Author’s response to reviews

Title: “They’re always there”: Resident Experiences of Living with Rats in a Disadvantaged Urban Neighbourhood

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Author’s response

Dear Dr. Negev:

Thank you for the opportunity to revise our manuscript “‘They’re always there’: Resident experiences of living with rats in a disadvantaged urban neighbourhood”. The comments provided by both reviewers were very helpful and we believe have improved our manuscript substantially. We address each of the reviewers’ comments below, and have tracked the relevant changes in the uploaded revised document. In addition to the recommended changes, we have restructured the Results such that we discuss the mental health impacts of rats prior to detailing perceptions of pest control practices. We believe this restructuring will improve the overall story of the paper.

Thank you for your consideration,

Kaylee

Reviewer 1
We would like to thank the reviewer for their thorough review of our manuscript and for their insightful comments around the under-sampling of female participants in the initial submission.

Comment 1. The sample and approach allows for rich description, but I do wonder about the small proportion of female participants. Given that the authors cite a number of examples where the findings among women seemed unique, it is unfortunate that they were not able to further expand this component of their data collection. It would be useful for the authors to reflect on their confidence in having reached saturation among women - and if not, to comment further in the limitation section about how the readers should interpret their observations about potential gender differences.

The note around reaching saturation among women is an important one. Indeed, we do not claim to have reached saturation with regards to differences arising in the data according to gender. Given the smaller sample of women, we do not believe this to be possible. This does raise this under-sampling as a limitation of our study, and so we have acknowledged this in the limitations of our paper (Discussion lines 10 - 19, page 35) and have identified it as an important area for further research.

Reviewer 2

We would like to thank the reviewer for their thorough review of the manuscript and for their insightful comments which identified important issues in the initial submission as well as additional areas for consideration. In what follows, we outline how we have addressed each concern to improve this paper. We have tracked these changes in the attached document.

Comment 1. The paper would benefit from an introduction stating what it aims to do. The background is largely about health, yet there is no statement of research questions (no mention of health?) - apart from explaining that this is an exploratory study to elicit and describe the experiences of residents with rats.

Thank you for identifying that the aim of the paper is not sufficiently explicit. We have rephrased the introduction to state that “the aim of this study was to identify the potential impacts
of living with rats on the health and wellbeing of residents in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside.”
This edit can be found on page 5, lines 5 - 7.

Comment 2. You state that you do not want to build a theory to explain experiences - why not as this would strengthen the paper?

We have chosen not to focus on theory building in this paper for two reasons. The first is that good descriptive work necessarily precedes theory building. The second is that theory building would require a second iteration of this work in order to saturate all categories for theory building. In order to provide a more thorough rational for why we have made this choice, we have expanded on this statement in the Methods (lines 12 - 14, page 7) to reflect these reasons.

Comment 3. The focus on health needs to be made explicit e.g. considering the pathways to health (mental health, physical, community health, social justice, different dimensions of health etc) as a way of framing the findings and discussion.

This is a very helpful comment and we agree that the framework of the Introduction could be strengthened to emphasize the links between rats and health. To do this, we have restructured the Introduction to focus on three potential pathways through which rats may affect health: 1) as symbols of neighbourhood neglect and disorder, exacerbating issues of environmental injustice (lines 18 - 23 page 3); 2) through perceptions of the risks posed by rats (i.e., disease) (lines 1 - 8 page 4); and 3) as environmental hazards (lines 10 - 19, page 4). We have also returned to these ideas in the Discussion for environmental injustice (lines 8 - 10, page 32), risks posed by rats (lines 5 - 10, page 31) and environmental hazards (lines 8 - 10, page 34). Further, we have suggested that identifying the pathways through which rats affect health is an important area of future work (lines 24, page 35, lines 1-3 page 36).

Comment 4. Homelessness, deprivation and drug use are important contextual features and you recruited participants from the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users - was the focus therefore specifically on drug users, as this is not particularly clear. If so, it would be helpful to consider the context more and why this is important/unique.
Thank you for identifying that the reasons made for recruitment through the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users are unclear. We chose to recruit participants through VANDU because it is a trusted institution among a population of disadvantaged residents. The focus itself was not on the experience of drug users, as VANDU members may or may not be illicit drug users (there are two membership streams in the organization), but instead on the experience of those with a greater likelihood of exposure to rats. Therefore we believed that information derived from this population would be more informative regarding the impacts of rats than a population of individuals with stable housing. We have clarified our reasons for recruitment in the Methods (lines 7 - 13, page 6).

Comment 5. Methodology reads like it is taken from a text book - would be useful to see what the concept maps or composite map looks like.

In order to improve the details of the methodology we have revised some of the wording in the Methods (pages 6 - 7). While we have chosen not to include the concept maps of individuals (in order to minimize the risks of participant identification), we have included a figure (Figure 1, Figure legend on lines 10 - 13, page 43) demonstrating the themes derived from the work in the original concept map. We have not included the original concept map as it is far too large to be legible in print in the journal, but we hope that this simplified version will be useful for readers in conceptualizing the data.

Comment 6. You provide little information about the characteristics of the research participants e.g.- material circumstances; working/not working; drug users or not; household characteristics; children etc (a table might be helpful).

Indeed, we had considered including a table, however for reasons of participant anonymity, we chose not to do so. Further, many of the characteristics mentioned (e.g., material circumstances; working/not working; drug users or not) were not recorded for each individual, and therefore only information that was mentioned freely as part of the individual’s experience with rats was recorded. However, we do agree that it is important to more clearly identify the characteristics of the participants. Therefore, for each quotation used, we have included two identifiers after each participant’s name: their gender (M/F) and an additional identifier if the individual indicated that their story occurred at a time when they were homeless (H).
Comment 7. Occasionally you reference the view of a homeless person, woman or child, but it is not consistent. You should bring out the differences/similarities based on sample characteristics.

Although we do reference some of the demographic differences of participants, we do not believe that we have sufficient data to offer rigorous comparisons according to sample characteristics. We have expanded on the limited sampling of women and homeless individuals as a limitation in the Discussion (lines 17 - 19, page 35) and used this limitation to highlight areas for future research. As indicated in the response to Comment 5 we have attempted to improve the consistency of the results by identifying participants by gender and by housing status.

Comment 8. You have five themes - some of these could be background factors (very descriptive), and there could be a stronger focus on the health aspects (e.g. mapping pathways) and what the implications are of this in relation to other environmental hazards and issues.

We agree that identifying the pathways underlying rat-associated health impacts would be a very valuable contribution to this field, and that stronger links to environmental hazards would also improve our understanding of the role of rats in mental health outcomes. Yet, we believe that these associations extend beyond the scope of this particular paper and might be limited by the data we have collected which was directed at exploratory questions which were not designed to contribute to the development of theory in this way. However, we do believe that this approach would be very valuable for future studies, and therefore we have identified these questions as areas for future research in the Discussion (lines 24, page 35, lines 1-3 page 36).

Comment 9. Other issues are not detailed in the findings e.g. (p30). Very briefly you mention other pests such as cockroaches and bedbugs, then lack of affordable housing, opioid crisis, police harassment etc but in a scant way.

This is an important observation, and we had not meant to represent these findings as less important than others. We have added some additional description around the perceptions of other pests (lines 9 - 13, page 29). Specifically, we have added a sentence to indicate that other pests such as bedbugs were mentioned as an important factor when looking for housing, whereas rats were not. We have expanded as well in the section on housing to emphasize the disgust felt by participants regarding a perceived lack of action by city officials to address homelessness.
Regarding the opioid crisis and police harassment, these factors were mentioned by fewer participants (unlike housing, which was mentioned by the majority of participants). However, we have elaborated in this section to underscore that individuals were concerned about the fentanyl crisis and police harassment because of the impacts on the community and feelings of safety (lines 8 - 15, page 30).

Comment 10. There are too many quotes and not enough analysis. The discussion is interesting and well-written but does not build very much on the findings.

Thank you for your suggestion to reduce the number of quotes. This was particularly difficult given the rich description of the participants. We have removed 11 of the quotes from the original draft to address this. We have also restructured the Discussion to build more on the findings of this study.