Most formulators of housing policy will state as one of their central objectives the aim of providing adequate and appropriate shelter for the poor. The currently dominant Global Strategy for Shelter to the Year 2000 (GSS) – adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1988 – gives priority to the lower-income groups in the major urban areas of the developing world and to widening the range of housing choices available to all households. In South Africa the White Paper on the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) contains similar sound goals for future housing policy: the national housing goal is ‘to establish a sustainable housing process which enables all people to secure housing with secure tenure within a safe and healthy environment ...’ (National Housing Forum 1994).

It is surely relevant, then, to consider how the unhoused poor, the future targets of housing policy, currently meet their shelter needs. This will give some indication of the problems and priorities of the inadequately housed, and allow the broad goals of national housing policies to be operationalised through specific and appropriate objectives.

In the urban areas of South Africa we know that many of those inadequately housed are to be found in the unserviced informal settlements, many are crowded into hostel accommodation, while some are on the pavements or in the night shelters. A very significant number, however, fall into the often neglected category of subletters and sharers: they find shelter with other families in backyard shacks, in garages, or in storerooms, or in part of a landlord’s house. They choose to find accommodation in this way because it can offer some important advantages. There are important disadvantages, too, and not many renting families would claim that their form of accommodation met the housing goals of the RDP.

It is uncertain how many people in the urban areas of South Africa qualify as subletters and sharers. A recent survey by the Palmer Development Group (1993) in six formal African urban townships (in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban, Springs, and Welkom) estimated that 40 per cent of the surveyed population lived in backyard shacks and a further 15 per cent were tenants within the formal dwellings; thus a possible 55 per cent of the surveyed population
were renters and sharers. A survey in the African areas¹ of Cape Town (Watson 1994) indicated that in the older formal township of Guguletu, 100 per cent of properties were sublet; this fell to 86 per cent in the informal settlement of KTC and to 68 per cent in the newer formal areas of Khayelitsha. Surveys in other parts of the developing world indicate equally high, and often higher, levels of subletting (see Edwards 1990; Gilbert 1991, 1993; Malpezzi and Ball 1991).

Despite the important role which subletting is playing in accommodating lower-income people, and the growing literature on this topic, its importance has still not been fully acknowledged in policy terms. This is true of the widely accepted GSS, prompting the criticism from Habitat (UNCHS 1991:3) that the failure of most housing policies can be attributed to their failure to ‘address the needs and interests of tenants, who form the majority of low-income households in many cities’. This is also true of the housing policy currently emerging in South Africa: while the need of some people to rent rather than to buy is acknowledged, it seems unlikely that the rental needs of the very poor will be addressed.

The aim of this paper is to draw attention to what is clearly a major housing sub-market in the urban areas, and to argue for the incorporation of subletting into future housing policy deliberations. The information contained in this paper was collected through a relatively small-scale survey² carried out in parts of Cape Town in early 1994; as such it is not necessarily valid for Cape Town as a whole, or for other parts of the country. However, significant parallels between the results of this survey and research on subletting elsewhere (see especially Gilbert [1993] on subletting in South America) suggest that the patterns and processes described here are not entirely off the mark.

This paper firstly identifies the issues and problems of subletting and sharing which are relevant to a policy perspective. The second section reviews the extent to which subletting has been incorporated into policy debates, and the third section puts forward a position on the role of subletting within a national housing policy.

SUBLETTING AND SHARING IN THE CONTEXT OF CAPE TOWN

Defining Subletting and Sharing

The focus, in this paper, is on those individuals or households which occupy dwelling space which is under the ‘control’ of other private individuals. Within this broad definition, the nature of the occupancy and the rights and obligations which accompany it can take on a number of forms.

The nature of the relationship between the two parties is sometimes defined in legal terms, and the distinction is made between ‘formal rental’, where an individual or household rents an officially approved second dwelling from a resident landlord, and ‘informal rental’, where the sublet space is a backyard shack or a room within a house. This may be technically illegal if the shack