

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### SEPTEMBER 16, 2009

---

#### *Tompkins County Renter Survey: Combined Analysis of Student Renters and the General Population*

#### **Background:**

The Tompkins County Housing Needs Assessment estimates the need for 4,000 new owner and renter-occupied housing units based on population growth dynamics and underlying demographic trends in the county. According to the *2005-2007 U.S. Census American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates* the county has 19,738 (53%) owner-occupied housing units and 17,636 (47%) renter-occupied housing units.<sup>1</sup>

The Tompkins County Renter Survey was developed to provide more detailed information about the evolving nature of renter unit demand in the County and assist in gaining a greater understanding of the nature and specific sub-components of future unit demand. Information about the type of renter housing needed; the composition and structure of the household(s) living in unit types; household income; and information about the housing costs borne by renters was gathered to assist in developing a greater understanding of the needs and challenges faced by the county's renter households.

The survey was constructed in such a way that it can be replicated in subsequent years and provide the opportunity to observe trends and changes over time. The Department would like to repeat the survey on a three year cycle with the next survey in January 2011 if funding is available.

#### **Survey Methodology:**

The Tompkins County Planning Department, in conjunction with Cornell University's Office of Government and Community Relations, contracted with Survey Research Institute (SRI) to conduct a survey of renters in Tompkins County. Two renter populations were surveyed - students from Cornell University, Ithaca College and Tompkins Cortland Community College and non-students. The students were surveyed via a web-based survey instrument and the non-students were surveyed by phone. The survey questions were developed by housing professionals in the community and modifications were made by SRI based on the response reliability of the questions.

In December 2008, the Tompkins County Planning Department, in cooperation with Cornell University, contracted with Survey Research Institute to complete a Combined Analysis of Student Renters and the General Population.

#### *General Population*

A random sample was drawn by Genesys Sampling Systems targeting renters in Tompkins County (renters were surveyed from all municipalities in Tompkins County). Potential respondents were screened as to their rental status, non-student status, whether they are a decision-maker, and if they live in Tompkins County. If respondents fell into all of those categories, they were deemed eligible. The survey was conducted until the target sample size of 380 respondents who completed the survey was reached.

#### *Student Population*

The samples of student email addresses were provided by each participating institution: Cornell University, Ithaca College, and Tompkins Cortland Community College. Only students living off-campus were surveyed. The survey was sent out to 1,999 people, 1,755 of whom had valid email addresses and were eligible for the survey. Invitation emails were sent out on April 22, 2008 followed by five reminder

---

<sup>1</sup> The data does not include on-campus student housing.

emails. Data collection ended on June 6, 2008. 356 people completed the survey out of a possible 1,775 valid email addresses yielding a response rate of 20%.<sup>2</sup>

### **Objectives of Renter Survey:**

The key objectives of the Renter Survey were to gain better information on the following:

- The cost of rent as it is related to the number of bedrooms in a unit.
- The cost of rent and utilities combined as it is related to the number of bedrooms in a unit.
- Comparison between the student renter population and the general renter population regarding desired characteristics in a rental unit.
- Characteristics retired renters are looking for in a rental unit.
- The quantity of respondents who have moved from homeownership to renting in relationship to age.
- The cost of rent related to income and the proportion of income contributed to monthly rent.
- Desired characteristics in a rental unit and reasons for renting among different age groups.
- Desired characteristics in a home among those renters who would like to purchase a home.
- Demographics of the student renter population and general renter population.

### **Key Findings:**

- The greatest difference in the cost of rent as it is related to the number of bedrooms in a unit was for 3-bedroom units.
  - When comparing the 3-bedroom cost (rent only, not including utilities) 42% of the general population pays \$700-899 for a 3-bedroom unit with 26% paying \$900-1,099 and 28% paying \$1,100 or more; the majority (51%) of the student population pays \$1,100 or more for a 3-bedroom unit with only 9% paying \$700-899 and 29% paying \$900-1,099.
- Comparison between the student renter population and the general renter population regarding desired characteristics in a rental unit.
  - The condition of the apartment is the most important characteristic for the general renter population (90%) followed by location of apartment/house (81%).
  - Location of apartment/house and condition of apartment are the most important characteristics for the student renter population (90% and 87%, respectively).
  - Access to garage is the least important characteristic for the general renter population (78%) followed by play area for children on-site (72%).
  - Play area for children on-site is the least important characteristic for the student renter population (86%) followed by access to a garage (73%).
- Characteristics retired renters are looking for in a rental unit.
  - The general renter survey asked the work situation of the individual. Information regarding those who answered “retired” was pulled from the data for further analysis. The primary reason retired individuals are renting is to have less maintenance and responsibility in a rental unit (88%). The condition of the apartment is the most important characteristic in a rental unit for retired individuals (88%).
- The quantity of respondents who have moved from homeownership to renting in relationship to age.
  - Two-thirds of respondents age 35-65 had owned a home prior to renting; three-quarters of respondents over the age of 65 had owned a home prior to renting.
- Affordability of apartment/house.
  - When asked “*Is this apartment/house affordable to you?*” 88% of the general renter population and 74% of the student renter population stated “yes”.
- Ease of finding a rental unit.

---

<sup>2</sup> The students were surveyed near the completion of the spring semester. This was found to be a less than ideal time period. Subsequent surveys will be administered in February/March for greater student participation.

- When asked “*How easy or difficult was it to find an acceptable apartment/house to rent?*” 58% of the general renter population stated “very or somewhat easy” and 41% stated “very or somewhat difficult”.
- 51% of the student renter population stated “very or somewhat easy” and 47% stated “very or somewhat difficult”.
- The cost of rent related to income and the proportion of income contributed to monthly rent.
  - The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) standard is that no more than 30% of a renter household’s income should be spent on rent and utilities.
  - Of those individuals in the survey (general renter population) with an income of less than \$20,000, 38% are paying more than 30% on housing costs; those with an income of \$20,000 to 40,000, 12% are paying more than 30% on housing costs.
  - Among students surveyed with an income of less than \$20,000, 90% are paying more than 30% on housing costs; those with an income of \$20,000 to 40,000, 39% are paying more than 30% on housing costs.
- Desired characteristics in a rental unit and reasons for renting among different age groups.
  - Survey respondents were asked the importance for renting based on the following factors: (1) desire to be close to job; (2) cannot afford down payment on a house; (3) have another home/vacation home; (4) does not need a large living space; (5) less maintenance and responsibility; (6) financially more affordable than owning; and (7) may move from Tompkins County in the near future. Individuals were able to indicate multiple factors. The data was analyzed by age cohorts, i.e. under 25; 25-34; 35-65; and over 65.
  - All age cohorts indicated that having another home or vacation home was the least important factor for renting.
  - Both the under 25 cohort and the 25- 34 age cohort indicated that the desire to live close to their job was the most important factor for renting.
  - Both the 35-65 age cohort and the over 65 age cohort indicated that less maintenance and responsibility was the most important factor for renting.
  - The 25-34 age cohort identified four (out of seven) factors that a majority of respondents felt were important: (1) cannot afford down payment on a house; (2) less maintenance/responsibility; (3) financially more affordable than owning; and (4) may move from Tompkins County in the near future.
- Characteristics in a home among those renters who would like to purchase a home.
  - Two hundred and fifty-eight respondents (of a total of 736 respondents) were very or somewhat interested in purchasing a home in the next 2-3 years. Of those 258 respondents, 166 were interested in purchasing a home in the Tompkins County area (defined as City of Ithaca, Tompkins County outside the city of Ithaca, or immediate area within 40 miles of Tompkins County). Those interested in owning a home in the near future in the Tompkins County area are most interested in purchasing a single family detached home (75%), duplex (7%), condo (7%), townhouse (5%), mobile home (1%), other type of housing not listed (1%), or any type of housing listed (4%). Their preference for where the housing unit would be located was in an urban neighborhood (31%), village or hamlet (20%), suburban subdivision (17%) or rural area (32%).
- Demographics of the student renter population and general renter population.
  - Survey demographic data were compared to data available through the U.S. Census American Community Survey 2005-2007. Using the American Community Survey, the respondents surveyed represent an accurate sample of the larger renter population in Tompkins County.

- From those respondents of the general renter population survey, 86% of households are single or two-person households among the general renter population and 85% of general renter households do not have children.
- The Tompkins County Renter’s Survey asked both the general renter population and the student renter population the following open-ended question: “*If you could change or improve one thing about your current apartment/house, what would it be?*” The responses were aggregated into multiple broad categories. For the general renter population twelve (12) broad categories were identified; the student renter population comments fit into seventeen (17) categories. The top six categories are highlighted below.

*General Renter Population:*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Responses</b>
Apartment Size	65
Affordability	50
Condition of Apartment/Building	34
Kitchen	25
Location	23
Energy Efficiency/Utility Cost	23

*Student Renter Population:*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Responses</b>
Condition of Apartment/Building	68
Affordability	55
Energy Efficiency/Utility Cost	40
Management	39
Apartment Size	26
Location	23

The data and analysis provided in the 2008 Tompkins County Renter Survey provides housing organizations, local government, employers, and higher education institutions an initial snapshot of the larger rental housing situation as it relates to both the general renter population and the student renter population. The findings reinforce the need for affordable, well maintained housing, both renter and owner-occupied, in our communities. As subsequent renter surveys are completed, it will provide the opportunity to identify trends within the renter housing market.

**Contact:**

Jeanne Leccese at 274-5560 or by email, [jleccese@tompkins-co.org](mailto:jleccese@tompkins-co.org).

Copies of the three final reports, *Tompkins County Renter Survey: General Population*; *Tompkins County Renter Survey: Student Population*; and *Tompkins County Renter Survey: Combined Analysis of Student Renters and the General Population*, are available at [www.tompkins-co.org/planning/housing\\_choices](http://www.tompkins-co.org/planning/housing_choices).

**Tables: Desired Characteristics in a Rental Unit**



