin, but to avoid any confusion the following analysis focuses explicitly on retention rates.

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<sup>1</sup> We refer readers to the earlier report if they are interested in the policy context around social housing and tenancy turnover.

## TENANT CHARACTERISTICS

Each year Unison signs up hundreds of new tenancies and 2017 was no exception. In 2017, 313 new tenancies commenced at Unison. The majority (72 percent) were in long-term accommodation with

**Table 1:** Selected Social characteristics

	2014-16 (N=967)	2017 (N=313)
<b>Housing at allocation</b>		
Homeless	57	58
Housed	24	28
Institution	6	6
Unknown	13	8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	43	43
Male	56	55
Missing	1	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Age at allocation</b>		
24 or less	22	12
25-34	25	21
35-44	22	25
45-54	19	25
55-64	7	11
65-74	2	3
75 plus	0.4	1
Unknown	2	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Household type at allocation</b>		
Single	59	81
Couple	2	2
Family	9	12
Other	2	1
Missing	29	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Housing program</b>		
Rooming house	31	28
Long term	69	72
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Other select characteristics</b>		
Disability	17	25
Indigenous	8	5
NESB	27	24

just over a quarter (28 percent) in rooming house accommodation. The social characteristics of tenants who moved into Unison in 2017 were consistent with previous years (Table 1). A slight majority were male (58 percent) and over half (58 percent) were between the ages of 24 and 44. There was, however, a 10 percentage point decline among tenants aged 24 or younger. It is unclear if this reflects a shift in targeting or random volatility in the process of allocating properties, but future reports will monitor this. As with the earlier report, around a quarter of the tenancies that started in 2017 were from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) but the proportion of tenancies with a disability increased by 8 percentage points, from 17 percent to 25 percent. In contrast, the number of Indigenous tenancies declined by 3 percentage points in 2017 from 8 percent to 5 percent. Consistent with previous years a significant

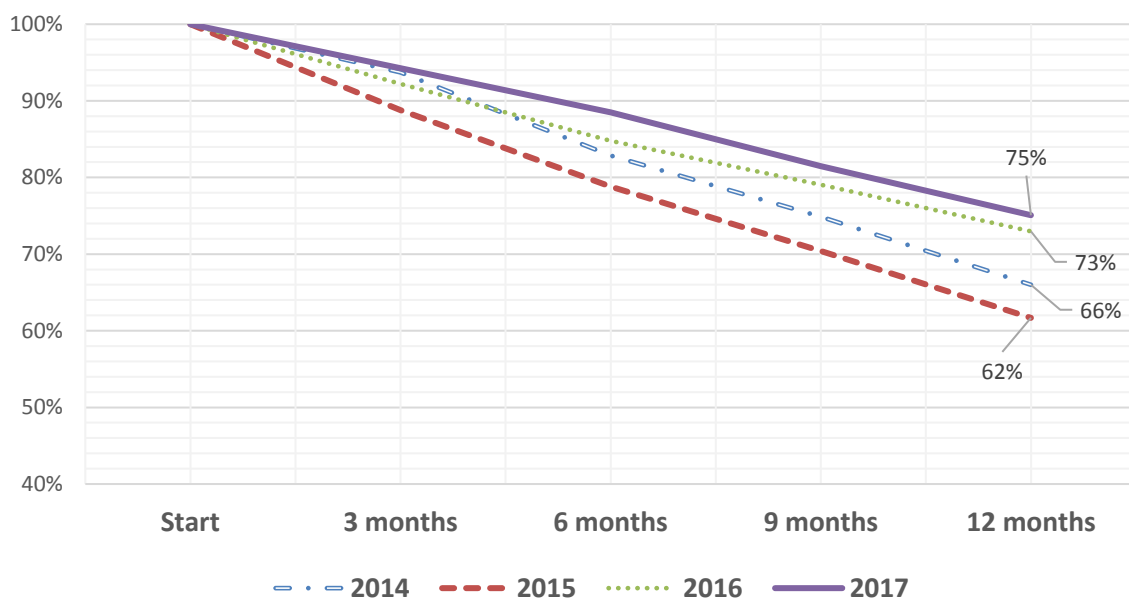
majority of Unison tenants were homeless<sup>2</sup> prior to their tenancy commencing (58 percent).

Previously, we could not provide any information about the occupancy patterns of various household types - families, singles or couples - due to a significant amount of missing data (29 percent). However, **this improved markedly in 2017 with missing information reduced to four percent.** As can be seen in **Table 1** the improved data collection lifts the number of single households from 59 to 81 percent. Just over 1 in 10 tenancies that commenced in 2017 were families, much the same as previous years.

## RETENTION RATES

Of the 313 tenancies that commenced in 2017, 75 percent (N=235) were still housed after 12 months. **The retention rate of 75 percent is the highest rate reported across the four years for which data is available (Figure 1) and represents a 13-percentage point improvement from 2015.**

**Figure 1:** Retention rate by tenancy commencement year

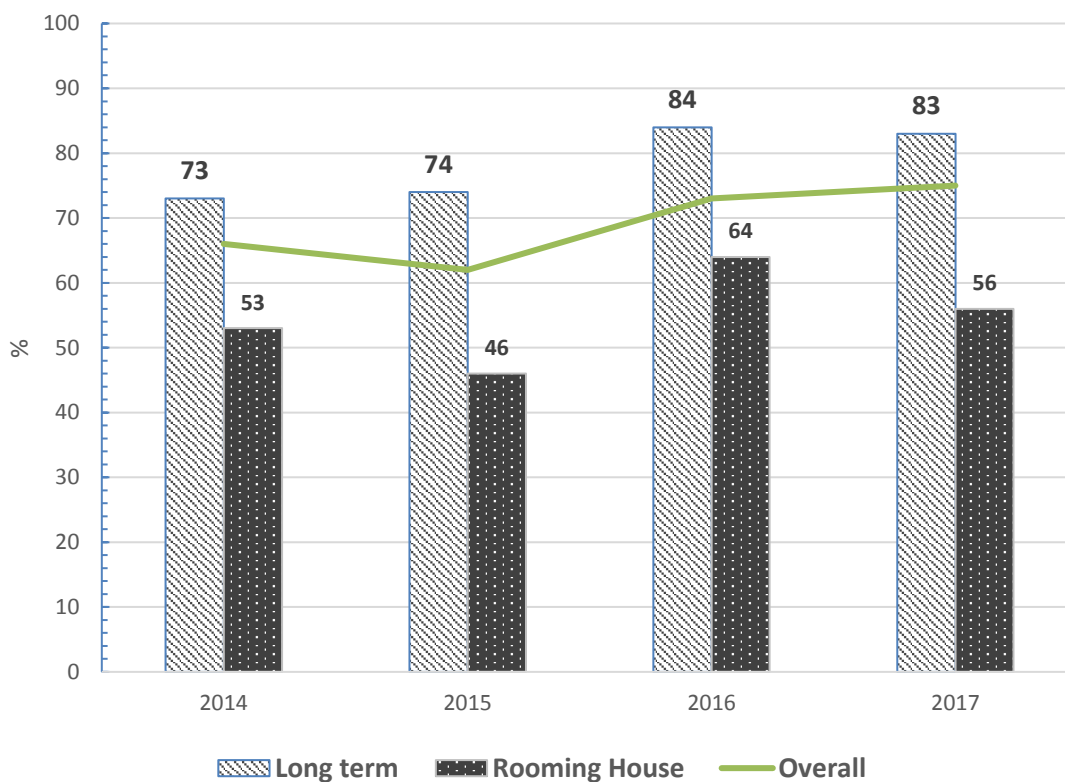


Next, we considered the retention rate in relation to age and tenure type. We found that tenants who sustained their housing were, on average, five years older than those whose tenancies had ended. An analysis of tenure type showed that the higher retention rate has been driven

<sup>2</sup> As with our previous report, we utilise the cultural definition of homelessness which includes rough sleeping, improvised dwellings and couch surfing.

primarily by long-term housing. **Figure 2** shows that over the four-year period the proportion of tenancies in long-term housing that remained intact after 12 months was 83 percent, up 10 percentage points from four years earlier. A 10 percentage point lift is substantial. It represents an additional 31 tenancies maintaining their housing. This is a positive outcome for these households. While we observe a consistent improvement in long-term housing retention rates, rooming house retention patterns are more volatile for reasons which are well understood (Hwang et al 2009; Johnson and Wylie, 2010). The inclusion of rooming houses pulls down the overall retention rate at Unison.

**Figure 2:** Proportion of intact tenancies after 12 months, by commencement year and accommodation type



Of the 313 tenancies, 58 percent (183) were homeless prior to commencing their tenancy, 28 percent (88) were housed, and just 6 percent (18) were in an institution. These results are consistent with previous years. In the first report, we found considerable variation in the retention rates depending on the residents' housing prior to allocation. Among those who were housed prior to allocation, 84 percent were still housed after 12 months; and among those who were homeless and among those who were in an institution prior to allocation the retention rates were 65 percent and 51 percent respectively. While the same pattern is evident in 2017 retention rates are slightly higher in each case: 86 percent of those who were housed prior to Unison were still in their

property after 12 months (a 2 percentage point increase), with rates declining to 72 percent among households that had been homeless (a 7 percentage point increase) and 63 percent among those that had been in an institution (a 12 percentage point increase). While 2017 retention rates are broadly consistent with results from our previous study, the small sample size, particularly those that had been in institutional arrangements, warrants caution when interpreting the results.

## EXITING SOCIAL HOUSING

While improvements in retention rates are a positive sign, the question of why people leave Unison housing remains an important one. In the previous report, we noted an association between tenancy duration and the reasons people leave, which we termed their ‘exit motivations’. Here we again classify exit reasons as either ‘pull’ or ‘push’, where pull are positive reasons for leaving and push are negative reasons.<sup>3</sup>

The first report found that shorter tenancies were more likely to leave because of negative reasons while those that remained housed for longer tend to leave for positive reasons. We cannot run the same analysis for the 2017 data because the observation period is insufficient, but in future we intend to aggregate data from multiple years to further investigate the association between tenancy duration and exit motivation.

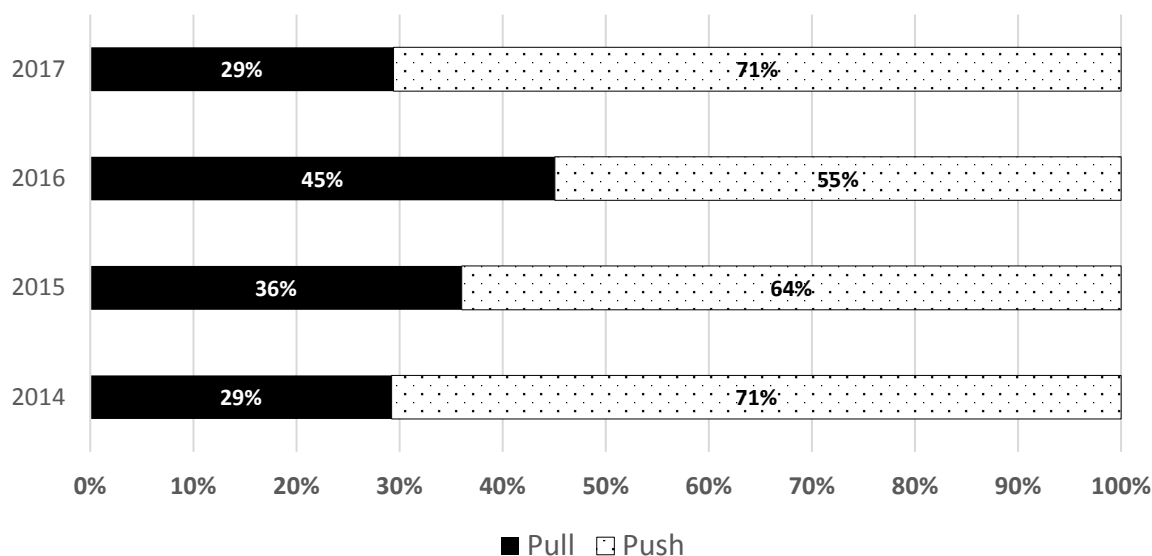
Nonetheless, even with a short observation period there is important information pertaining to exit patterns. **Figure 3** shows that in 2017 the majority of tenancies that left within 12 months (71 percent) did so for negative reasons – what we term ‘push factors’. This is 16 percentage points higher than the year before. It was not immediately clear to us why the proportion of negative exits increased in 2017, so we examined the most common reasons people left and then compared the results to previous years.

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<sup>3</sup> We include the classification approach in the Appendix, noting that we adjust the classification scheme to incorporate two new exits reasons Unison had added to their database (GreenTree). They make no material difference to the analysis.



**Figure 3: Exit motivations of tenancies that ended in 12 months, by commencement year**



**Table 2** shows that the most common ‘push’ factor in every year is rental arrears resulting in eviction or vacate, but there is some volatility in results. In 2015, arrears account for 40 percent of all negative exits but declined to 23 percent in the following year. The volatility may reflect different approaches to the collection of arrears, but more information is required to confirm (or otherwise) this claim.

**Table 2: Most commonly reported ‘push’ factors, by commencement year, %**

	<b>Arrears – Eviction and vacate</b>	<b>Unsuitable</b>	<b>Abandoned</b>
2014	31	23	10
2015	40	21	4
2016	23	20	20
2017	27	21	10

The second most common ‘push factor’ was housing being unsuitable for the tenant’s needs. A deeper examination of the data revealed that exits due to unsuitable housing were primarily driven by exits from rooming houses, where the rate was typically double that observed in long-term accommodation.

The third most common ‘push factor’ was abandonment. The difference between rates of abandonment in long-term housing and rooming houses was negligible. However, the results in Table 2 indicate some volatility with the proportion of tenancies that abandoned their properties

increasing by 16 percentage points between 2015 and 2016, and then declining by 10 percentage points the following year. This variance suggests some possibilities, all of which would be useful to understand in terms of responding to early tenancy loss. It could be, for example, that the categories of 'exit reason' are being used differently across the organisation or that exits without explanation can provide information on levels of engagement between tenants and staff. In any case, we think it might be prudent for Unison to consider investigating the issue of abandonment further.

An omission from the earlier report is that we did not investigate the association between exit motivations and housing status on entry; however, based on our 2017 dataset we find an association. More specifically, we find that most people (89 percent) who were in some form of institutional accommodation prior to Unison and who had exited within 12 months, did so because of 'push factors' - it is important to keep in mind, though, that our sample is very small (N=9). Just under two thirds (65 percent) of those who were homeless and subsequently left their Unison accommodation (N=51) did so for negative reasons. In contrast, only one third (33 percent) of those who were housed prior to Unison left their Unison property for negative reasons. These results provide strong evidence that the transition from homeless to housed or from an institutional setting into independent housing is particularly challenging. It emphasises the importance of post-settlement support to these households, which are at high-risk of early tenancy termination.

## **CONCLUSION**

This report has reviewed the most recent 12 months of tenancy data and compared this with data collected between 2014 to 2016. We found that tenant characteristics, in terms of previous housing status, gender, and tenancy type, were largely consistent with earlier years. However, improved data collection in relation to household type resulted in a significant jump in the proportion of single households, which constituted 81 percent of new tenancies in 2017. An increase in the proportion of main tenants with a disability and a decrease in the number of Indigenous households was also noted.

Overall retention rates, that is the number of tenancies that were intact at the end of 12 months, were at the highest rate recorded since 2014. We noted that this was largely due to stability in long-term tenancies with over 80 percent remaining intact at the end of 2017. Retention in rooming houses remains volatile but is consistent with expectations.

As with previous years, tenancies that ended within the 12-month period tended to do so for what we refer to as 'push factors' (negative reasons). However, we noted a 16-percentage point jump in negative exits in 2017. Comparison with previous years data shows that 'rental arrears' is consistently the most common exit reason, but that some volatility in numbers year on year suggest opportunities for further work in this area. The relationship between early tenancy loss and negative exits remains strong suggesting that proactive engagement with high-risk tenancies may be beneficial to tenancy sustainment and better outcomes for tenants, Unison, and the broader community. Consequently, the issue of tenancy sustainment will provide the focus for further analysis of tenancy data and will inform recommendations for further development of administrative data collection.

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## Appendix

<b>Table : Push and Pull Factors</b>			
Unison exit reasons	Push	Pull	Other
Moved to other non-YCH Housing		✓	
Evicted. Rent Arrears	✓		
Housing Unsuitable For Needs	✓		
Leaving Melbourne		✓	
Offer of Public Housing		✓	
Unknown/Missing*			✓
Abandoned. No known reason	✓		
Evicted. Anti Social Behaviour	✓		
Vacated. Rent Arrears	✓		
Housing Not Affordable	✓		
*Deceased			✓
Temporary Housing Only	✓		
Conflict With Neighbours	✓		
Unsatisfied with standard	✓		
Incarcerated	✓		
Vacated. Antisocial behaviour	✓		
Re-incarcerated	✓		
NTV - No Specified Reason	✓		
<b>Immediate Notice – Danger</b>	✓		
<b>Immediate Notice - Damage</b>	✓		