

Low income not enough to qualify for scarce social housing

- The need to manage long wait lists influences many social housing policies, rather than ensuring positive outcomes for tenants.
- Eligibility reviews mean tenants fear any increased income may make them ineligible for social housing.
- Tenant transfers between public and community housing or between community housing providers is not possible.

A shortage of social housing means eligible applicants who don't have a 'priority need' can spend up to 10 years on wait lists, and have to face strict annual eligibility checks to remain in consideration for housing, according to new AHURI research.

The research, '*The construction of social housing pathways across Australia*', undertaken for AHURI by researchers from the Centre for Social Impact and City Futures at UNSW Sydney, Swinburne University of Technology, University of Tasmania and University of Adelaide examines the role government policies have in shaping the use of social housing by tenants over time.

'We found that the main pathway into social housing is via homelessness or risk of homelessness, followed by other circumstances that require deep support, such as having a disability, mental health issues or experiencing domestic and family violence,' said lead researcher Associate Professor Abigail Powell from the Centre for Social Impact at UNSW.

Once tenants are in social housing, government policies that review eligibility every two or three years can potentially undermine the preparedness of tenants to undertake education and training, or take up employment opportunities that might begin to establish a greater level of independence. Tenants may have to, or may fear they may have to, give up their social housing, and hence their housing security, if their income increases and they are no longer eligible for social housing. There is great variation across Australian jurisdictions in terms of what is reviewed and the frequency with which reviews occur.

The research also examined how government policies impact tenants' ability to move between social housing properties. Policies are strongly influenced by a need to manage the long social housing wait list in times where there is a sustained high demand and lack of supply. For example, tenants who apply to move to another property must satisfy the eligibility criteria for entry into social housing, including having the lower income thresholds required of applicants, and tenants with complex or particular needs are most likely to be successful.

Policies that enable public housing properties to be transferred to and managed by community housing providers result in tenants becoming less mobile in the future as moving between public and community housing properties is not possible.

'The policies that deliver social housing exist within a broader, resource-constrained policy context. Our research suggests addressing the supply of social housing is a way to address many of the other problems with social housing as well,' said Associate Professor Powell. 'It would help with the creation of a more flexible system in terms of social housing eligibility and employment activities that improve tenants' income, which could lead to better outcomes for tenants.'

The report can be downloaded from the AHURI website at:

<https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/316>

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