

Thursday 13 June 2019

Social housing terminations impact vulnerable families, new research finds

- Social housing landlords increasingly house persons and families with complex support needs.
- Exclusionary ‘get tough’ approaches that emphasise eviction have impacts on vulnerable families.
- Women often face eviction because of the actions of a male household member, and some women are evicted because of violence against them.
- Reviewing gender impacts of social housing policies and adopting ‘the best interest of the child’ principle can help sustain tenancies.

As social housing becomes more targeted to households with complex support needs, ‘get tough’ approaches to crime and anti-social behaviour are impacting vulnerable people and families, AHURI research has found.

The research, ‘*Social housing legal responses to crime and anti-social behaviour: impacts on vulnerable families*’, undertaken by researchers from UNSW Sydney and University of Tasmania, reviewed social housing tenancies law, policies and 95 cases of eviction proceedings in five jurisdictions—New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria, Western Australia and the Northern Territory—and national policy principles relating to four groups of vulnerable people: women affected by domestic violence; children; Indigenous families; and people who problematically use alcohol and other drugs.

The research reveals that social housing landlords are generally strongly committed to assisting women affected by domestic violence into safe housing, but this commitment may falter during a social housing tenancy. ‘Tenancy obligations and extended liability impose hard expectations that women will control the misconduct of male partners and children. In tenancy legal proceedings violence against women becomes framed as a ‘nuisance’ and some women are evicted because of violence against them’ said lead researcher Dr Chris Martin from UNSW Sydney.

‘The cases involving drug offences in particular show a punitive approach, with very minor offences, or offences involving visitors or family members often resulting in termination proceedings. In some cases, tenants are evicted even though the criminal justice system outcome is to allow rehabilitation at home.’

A number of policy options are put forward by the researchers to help social landlords in supporting vulnerable people and families when responding to crime and anti-social behaviour including:

- reviewing the gender impacts of social housing policies and practice and sponsoring the cultivation of respectful relationships
- adopting ‘the best interests of the child’ as the paramount factor in decisions about termination affecting children

- establishing specific Indigenous housing organisations, officers and advocates
- adopting harm minimisation as the guiding principle for responses to alcohol and other drug use, including where there is criminal offending.

'Responding to anti-social behaviour and misconduct in social housing is plainly a very challenging area of practice. Many of the cases we reviewed involved highly conflictual, destructive and distressing behaviour', said Dr Martin.

'It appears that in most cases a single substantial contact between the social housing landlord and the tenant was sufficient to address any problems. However, where problematic behaviour continues, the usual course of escalating threats to the tenancy and pushing the tenant to 'engage' with the landlord and support services does not work for many. In those cases, people who are vulnerable may be evicted from their social housing, often into homelessness. We need to bring support out of the shadow of termination.'

The report can be downloaded from the AHURI website at:

<https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/314>

For media enquiries, please contact:

Anthony Smeaton
Marketing and Communications Director
Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute
Mobile +61 404 544 101
Email **anthony.smeaton@ahuri.edu.au**