Squatting should not be illegal. In fact, it should be encouraged.

You go away on a two month holiday that you’ve been saving for for five years, only to find a bunch of squatters have taken up residence in your home when you return. They’ve packed your clothes into bags. They’ve rearranged your furniture. They’ve even changed the locks. It takes you two weeks to get them evicted, two weeks of you staying with relatives or in the uncomfortable motel down the road, and afterwards you can’t even charge them with anything. The backdoor was unlocked, they say. It isn’t illegal, they say. Where’s your heart, they say.

**“Homes are sacrosanct places: they’re places to feel safe and secure”**

It’s invasive, distressing and violating. Homes are sacrosanct places: they’re places to feel safe and secure.

**“No one has, nor ever should, have the right to move into your home without your permission”**

And the thing is, no one is arguing with you on this. No one has, nor ever should, have the right to move into your home without your permission. But this story is in the minority, and it pays to remember that. In the past five years, there have only been 112 reports of squatters moving into occupied homes. In this city, there are 1.2 million residences. Think of it this way: it is statistically more likely for you to be homeless than for your house to be overtaken with squatters.

There is an estimated 17, 890 people who are homeless on any given night in this city. Of those, nearly half are family groups, with almost 20% of those experiencing homeless aged less than 12 years old. Over 30% of all homeless people are women and children escaping domestic or family violence. The impact of homelessness on people is dramatic and even worse for children. Feelings of isolation, insecurity, anxiety and depression are incredibly common. People who experience homelessness are more likely to suffer serious health and mental health conditions, suffer discrimination and stigma and have difficulties in making and maintaining relationships with others. If they are not already unemployed, being homeless increases the chance of being let-go or fired, and makes any sort of education incredibly difficult.

**“Feelings of isolation, insecurity, anxiety and depression are incredibly common”**

But consider this: according to census data, there were 107,226 empty houses on census night in 2015. That’s nearly 6 for every single homeless person, including the children. Even if 90% of those houses were owned by people on long term holidays, or embroiled in legal battles, or even simply unliveable due to asbestos or mould, there would still be more than enough to provide safe, secure and long-term accommodation to those who need it most.

And the thing is, no one is actually suggesting we simply give homeless people those houses. But allowing, and encouraging, squatting in unoccupied dwellings is something that needs to be considered and needs to be considered *now*.

Squatters, by and large, can actually serve a valuable purpose. Abandoned houses encourage vandals, become dilapidated and run down and lose their property value quickly. They become infested with rats, mice and bugs. Without use, the plumbing and electrical wires break and rot away. Squatters *help* with these. They mow your laws, weed the garden beds, and keep the house clean. Squatters will fix leaking pipes and replace missing electrical wires. As we said, homes are sacrosanct places: they are places to feel safe and secure. If anyone needs that, it is those who experience homelessness.

House prices are rising. Rent is rising. The average cost of a three bedroom home is now close to $1million while the average cost of a one bedroom rental is $450 per week, nearly half the average income. Those who can afford homes often have more than one, and, due to the tax-evasion scheme of negative gearing, many choose to leave those second homes unrented, instead claiming them as losses. This limits the availability of rentals and drives up the costs. In one word, it is unsustainable.

**“It is time we stopped caring so much about property rights and started caring more about human rights”**

Squatting in these “abandoned” houses is a short term solution to the lack of low-end affordable housing. Making it illegal is just further disadvantaging the most needy and underprivileged in our society. It is time we stopped caring so much about property rights and started caring more about human rights.