

FINAL INQUIRY REPORT

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FINAL REPORT NO. 332

‘A pathway to where?’ Inquiry into understanding and reimagining social housing pathways

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Publication Date July 2020

DOI 10.18408/ahuri-7118001



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ISBN

978-1-925334-96-8

Key words

Social housing, public housing, community housing, policy, operational policy, practice, housing pathways, systems thinking

Series

AHURI Final Report

Number

332

ISSN

1834-7223

Publisher

Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited
Melbourne, Australia

DOI

10.18408/ahuri-7118001

Format

PDF, online only

URL

<http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/332>

Recommended citation

Muir, K., Powell, A., Flanagan, K., Stone, W., Tually, S., Faulkner, D., Hartley, C., and Pawson, H. (2020) 'A pathway to where?' Inquiry into understanding and reimagining social housing pathways, AHURI Final Report No. 332, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/332>, doi: 10.18408/ahuri-7118001.

Related reports and documents

Powell, A., Meltzer, A., Martin, C., Stone, W., Liu, E., Flanagan, K., Muir, K. and Tually, S. (2019) *The construction of social housing pathways across Australia*, AHURI Final Report No. 316, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/316>, doi: 10.18408/ahuri-7118101.

Flanagan, K., Levin, I., Tually, S., Varadharajan, M., Verdouw, J., Faulkner, D., Meltzer, A. and Vreugdenhil, A. (2020) *Understanding the experience of social housing pathways*, AHURI Final Report No. 324, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne, <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/324>, doi: 10.18408/ahuri-4118301.

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Acknowledgements

This material was produced with funding from the Australian Government and state and territory governments. AHURI Limited gratefully acknowledges the financial and other support it has received from these governments, without which this work would not have been possible.

AHURI Limited also gratefully acknowledges the contributions, both financial and in-kind, of its university research partners who have helped make the completion of this material possible.

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Each AHURI Inquiry is supported by a panel of experts drawn from the research, policy and practice communities.

The Inquiry Panel are to provide guidance on ways to maximize the policy relevance of the research and draw together the research findings to address the key policy implications of the research. Panel members for this Inquiry:

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Acronyms and abbreviations used in this report

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AHURI	Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AURIN	Australian Urban Research Infrastructure Network
CRA	Commonwealth Rent Assistance
DOMINO	Data Over Multiple Individual Occurrences
DHS	Department of Human Services
GP	General Practitioner
ICH	Indigenous Community Housing
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NRAS	National Rental Affordability Scheme
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
PC	Productivity Commission
PIA	Priority Investment Approach (dataset)
PRA	Private Rental Assistance
SA	South Australia
SOMIH	State Owned and Managed Indigenous Housing
WA	Western Australia

Glossary

A list of definitions for terms commonly used by AHURI is available on the AHURI website www.ahuri.edu.au/research/glossary.

Executive summary

Key points

- Demand for social housing in Australia significantly exceeds supply.
- The policy response to the demand has focused on ‘pathways’, with pathways being shaped by increased targeting to people with the highest needs.
- As a result, there are inconsistencies between operational policies and the reality of people’s lives as they traverse housing pathways;
- Reimagining social housing pathways requires:
 - Solutions that move away from managing a waitlist by rationing supply;
 - Constructing realistic pathways that best enable positive tenant outcomes;
 - Rethinking social housing as infrastructure of care, within a spectrum of housing assistance and supports across tenures.
- As a society, it is critical we can answer the most frequent question that emerged from this research project: ‘A pathway to where?’

Key findings

The demand and supply policy context

The demand for social housing is significant and waiting lists are long. In 2018, there were 140,600 applicants on the wait list for public housing and 8,800 awaiting State Owned and Managed Indigenous Housing (SOMIH) (AIHW 2019a) and 38,300 on the waitlist for mainstream community housing data (as at 2017) (AIHW 2018).

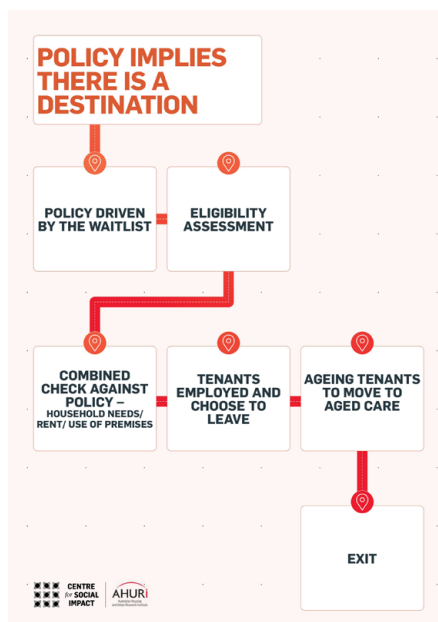
Available housing stock has been out-paced by growing numbers of households experiencing housing affordability issues (Muir, Martin et al. 2018). This is partly due to a 7 per cent decrease in government expenditure on social housing between 2011–2016 (Pawson, Parsell et al. 2018).

Policies that shape social housing pathways have evolved in response to high demand and decreased supply, with a tighter targeting of eligibility and a rationing of housing to those of 'highest need'. Consequently, over time, public housing has shifted away from supporting the working class to supporting people who are in poverty and have complex needs¹ (Hayward 1996; Chalkley 2012).

How are pathways into, within and out of social housing conceptualised and translated into policy?

Policy implementation has largely been driven by a need to manage the social housing waiting list, rather than ensuring positive housing outcomes (such as housing stability, affordability, security and safety) for tenants and their households. Policies affecting entry into, movement within and out of social housing are predominantly shaped by eligibility criteria and increased prioritisation of people with complex needs. Social housing policies largely imply a throughput pathway (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Social housing policy implies a throughput pathway (an example)



Source: The Centre for Social Impact

¹ Complex needs is often used to describe people with compounding social and/or health issues (that often require different types of supports), such as mental or physical illness, disability, family violence, homelessness and/or substance abuse issues (Chalkley 2012).

In practice, this means that having a very low income alone is rarely enough to access social housing. In this high demand, low supply environment, low income eligibility almost always needs to be coupled with other complex needs—including disability, poor physical or mental health, experience of family violence, exiting institutions or being homeless or at risk of homelessness. Homelessness or being at risk of homelessness is the most common pathway for entry into social housing because it is deemed as 'highest need' (AIHW 2018).

However, the situation is far more complex. Pathways are about the mobility of people moving through the housing system as their circumstances change. The extent to which these preferences and needs can be met depends on the context in which people live and the ecosystem surrounding them (see Figure 2).

This ecosystem has a significant impact on how policies play out across jurisdictions and for different people. Pathways are also affected by people's changing needs and household types; housing providers; how policies are operationalised; the availability of stock; a lack of affordable alternatives; and the broader social, economic and policy environment. While policy rhetoric recognises the non-linear nature of housing pathways, the operational policies driving the shape and direction of social housing assistance do not adequately take account of this.

Who is moving into, within and out of social housing?

The number of people entering and exiting public and SOMIH properties between 2011 and 2018 reflects a trend in decreasing supply.

Annual exits from public housing and SOMIH properties outstripped the number of newly allocated properties:

- In 2017–18, 7.6 per cent of all public housing tenants and 8.6 per cent of all SOMIH tenants exited, but there were only 6.7 per cent and 8.0 per cent of tenancies newly allocated respectively (AIHW 2019a).
- Between 2016–17 and 2017–18, the number of public housing exits increased by 14 per cent (26,369 households) (AIHW 2019a).

The current demographics of the social housing population reflect the application of policy over time, with a number of cohorts overrepresented in social housing:

- People over 65 years;
- Children aged 0–14 years;
- People with caring responsibilities; and
- People with a disability (AIHW 2019a).

The prioritisation of people with complex needs has been increasing over time. This is most clearly evident in new allocations of social housing. In 2017–18, a majority of all new allocations where need was recorded were to people in 'greatest need'² (AIHW 2019a).

The increasingly complex needs of these tenants raises questions about:

- a. whether social housing should be seen as a transitional tenure on a housing pathway, or as an appropriate, safe, stable destination point;
- b. whether social housing is increasingly becoming an infrastructure of care for tenants with complex and potentially ongoing support needs (Power and Mee 2019); and
- c. how many people would be in a position to be able to transition out of social housing, without affordable housing options and adequate supports in the private market.

² A combination of safety, health conditions, disability, caring responsibilities, Indigenous, under 25 years or over 75 years, homeless and at risk of homelessness.

Despite policies that seek to increase exits and decrease waiting lists, 43 per cent of public tenants currently residing in social housing have lived in that tenure for 10 years or more and the proportion of public housing tenants with tenures over 10 years has been increasing over the last decade (AIHW 2019a).

Longitudinal data show similar trends, but with more transience. Baker, Leishman et al. (2020) recently examined the stability, entries and exits of 10 million interactions with government services over 10 years using the Priority Investment Approach (PIA) dataset. After categorising people into entry, exit and transient groups, they found that the largest group of social housing tenants (33.9%) were 'stable'. This group had remained in social housing for the full 10-year period. They were demographically different from the others in the dataset—more likely to be older and in receipt of an aged pension or a disability pension and out of the workforce.

Baker, Leishman et al. (2020) also found that 1 in 10 (11.3%) were transitional exits (2.8% were in social housing, left briefly and then returned while the remaining had multiple entries and exits from and to social housing). Therefore, an exit out of social housing did not necessarily mean a successful stable housing outcome. Further, on average, the people who fell into these transitional categories spent more time on social welfare/income support than those in the stable category.

Movements within public housing and SOMIH have been limited (community housing data is not available). National transfer rates were only at 2.7 per cent and 2.5 per cent respectively in 2016–17 (AIHW 2018). Moves within social housing are tenant-initiated or landlord-initiated. Tenant-initiated transfers are most likely to result from changing household circumstances. Landlord-initiated transfers usually relate to portfolio or tenancy management. Both types of transfers are constrained by the wider policy context. There is, for example, very little housing stock to transfer people to. National vacancy rates, for example, are at 4 per cent for public housing dwellings, 5 per cent for community housing and 3 per cent for SOMIH dwellings (AIHW 2019a).

Interviews with tenants and housing providers in this study reflect the challenges faced by the lack of appropriate stock for entries, transfers and exits. This is evident in the length of time people have to wait for more appropriate housing to become available.

Challenges are also faced by providers trying to transfer tenants across providers in multi-provider systems, despite the existence of common housing registers (waiting lists) in most jurisdictions. Some providers expressed considerable frustration about the lack of legal levers to enforce older tenants living in larger properties to 'downsize' into smaller ones and free up larger homes for 'families on the waiting list'. For many of the older tenants interviewed, who had lived in public housing for decades, however, 'moving on' conflicted with their sense of belonging and their connection to 'home'.

Like movements within social housing, exits can also be tenant or landlord initiated. From a landlord perspective, exits can relate to changes to eligibility. Most housing authorities have policies in place regarding the eligibility of tenants to continue in social housing, although there is wide variation across jurisdictions in relation to what is reviewed and how often. Three of the most common eligibility exit policies relate to:

- **Household changes:** Social housing tenants are required to report household change to their landlord, meaning that people leaving or joining a household (e.g. as a result of relationship changes) can affect tenants' entitlement for social housing or a particular type of housing;
- **Income:** Most social housing providers operate a scheme of income-related rents, where tenants pay a proportion of their household income as rent (between 25–30 per cent). Different types of income (e.g. salary vs benefits) can be assessed differently for the purposes of calculating rent and also people's eligibility to stay in social housing.
- **Use of premises by tenants and households:** Tenants are subject to a range of obligations regarding the use of their premises by both members of their household and visitors. Breach of these obligations can result in tenancies being terminated and households leaving social housing.

Some tenants may choose to exit social housing. In our sample of 76 tenants³, 3 had chosen to leave. Two left because they felt safer in unaffordable, unstable market housing than in their social housing. However, the biggest challenge is that even if tenants choose to leave social housing, where do they exit to?

How do tenants experience moving into, within and out of social housing?

People's experiences and their navigation of the social housing system were shaped not only by entry, exit and throughput policies but also by operational policies and, importantly, by the relationships they had with housing providers. Tenants' experiences were profoundly influenced by the level of care (or lack of care) shown to them by housing provider staff members.

They don't like you when you're articulate. I heard the way they talked to people in there—you know they just want very dependent, frightened people. (tenant, NSW)

Tenant experiences were also significantly affected by the broader policy environment. Service fragmentation within and outside of housing services was particularly problematic. Better integration is needed not only between housing and housing related support services, but also between housing and non-housing services.

I was on Newstart at the time, I couldn't afford—that's the thing with being pregnant, they won't put you on parenting payments 'til six weeks, sometimes longer after you've had your child. So I struggled really hard the first six weeks of having her. Just daily food and then trying to afford the rent and stuff before my payments had come in—it was super-tight. I couldn't do anything for those six weeks. (tenant, South Australia)

It is clear that for tenants, and also for many providers across the four jurisdictions studied, social housing is not regarded as a stepping stone but as a legitimate destination.

For tenants reliant on income support and experiencing disability or poor health or other challenges, social housing offers their best chance of stable, secure and affordable housing. For providers, the purpose of social housing is to provide that stable, secure and affordable housing—many workers argued that their role was to preserve tenancies, not disrupt them by forcing people into insecurity and homelessness. In some cases, providers' contractual key performance indicators work against pathways approaches.

For many tenants, the stability, security and sanctuary offered by social housing, makes it a home. This sense of home is incompatible with a pathway model that promotes transition out of social housing as the most desirable outcome.

The greatest thing about it is knowing that 'til the day I die I am safe. I'm coming up to now the longest I've ever lived anywhere. Up until then the longest I lived anywhere after I was married was 12 months. After that [it was] three months, six weeks, nine weeks, eight weeks, two weeks. Four months on, two months off, two months on, one month off. It's huge sense of security and safety and I can plan. I can make decisions knowing I've got the two things you need, health and a home. (tenant, Tasmania)

These arguments should not be read as a failure to understand the pressures facing the social housing system—providers and tenants are acutely aware of these—but as a clear-eyed articulation of the fact that no affordable, secure alternatives to social housing exist.

Importantly, for tenants in particular, the solution is not about finding alternatives but rather building more social housing so that more people can obtain its life-changing benefits.

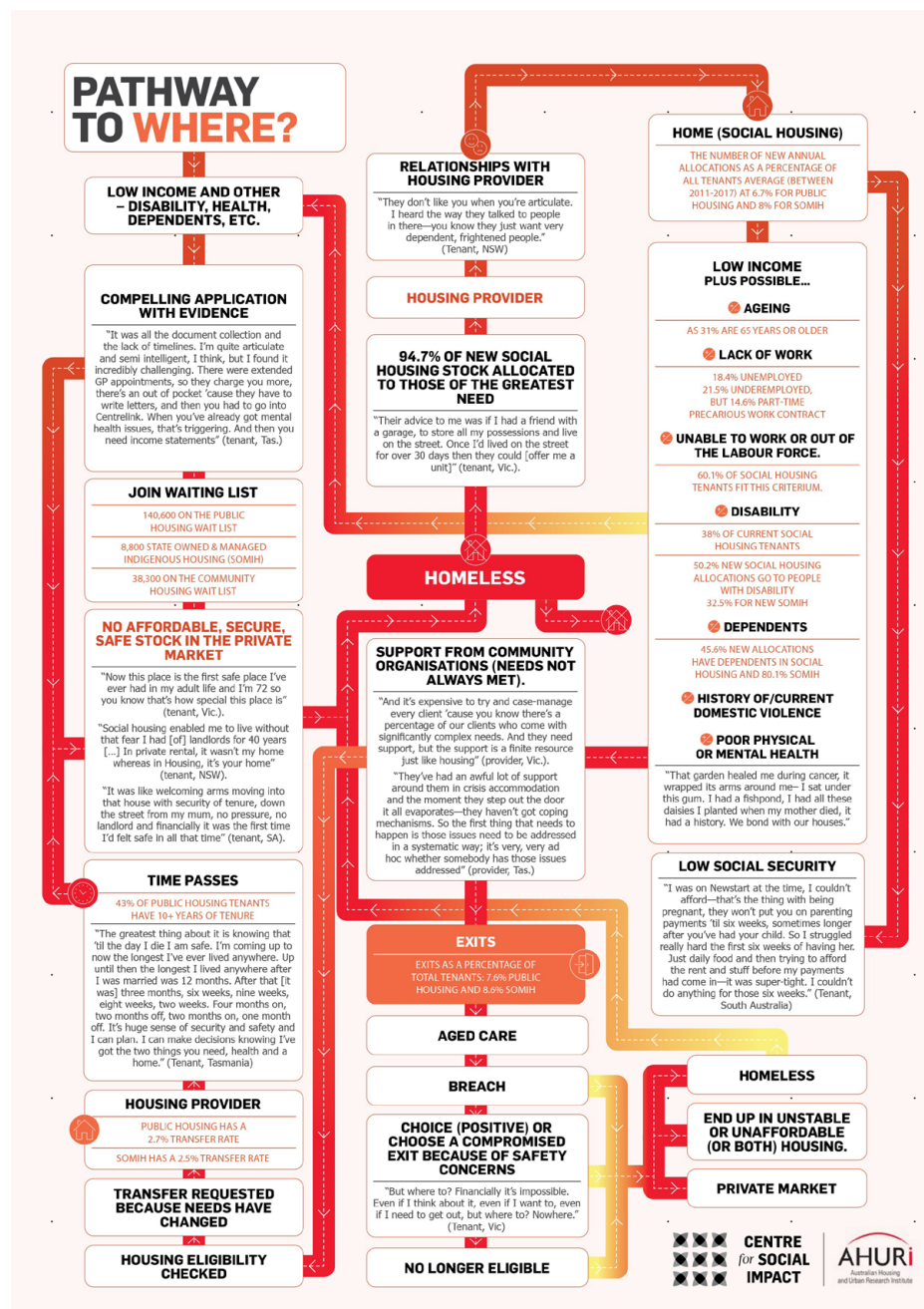
³ 1 of the 76 tenants was not yet in social housing.

Even where tenants wanted to be in a position to move into the future, they did not see exiting social housing as a genuine option for them because there are no affordable, stable alternatives.

But where to? Financially it's impossible. Even if I think about it, even if I want to, even if I need to get out, but where to? Nowhere. (tenant, Victoria)

As a consequence, there is a significant disconnect between the policy implications of pathways and how these pathways are constructed in people's lives (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Realistic social housing pathways faced by tenants and prospective tenant



Source: The Centre for Social Impact

Policy development options

How could social housing pathways be reimagined for positive housing outcomes for current and future tenants across the social and affordable housing system?

If we are going to reimagine social housing pathways, reimagining requires some fundamental changes including:

- Moving away from managing a waitlist by rationing supply to change the system to construct realistic pathways that best enable positive tenant housing outcomes. That is, we need to change the question from: 'How do we decrease the waitlist?' to 'How do we improve housing stability, security and safety of people who are tenants, on the waitlist, or homeless?'
- As a society, it is critical we answer the most frequent question emerging from this research project: 'A pathway to where?' by increasing the supply of affordable, secure housing.
- A cultural shift that puts tenants' needs and outcomes (defined by them) at the heart of changes to policy and practice and ensures kindness is embedded into social policy (Unwin 2018).

Social housing reimagining requires:

- Working from a preventative space⁴ (rather than a reactive one), by providing social and affordable housing for low and very low income people who do not yet have complex needs;
- Accepting that long-term social housing is a legitimate (and cost-effective) way to provide social housing assistance and we need to increase its supply;
- Recognising that social housing provides an infrastructure of care for other tenants/households with long-term complex needs;
- Increasing the supply of social housing;
- Establishing KPIs across the sector that focus on tenant housing outcomes to ensure shared goals that meet the needs of tenants and their households.

Private market reimagining requires:

- Increasing the supply of affordable housing in the private rental market e.g. through private rental subsidies; rental brokerage/access supports; social impact investment;
- Ensuring appropriate, resourced supports are available for people who need them, to enable them to remain in private housing, including affordability and rental assistance schemes;
- Creating conditions for increased housing stability in the public and private markets;
- Providing and adequately resourcing supports when needed to assist people who require it to maintain tenancies and for the duration of need.

The system requires

- Going beyond homogenous entry, transfer, exit paradigms to thinking about multiple pathways for different people under different circumstances and accepting different starting and end points, including social housing as an end destination;
- Developing conceptual understandings of how complex systems work in human services and how pathways are affected by people within and outside the housing sector;
- Improving connections between the private and public housing system;

⁴ With an aim to prevent people from becoming homeless, at risk of homelessness and/or entering the social housing waitlist.

- Better connecting affordable housing supply with demand to ensure that pathways match household needs and that resources are used effectively and efficiently;
- Improving linked administrative and qualitative data across the housing sector to ensure high quality evidence-informed policy and practice.

The study

This report is the culmination of an AHURI Inquiry into understanding and reimagining social housing pathways. The Inquiry aimed to understand how social housing pathways could be reimagined for more effective service delivery, supports and policies for people's housing outcomes. The Inquiry, conducted between 2018–2019, used a mixed methods approach informed by systems thinking. Research methods included:

- **Policy review:** review of the operational policies impacting social housing pathways across all Australian jurisdictions.
- **Administrative and survey data:** publicly available data compiled and presented by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and related agencies was used to examine movement of key population groups into, mobilities within, and exits from, social housing, including over time.
- **Key stakeholder interviews:** interviews and a workshop held with 29 senior government officials, social housing managers and tenant advocates.
- **Service provider interviews:** interviews with 33 service providers (team leaders and frontline workers across government and non-government) in Tasmania, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia.
- **Tenant interviews:** interviews with 76 tenants (former, current and prospective) in three cohorts: older people, families with children (especially single parents) and people with disability, across Tasmania, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia.

All data were analysed to address the Inquiry research questions, but analysis also utilised a systems thinking approach to map different components of the social housing landscape.

1. Introduction

- **This report is the final report in a series for the AHURI Inquiry into understanding and reimagining social housing pathways.**
- **Housing pathways are the housing experiences of tenants and their households over time and space. They are not linear and may refer to changes in tenure, household form, experiences and attachment.**
- **This Inquiry draws on a range of data to understand:**
 - How social housing pathways are conceptualised and constructed by operational housing policies and the wider social policy context in Australia;
 - What survey and administrative data tell us about who is moving into and out of social housing; and
 - The lived experience of people who have moved into, within and/or out of social housing.
- **These findings are brought together in this report to reimagine social housing pathways for positive housing outcomes for current and future tenants.**

This report is the final report for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) evidence-based policy *Inquiry into social housing pathways*. The report examines data on entrants and exits to social housing and draws together findings from a program of research that examined: 1) the role of policy in shaping social housing pathways through a review of current social housing operational policies (Powell, Meltzer et al. 2019), and 2) the lived experience of people who have moved into, within and/or out of social housing across four jurisdictions (Flanagan, Levin et al. 2020). Reports from these two elements of the research program can be read elsewhere.

This report summarises findings from these components, adds some quantitative data on social housing entry and exits, and examines the similarities and differences between the policy perspective of social housing pathways and the reality of pathways for tenants and their families. In doing so, it seeks to better understand and hypothesise how social housing pathways could be reimagined for positive housing outcomes for current and future tenants across the social and affordable housing system.

1.1 Inquiry focus and research questions

This Inquiry set out to understand how social housing pathways can be reimagined for more effective service delivery, supports and policies for people's housing outcomes. It sought to answer the following questions and sub-questions:

1. How are pathways into, within and out of social housing conceptualised and translated into policy?
 - a. What are the formal social housing pathways set out in policies? How do these differ across jurisdictions? What are the eligibility criteria for entry, moving within and exiting social housing?
 - b. How has the shift to more diverse social housing provision and other major policy reforms affected social housing pathways?
 - c. How do actors, levers, feedback loops and incentives/disincentives influence formal social housing pathways?
2. Who is moving into, within and out of social housing, and why?
 - a. How does this differ across jurisdictions?
 - b. What are the gaps and silences in the data and what do they tell us in regard to social housing pathways?
 - c. How can existing data be used most effectively for policy innovation about social housing pathways?
3. How do tenants experience moving into, within and out of social housing?
 - a. How do tenants' experiences, behaviours and interdependencies interact with policy goals and providers' practice?
 - b. What are the effects, positive and negative, of wider changes in social policy on social housing pathways?
4. How could social housing pathways be reimagined for positive housing outcomes for current and future tenants across the social and affordable housing system?
 - a. What are the implications for policy and practice?
 - b. What role can/should different actors play in facilitating positive social housing transitions and minimising perverse incentives and unintended consequences?

1.2 Inquiry Panel

The Inquiry was supported by a Panel, formed of members with knowledge, skills and experience in social housing. The purpose of the Panel was to help inform the Inquiry's scope, focus, implementation and policy application of its findings.

The Panel met twice throughout the Inquiry. It met early in the Inquiry to ensure the scope and implementation matched key stakeholder needs. The second meeting reviewed the preliminary research findings and brainstormed implications for future policy and practice before the release of this Final Report.

The authors acknowledge the value the panel members offered to this research and report, however, the views within this report are the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the panel members or AHURI.

1.3 Projects

Two supporting projects intersected to answer the Inquiry research questions; each of which provided a nuanced focus on a specific research question.

The construction of social housing pathways across Australia

This part of the research program primarily focused on research question 1. It:

- Critically examined national and international academic, grey and policy literature
- Provided a systematic comparative policy review and a number of case study examples
- Used a 'systems thinking' conceptual framework and workshop to map social housing pathways, actors and feedback loops
- Utilised interviews with senior government personnel and other stakeholders to understand the design and intent of operational social housing policies, as well as their implementation.

Experiencing social housing pathways: Bridging the policy and practice divide

This part of the research program primarily addressed research question 3. It integrated analysis of extensive qualitative data collected, including:

- Interviews with tenants from three key cohort groups—people with disability, families and older people who have used, currently use or may use social housing in the future
- Interviews with service providers
- Relevant grey literature and strategy and policy documents.

In addition the Inquiry examines publicly available programmatic data (AIHW), which provide population group estimates as well as change over time indications in entry, mobility and exit patterns associated with social housing. We also draw on ABS data and recent work by Baker, Leishman et al. (2020) who use PIA and HILDA data and highlight some data gaps in Appendix 1. Collectively, these data sources address research question 2.

1.4 Research methods

The Inquiry used a mixed method approach to answer the research questions outlined above. The key concepts and methods used across the three Inquiry Projects are described below.

1.4.1 Key concepts

Housing pathways

The concept of housing pathways describes the mobility of households and residents within the housing system (see Powell, Meltzer et al. 2019). These pathways are a continually changing set of relationships and interactions that are experienced over time (Clapham 2002: 63–64). This report uses this definition for housing pathways.

This non-linear conceptualisation of pathways captures changes in tenure, as well as household form, meaning and attachment. It also links mobility to housing and non-housing factors, including affordability, housing life-goal aspirations and government policy promoting residential mobility. This conceptual definition does not necessarily match the way in which 'pathways' are understood or operationalised by policy makers. Policy 'pathways' are usually far more linear and reflect who goes into social housing, moves within it and out of it and under what rules and circumstances. In practice, there are also operational pathways—the realities of how tenants move into, within and out of social housing.

Systems thinking

Complex systems thinking explains how complex problems occur within systems. These systems are made up of interconnected, interdependent elements that work together in a non-linear manner (Anderson 1999; Boal and Schultz 2007; Simon 1996; Van Beurden, Kia et al. 2011). From a housing perspective, this means that many agents, policies and interventions within and outside of the housing system will affect people's housing outcomes.

Our analysis utilised systems thinking to map the different components of the social housing system, as well as the broader landscape of human services (including homelessness and aged care service systems) and private sector interests.

1.4.2 Quantitative data analysis

Data about current and historical rates of social housing occupancy are used to examine in-flows, exits and occupancy rates nationally and across jurisdictions. These administrative data provide insights into:

- Social housing pathways of households, with a particular focus on key policy groups (children, young people and their families; people with disability/carers; older persons); and
- Social housing pathways by different housing assistance types (rent assistance, public housing, community housing).

We also briefly examine data gaps, blind spots and challenges currently affecting the ways 'big data', such as administrative records, can be used for housing and housing assistance policy development.

1.4.3 Policy review and practice mapping

Powell, Meltzer et al. (2019) reviewed the operational policies impacting on social housing pathways across Australia. Operational policies include those related to tenant eligibility, rental rebates, transfers and other tenancy matters.

Flanagan, Levin et al. (2020) also explored existing practice in social housing transitions that facilitate movement throughout the system from the perspectives of tenants and key stakeholders.

1.4.4 Qualitative interviews

Interviews were conducted in Project A (Powell, Meltzer et al. 2019) and Project B (Flanagan, Levin et al. 2020) to capture rich experiential data about pathways through (and around) the system, rather than static or isolated experiences within it.

Key stakeholder interviews and workshop

Interviews were held with senior government officials, social housing managers and tenant advocates (key stakeholders). The interviews aimed to understand:

1. The intent behind social housing transition policies
2. How these policies are interpreted by those who have designed or are implementing them
3. How these policies impact on tenants' housing pathways.

A systems thinking workshop was attended by representatives of government agencies, social housing managers and other staff with direct experience working with tenants. A total of 29 people participated in the stakeholder interviews and workshop.

Service provider interviews

Interviews with 32 service providers (government and non-government) were undertaken to capture the perspectives of those working in service delivery (team leaders, frontline workers, those responsible for operational policies and procedures) in the four case study jurisdictions (Tasmania, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia). These four jurisdictions are at different stages of implementing 'pathways' policy. New South Wales has adopted the approach formally, while in the other jurisdictions it is more implicit rather than explicit. All jurisdictions are experiencing similar housing market pressures and struggling to meet demand for social housing under existing policy settings (see Flanagan, Levin et al. 2020).

Tenant interviews

Interviews were conducted with 76 tenants (former, current and prospective) in three cohorts: older people, families with children (especially single parents) and people with disability. These groups were chosen because they were (each for different reasons) potential targets of pathways policy (see Flanagan, Levin et al. 2020). In practice there was considerable overlap in membership across the targeted cohorts. This reflects the complexity of need that brings many households into social housing. From an analytical perspective, however, it means that clear comparisons could not be drawn between cohorts. In this report, minimal contextual information is provided on individual interviewees. This was a deliberate decision to respect participants; a significant number of the tenants interviewed felt that they and their housing were vulnerable and they were extremely concerned about the risk of identification.

Interview analysis

The interviews with tenants and stakeholders were conducted by local researchers in each jurisdiction, with recruitment via local service, policy and research networks. Initial thematic analysis also took place at the jurisdictional level, based on a common and collectively-developed coding frame. The state-based write-ups were then integrated to form a single analysis of themes. This, rather than data presentation based on jurisdictions, was because the purpose of the research was to identify learnings for policy across Australia and because the weight of the evidence pointed to consistent experiences across jurisdictions (see Flanagan, Levin et al. 2020).

2. Formal social housing pathways

- Demand for social housing has increased and waiting lists for social housing are long.
- There was a 7 per cent decrease in government expenditure on social housing between 2011–2016 (from \$1.42 billion to \$1.32 billion; Pawson, Parsell et al. 2018).
- Available housing stock has been outpaced by the growing numbers of households experiencing housing affordability problems (Muir, Martin et al. 2018).
- Demand is high, with significant numbers of people on social housing waitlists: 140,600 for public housing, 8,800 for SOMIH (as at 30 June 2018; AIHW 2019a) and 38,300 for mainstream community housing (as at 30 June 2017; AIHW 2018).
- Social housing policies that shape pathways have largely evolved in an ad hoc way, with social housing providers generally responding to increased demand and decreased resources by tighter targeting of eligibility and other supports.

- Jurisdictions have, to varying degrees, shifted ‘from providing a (permanent) “safety net” to a (temporary) “ambulance service”’ (Fitzpatrick and Pawson 2014).
- Social housing pathways—into, within and out of—are shaped primarily by eligibility criteria and increased requirements of complex needs, but are also affected by how policies are operationalised; changing household types and needs; stock availability; a lack of affordable alternatives and the broader policy environment.
- While policy rhetoric recognises the non-linear nature of housing pathways, the operational policies driving the shape and direction of social housing assistance do not adequately capture or take account of this non-linearity.
- Operational policies are influenced by a primary need to manage the social housing waiting list, rather than first ensuring positive outcomes for tenants and their households.

2.1 Existing research and policy context

Social housing is affordable and secure rental housing provided to eligible applicants by state and territory housing authorities (public housing), non-profit community organisations (community housing) and Indigenous organisations (Indigenous housing). First established in the early twentieth century, public housing became an integral part of the policy landscape in the post-war period, when it was built on a large scale to house working class families (Flanagan, Martin et al. 2019).

Over the last quarter of the twentieth century public housing construction declined, and provision became targeted to low-income, higher-need households. At the same time, the sector has been affected by:

- High demand, reflected in the number of waitlist applicants: 140,600 for public housing, 8,800 for SOMIH (as at 30 June 2018; AIHW 2019a) and 38,300 for mainstream community housing (as at 30 June 2017, AIHW 2018)
- Other unmet demands from people sleeping rough and very low income households in housing stress, who are not currently on waiting lists (Lawson, Pawson et al. 2018: 60)
- Hidden demands like those who have their waiting list status temporarily suspended (e.g. NSW social housing applicants who take up Rent Choice private rental assistance; NSW Family and Community Services 2018).

Many of these changes reflect the fact that social housing is increasingly operating in a resource constrained environment. Between 2011 and 2016, government expenditure on social housing decreased by 7 per cent from \$1.42 billion to \$1.32 billion (Pawson, Parsell et al. 2018). The quantity of available housing stock does not match the growing numbers of households experiencing housing affordability problems (Muir, Martin et al. 2018). Against this background, jurisdictions have, to varying degrees, shifted 'from providing a (permanent) "safety net" to a (temporary) "ambulance service"' (Fitzpatrick and Pawson 2014). As well as introducing greater emphasis on 'housing need' beyond low income and poverty, this has seen most Australian states and territories introduce fixed-term tenancies and reviews of continuing eligibility.

Other changes have been influenced by government commitments to increase competition in the market and shift the work of service delivery from government to the not-for-profit sector, and in some cases the for-profit sector (e.g. aged care and disability services). These include, for example, the expansion of community housing, the introduction of common access systems in some states, and reform of allocation processes for some housing authorities (e.g. the *Future Directions for Social Housing* reforms in NSW; NSW Government 2016).

As of June 2017, public housing was provided to 600,600 tenants, mainstream community housing to 153,200 tenants and Indigenous community housing to 50,100 tenants. If we examine dwelling numbers (rather than tenants), there were 316,231 public housing properties in 2017/2018. This makes up the majority of social housing stock (75 per cent; Table 1).

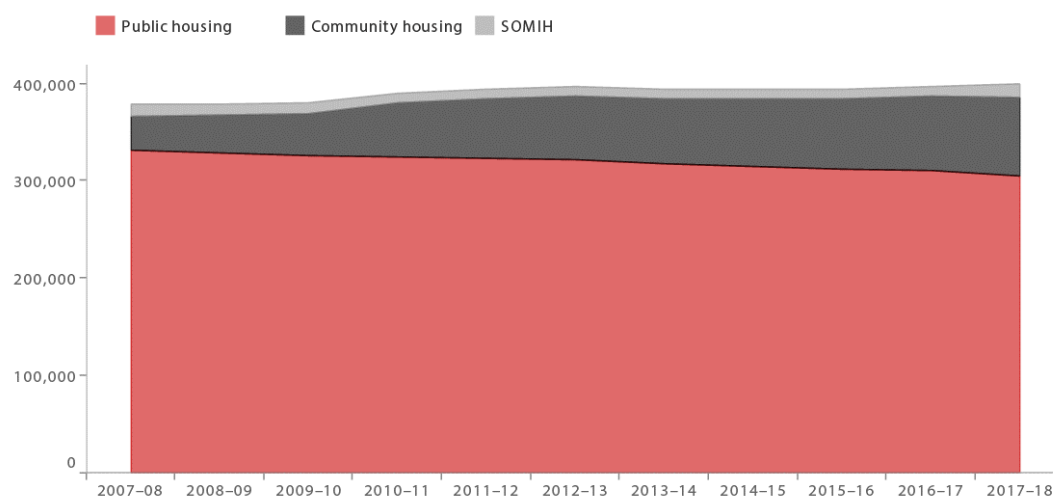
Between 2007–2008 and 2017–2018 community housing grew by 117 per cent, including through tenanted stock transfers from public housing. This was offset, however, by a decrease in public housing households (from 336,500 to 316,200) over the same 9-year period (AIHW 2019a). Collectively, Indigenous community housing numbers and SOMIH also decreased over time (see Table 1 and Figure 3).

Table 1: Number of social housing dwellings by program type 2005–6 to 2017–18

Year	Public Housing	Community Housing	Indigenous community housing	SOMIH	NT remote public housing	Total
2005–06	341,378	32,349	22,192	12,893	N/A	408,812
2006–07	339,771	35,161	22,018	13,098	N/A	410,048
2007–08	337,866	36,079	23,279	12,778	N/A	410,002
2008–09	336,464	39,770	20,232	12,056	4,631	413,153
2009–10	333,383	44,328	18,695	11,952	4,631	412,989
2010–11	331,371	57,506	17,543	9,820	4,765	421,005
2011–12	330,906	63,797	16,773	10,047	4,965	426,525
2012–13	328,803	67,385	17,165	10,084	5,056	428,493
2013–14	323,803	71,036	17,532	10,113	5,096	427,580
2014–15	321,627	73,620	17,467	10,035	5,025	427,774
2015–16	320,041	80,226	17,584	9,949	5,046	432,846
2016–17	319,913	82,902	17,925	14,921	N/A	425,661
2017–18	316,231	87,819	17,477	14,686	N/A	436,213

Source: AIHW National Housing Assistance Data Repository

Figure 3: Number of social housing households, by social housing program 2007–8 2017–18



Source: AIHW National Housing Assistance Data Repository

While the total number of social housing dwellings has increased, the rate of growth has not matched household growth. The number of social housing dwellings per 100 Australian households has declined from 5.1 per 100 households in 2007–08 to 4.6 in 2016–17 (AIHW 2018). Therefore the social housing sector has declined relative to the rest of the housing system and the population (AIHW 2018).

Some state governments have undertaken large estate redevelopment programs. These programs are intended to contribute to extensive reconfiguration of existing housing stock, but many are implemented over long timeframes and their long-term outcomes are therefore yet to be seen and understood. Redevelopment has also contributed to significant displacement of tenants, sometimes on an involuntary basis. In some cases, relocation is permanent, in others it is pending completion of the redevelopment.

Together, these changes have altered the landscape of social and community housing (Groenhart and Burke 2014). They have affected the type of stock available for government (public) and non-government (community) housing providers to allocate. The changes have resulted in the diversification of 'social housing products' and changes to government policies and programs.

In a context of growing diversity of housing stock, policy makers in some jurisdictions are increasingly seeking to introduce policies that enable and promote housing 'pathways'. These policies are intended to improve tenant housing and social outcomes (such as wellbeing and economic participation), but also function to manage long waiting lists and obtain efficiencies in the system. Housing pathways are shaped by formal operational policies that determine how tenants and households move into, within and out of social housing, but also by the relationships and interactions a household experiences in its consumption of housing (Clapham 2002). In particular, housing pathways are shaped by eligibility policies—which differ from jurisdiction to jurisdiction—interacting with life course events and demographic characteristics (Wiesel, Easthope et al. 2012).

While operational policy may establish formal pathways (e.g. setting eligibility criteria), what happens in practice may not always match what is set out in policy. In a recent review of policy settings and receipt of housing assistance, the Productivity Commission developed a housing assistance pathways map of major likely pathways into social housing tenures (Productivity Commission 2018). Consistent with existing evidence (Wiesel, Easthope et al. 2012; Wiesel, Pawson, et al. 2014), key housing assistance pathways may include use of short- to medium-term services and supports for some households depending on needs, while for others persistent vulnerability to housing insecurity may lead to social housing entry. Possible housing and service assistance pathways identified by the Productivity Commission include:

- Long-term receipt of Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) associated either with private rental tenancies and/or tenancies within community housing;
- Insecure housing in social and/or private tenancies directly into social housing via pathways receipt of CRA; and,
- Homelessness and supporting housing pathways (e.g. a range of intensive service interventions, people at risk of or experiencing homelessness using homelessness crisis and supported accommodation services (Productivity Commission 2018)).

However, what is known about the housing pathways of tenants moving in, within and out of social housing has been historically based on limited evidence—either from administrative data, housing providers themselves (who may be missing information about events prior to and following occupancy within social housing), or from survey research seeking to address some of the data gaps. Many blind spots exist in the current housing pathways evidence base.

Using a range of administrative housing data and survey data, previous research has found that many different factors trigger and discourage individuals from entering and moving within and out of the social housing sector. For example, the onset of a sudden personal or health crisis, potential eviction from private rental, stigma of social housing, and complexity of application (Wiesel, Easthope et al. 2012).

Decisions to apply or move within social housing are also often influenced by disinformation and misinformation—particularly relating to the perceived lengthy wait time, availability of suitable stock, and how this may differ across the different types of social housing. This can be the result of miscommunication between applicants and housing officers. There are also recorded cases of discrimination experienced by applicants of minority backgrounds (Wiesel, Easthope et al. 2012). Further, while tenant-initiated transfers within the housing system are possible, little is known about such pathways within social housing. While some research has explored drivers of social housing exits and transfers, the extent of this has been limited, with the focus on tenant-initiated exits and opportunities and risks associated with transitions, including within social housing (Wiesel, Pawson et al. 2014).

Recent research by Baker, Leishman et al. (2020) found that despite having higher levels of complexity, the main reasons social housing tenants give for moving to or from social housing are the same as people living in other housing types. They move primarily because of changes to the household composition or factors related to the household or neighbourhood.

Housing pathways are significantly affected by the wider social policy context. This includes, for example, the available social housing stock (mentioned above), a lack of affordable housing options in Australia (Muir, Martin et al. 2018) and the impact of neoliberalism on the welfare state (Clapham 2018). Waiting list demand for public housing far outstrips availability and many households eligible for public or community housing reside in unaffordable private rental (AIHW 2018; Stone, Parkinson et al. 2016). Within this context, the housing pathways of households and individuals have changed in ways that vary across housing assistance programs, jurisdictions and for population cohorts with varied demographic, economic and locational backgrounds. Added to this, the private rental market is unaffordable for people reliant on income support payments (Anglicare Australia 2019), making the private rental market an unrealistic and unsuitable option for most tenants (Powell, Meltzer et al. 2019).

Flanagan, Levin et al. (2020) note a tenant perspective of pathways is missing from current evidence, as is holistic, longitudinal and cross-tenure/assistance views of social housing pathways in the context of housing assistance (public housing, community housing, private rental assistance). Future optimal policy development requires clear, longitudinal evidence on (i) how we might understand social housing pathways within a changed housing policy and housing assistance context, and (ii) how policy innovation might best support improved social housing pathways. This evidence needs to include a systemic response, which considers for example, variable regulatory frameworks across state/territory jurisdictions; demographic, economic and local area contexts; and conditions in the wider housing market.

2.2 Impact of operational policies

2.2.1 Getting into social housing

Pathways into social housing are largely determined by policies that shape application processes and eligibility criteria. These are amongst the most prescriptive of policies shaping the housing pathways of tenants and their households (Powell, Meltzer et al. 2019).

- Most Australian jurisdictions now have centralised application processes, meaning that prospective tenants apply once through a single portal, with information shared between government housing departments and community housing providers.
- Pathways into social housing are dependent on a range of eligibility criteria, with income and assets at the forefront. Each jurisdiction has its own income criteria. Other criteria include citizenship and residence status, age and tenancy history.

In practice, meeting the income eligibility criteria alone (i.e. experiencing poverty) is often insufficient to get a tenant and their household into social housing, with priority given to people and households with specific or complex needs. What constitutes 'specific' or 'complex needs' varies by jurisdiction, but generally includes disability, poor physical or mental health, experience of family violence, exiting institutions or being homeless or at risk of homelessness. The most common pathway for entry into social housing is homelessness or risk of homelessness, as persons experiencing these states are deemed in 'highest need' (AIHW 2018).

2.2.2 Living in social housing

Living in social housing means that one's housing can be subject to periodic eligibility reviews, which can also be triggered by use/misuse of premises or by changing household circumstances—for example, an increase in household income, the expansion of a household or when a household member leaves. The way these issues are monitored and assessed across jurisdictions directly shapes the housing pathway of social housing tenants. Operational policies affecting housing pathways or experiences while living in social housing include:

- **Reviews of continuing eligibility:** Most housing authorities have policies in place regarding the eligibility of tenants to continue in social housing, although there is wide variation across jurisdictions in relation to what is reviewed and how often.
- **Rent policies:** Most social housing providers operate a scheme of 'income-related rents', where tenants pay a proportion of their household income as rent (between 25–30%). Different types of income (e.g. salary vs benefits) can be assessed differently for the purposes of calculating rent. This system has potential to affect tenants' decision-making about earnings and employment. This has particular implications at a time when the employment landscape is precarious.
- **Use of premises by tenants and households:** Tenants are subject to a range of obligations regarding the use of their premises by both members of their household and visitors. Breach of these obligations can result in tenancies being terminated and households leaving social housing.
- **Household change:** Social housing tenants are required to report household change to their landlord, meaning that people leaving or joining a household (e.g. as a result of relationship changes) can affect tenants' use of their homes or entitlement for a particular type of housing.

2.2.3 Moving within social housing

Moves within social housing can either be tenant-initiated or landlord-initiated. Tenant-initiated transfers are most likely to result from changing household circumstances, and landlord-initiated transfers from portfolio or tenancy management.

Policies allow tenants to apply for a transfer if there has been a change in household circumstances, for example, if a dwelling is no longer suitable (e.g. as a result of overcrowding) or a tenant is leaving family violence.

Key stakeholders (service providers and tenants) suggested, however, that in practice this can be challenging. Published data further indicates the challenges associated with efficient allocation of stock. Two challenges are overcrowding and underutilisation. Using the Canadian National Occupancy Standard, 4 per cent of public housing dwellings, 4 per cent of community housing and 24 per cent of SOMIH dwellings are deemed to be overcrowded. Under-utilisation and vacancy rates are higher (17% public housing, 10% community and 26% SOMIH; AIHW 2019a).

Landlord-initiated transfers can occur as part of housing providers' portfolio management (e.g. property or housing estate renewal requiring tenant relocation) or tenancy management (e.g. resulting from tenant conduct or changes in eligibility status). As a result, tenant and landlord preferences for allocations do not always match because 'efficiency' may not equate to a good quality outcome for the tenant. Baker, Leishman et al. (2020) from their recent analysis of HILDA data found that 'people who enter social housing (entrants) are more likely to have moved greater distances on average, than leavers', which 'suggests that regardless of the total level of residential instability people have, people who enter social housing are more likely to be pushed from their local area.'

Both tenant- and landlord-initiated transfers appear to be constrained by the wider policy context; specifically, a shortage of suitable alternative housing stock for households to transfer to.

2.2.4 Moving out of social housing

Moves out of social housing may also be either tenant- or landlord-initiated. Exits from social housing may occur when a tenant initiates a transition to private housing or is evicted by their social housing landlord. Operational policy levers exist to facilitate both of these pathways.

Policy levers to facilitate moves out of social housing include the sale of dwellings to tenants, provision of private rental subsidies, rental transition programs, financial planning and client-based needs planning. Some policies also target private landlords with a goal of increasing housing affordability and therefore pathways out of social housing (see Tually, Slatter et al. 2016 for discussion of such housing brokerage/access activities). By far the biggest factor impacting moves out of social housing, however, is the availability, or lack thereof, of affordable housing alternatives.

Previous research has demonstrated that regardless of who initiated the exit, tenants often return to the social housing system (Powell, Meltzer et al. 2019), particularly for older cohorts (Wiesel, Pawson et al. 2014). These trends, explored in the Inquiry via analysis of administrative data (Section 3), may be compounded by the increasing proportion of tenants with complex needs who are likely to require support to live in private housing. The lack of affordable and appropriate housing alternatives to social housing and the lack of support services in the community also increases pressure on the sector, including from tenants who have previously left returning to the sector.

2.3 Impact of the wider policy environment

As well as operational policies, social housing pathways are affected by the wider policy context in Australia. Key factors are a lack of affordable housing more broadly and a lack of housing supply within social housing that is fit for purpose. These factors limit the potential consumption of housing for current social housing tenants and those on the social housing waiting list. Without feasible alternatives to social housing—meaning safe, secure, appropriate and affordable alternatives (Muir, Martin et al. 2018)—there are limited options enabling smooth pathways into or out of social housing. However, many other key influences shape social housing pathways. Social, economic (e.g. income, social support, taxation), regulation (e.g. housing, land, inclusionary zoning etc) and other policies as well as geographic and other contextual factors all play a role.

2.4 Policy development implications

While policy rhetoric may now recognise the non-linear nature of housing pathways, the operational policies driving the shape and direction of social housing assistance we examined do not adequately capture or take account of this non-linearity.

Our review indicates many operational policies are influenced by a primary need to manage the social housing waiting list, rather than ensuring positive outcomes for tenants and their households. However, we acknowledge that many housing providers are working as well as they can in the current, resource constrained environment. Application of a systems thinking framework within this research shows that this is not only a result of operational policies and the challenges associated with managing scarce stock and long waiting lists, but also of the wider policy environment, including increased households experiencing housing affordability problems.

In thinking about policy development options and reimagining social housing pathways, a focus on positive outcomes for tenants and households should be at the forefront, including tenants' perspectives on pathways and outcomes. This section only focuses on a policy perspective. We must also examine the extent to which people are moving in and out of social housing and the role and impact of other influences, including families and communities. This is significant because while operational policy established the formal housing pathways, in practice housing staff interpret and implement policies in different ways, which impact on tenant outcomes. This will be explored further in subsequent sections.

3. Who is moving into, within and out of social housing?

- **Over time, public housing has shifted away from supporting the working class to supporting people who are in poverty and have complex needs (Hayward, 1996; Chalkley, 2012);**
- **It is now almost impossible to access social housing unless you are categorised as being in ‘greatest need’:**
 - 76 per cent of public housing allocations, 63 per cent of state owned and managed Indigenous housing (SOMIH) allocations and 82 per cent of mainstream community housing allocations made in the financial year of 2016 to 2017, were for people in ‘greatest need’—people deemed homeless or at risk of homelessness and at most risk because of safety, health conditions, disability, caring responsibilities, or being Indigenous, under 25 years or over 75 years (AIHW 2019a).
- **Allocation to those in greatest need, including large proportions of tenants with caring responsibilities (45.6% public housing; 80.1% SOMIH) or disability/illness (50.2% public housing; 28.8% SOMIH) (AIHW 2018), raises significant questions about whether social housing is an optimal destination point, rather than transitional tenure within a broader housing assistance pathway, for some tenants.**

- While housing continues to be allocated to those with greatest need, and others remain in need and on waitlists, social housing remains an emergency response, rather than a housing solution.
- Big data provide an opportunity for new evidence of the interaction of social housing tenants with other parts of the housing assistance system, and has potential to provide evidence to evaluate how well different types of housing assistance meet the needs of key population groups. This data also enables exploration of appropriate housing destinations and transitions within housing pathways for some current tenants. However, improved whole-of-housing-assistance data is required if optimal design and allocation of resources is to occur.

Eligibility criteria related to social housing allocation, outlined in Section 2, shapes the housing pathways of people moving into, within and out of social housing. Waiting list demand for public housing outstrips availability and many households eligible for public or community housing live in unaffordable private rental (Anglicare Australia 2019; AIHW 2018; Stone, Parkinson et al. 2016). Within this context, the housing pathways of households and individuals who may be eligible for social housing tenancies are distributed across housing tenures—notably private rental housing and housing assistance programs. Social housing plays a critically important role within a suite of housing assistance options (Lawson, Pawson et al. 2019) yet caters for an increasingly small proportion of the households who require support. Evidence to inform policy that most effectively meets households needs, either within or before/after social housing tenancies is needed to ensure that the limited housing assistance resources available are used optimally across sectors, tenures, programs and services.

This section draws on quantitative data to address the second substantive Inquiry question: *Who is moving into, within and out of social housing?* It examines the potential and current pitfalls of administrative forms of big data for furthering our understanding of these trends for key population groups, segments of the social housing sector and over time.

Current entry, transfer and exit patterns are based on data from state and territory housing offices and organisations collated and made available by AIHW and the Productivity Commission (AIHW 2019a; Productivity Commission 2018). This report also draws on recent AHURI funded research by Baker, Leishman et al. (2020) who examined 10 years of the PIA datasets.

These data provide current accounts of total tenant numbers living in social housing, entry and exits into and from social housing as well as some indication about mobility within sectors of social housing itself. Importantly, in addressing the overarching question of who is moving in, within and out of social housing, the research identifies gaps, blind spots and inadequacies in current data infrastructure and accessibility in Australia. These shortcomings fundamentally undermine the capacity of nuanced policy evaluation and development within complex systems of programmatic administration. This approach contributes to an understanding of how current government initiatives to improve data access and availability will significantly enhance evidence-based policy development around housing assistance in future years.

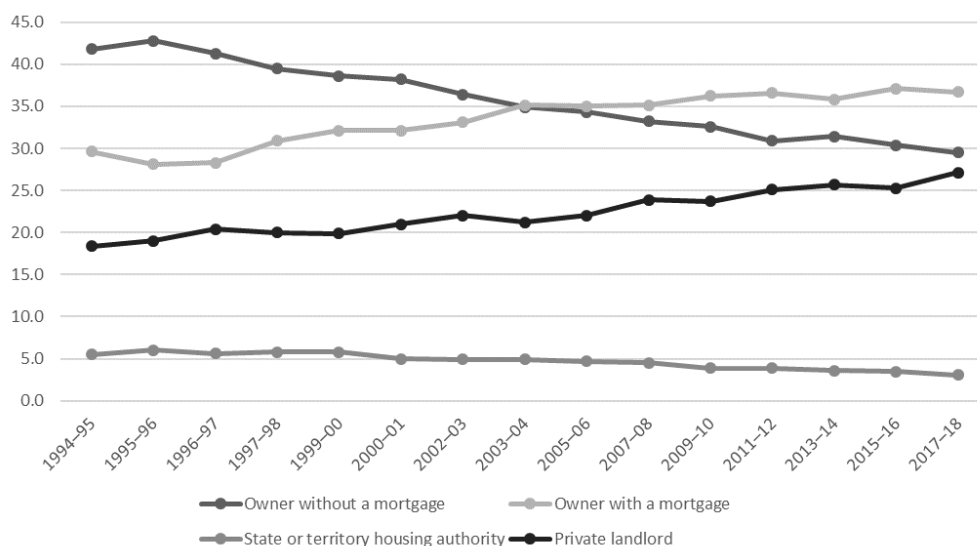
3.1 Who is moving into, within and out of social housing, and why?

The increased policy targeting of social housing to people in greatest need based on income and complexity is evident in the number and types of people in social housing and who is entering and exiting over time (see Section 2 and Wiesel, Pawson et al. 2014; Wiesel, Easthope et al. 2012; Groenhart and Burke 2014; Lawson, Pawson et al. 2018; Hall and Berry 2007).

Nationally, in real terms, the total population of Australians in social housing has steadily declined over recent decades (Groenhart and Burke 2014). The most recent data from the ABS survey, Housing Occupancy and Costs, 2017–18, shows a continuation of this decline. Estimates indicate that only 3.1 per cent of residential households rented from state or territory housing authorities, compared to 6 per cent of households in the mid-1990s (1995–96) (ABS 2019; Figure 4).

3. Who is moving into, within and out of social housing?

Figure 4: Proportion of owner and renter households in Australia, 1994–95 to 2017–18, showing landlord type



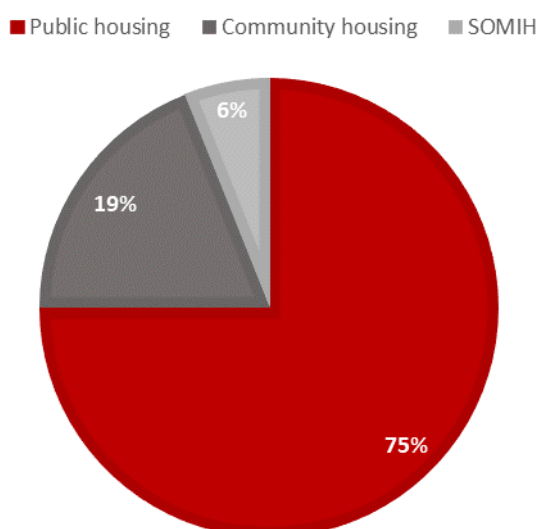
Note: Survey not run in 1998–99, 2001–02, 2004–05, 2006–07, 2008–09, 2010–11, 2012–13, 2014–15 or 2016–17. Values have been interpolated for these years.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Survey of Income and Housing*, various years.
(Data cube 1, 4130.0 Housing Occupancy and Costs, 2017–18.)

3.1.1 The number of people in social housing by type

In 2017–18, most tenants living in social housing were in public housing (75% or 600,600 tenants). Of the remaining tenants, 19 per cent were in community housing (approximately 153,200 tenants) and 6 per cent in SOMIH (approximately 50,100 tenants) (see Figure 5 below).

Figure 5: Proportion of social housing tenant households living in public housing, community housing and SOMIH, 2018.



Source: ABS AIHW 2019a: Supplementary table Tenants.5.

3.1.2 Demographic profile of current social housing tenants

Targeted allocation of new social housing tenancies substantially shapes the current demographic composition of social housing tenants. Females, older and young people, people from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background and people with disabilities are overrepresented in social housing.

Nationally across all three major social housing types, as at June 2019:

- Almost two-thirds (62%) of tenants were female;
- Nearly one-third of tenants were aged 65 years or older (31% or 123,600 households);
- Children 0–14 years comprise a significant proportion of all social housing tenants (22% in public, 20% in community and 32% in SOMIH housing compared to 18.7% across the population);
- More than 1 in 10 households (13%, or 53,700) included an Indigenous member;
- Almost 2 in 5 households (38%, or 151,500) included a tenant with disability (AIHW 2019a: TENANTS.4; see Table 2).

Table 2: Selected characteristics of social housing tenants, 2017–18

	Public housing		SOMIH ^(b)		Community housing ^(c)		All programs	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
Sex of main tenant								
Males	111,673	36.7	4,013	29.0	31,513	39.5	147,199	37.0
Females	188,786	62.0	9,761	70.6	46,906	58.8	245,453	61.7
Not stated	4,073	1.3	43	0.3	1,318	1.7	5,434	1.4
Household composition								
Single adult	169,215	55.6	2,940	21.3	48,550	60.9	220,705	55.4
Sole parent with dependent children	37,670	12.4	3,417	24.7	11,550	14.5	52,637	13.2
Couple only	22,129	7.3	576	4.2	5,874	7.4	28,579	7.2
Couple with dependent children	9,123	3.0	1,103	8.0	3,155	4.0	13,381	3.4
Group and mixed composition	55,161	18.1	5,774	41.8	8,775	11.0	69,710	17.5
Not stated	11,234	3.7	7	0.1	1,833	2.3	13,074	3.3
Indigenous status^(d)								
Indigenous	33,472	11.0	13,803	99.9	6,423	8.1	53,698	13.5
Non-Indigenous	193,036	63.4	8	0.1	64,813	81.3	257,857	64.8
Not stated	78,024	25.6	6	0.0	8,501	10.7	86,531	21.7
Disability status^(e)								
With disability	125,015	41.1	3,068	22.2	23,426	29.4	151,509	38.1
Without disability	152,107	49.9	6,241	45.2	48,956	61.4	207,304	52.1
Not stated	27,410	9.0	4,508	32.6	7,355	9.2	39,273	9.9

3. Who is moving into, within and out of social housing?

	Public housing		SOMIH ^(b)		Community housing ^(c)		All programs	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
Age of main tenant								
15–24 years	7,559	2.5	460	3.3	4,157	5.2	12,176	3.1
25–34 years	25,611	8.4	2,291	16.6	9,410	11.8	37,312	9.4
35–44 years	40,544	13.3	3,086	22.3	13,256	16.6	56,886	14.3
45–54 years	60,670	19.9	3,535	25.6	16,249	20.4	80,454	20.2
55–64 years	68,145	22.4	2,592	18.8	15,257	19.1	85,994	21.6
65+ years	101,852	33.4	1,853	13.4	19,920	25.0	123,625	31.1
Not stated	151	0.0	0	0.0	1,488	1.9	1,639	0.4
Source of income^(f)								
Employee cash income	22,051	7.2	1,389	10.1	n.a.	n.a.	23,440	n.a.
Youth allowance	1,576	0.5	61	0.4	n.a.	n.a.	1,637	n.a.
Newstart allowance	37,712	12.4	2,491	18.0	n.a.	n.a.	40,203	n.a.
Other allowances for students and the unemployed	866	0.3	61	0.4	n.a.	n.a.	927	n.a.
Age pension	76,383	25.1	949	6.9	n.a.	n.a.	77,332	n.a.
Disability pension	85,249	28.0	1,961	14.2	n.a.	n.a.	87,210	n.a.
Other government payment	57,320	18.8	4,076	29.5	n.a.	n.a.	61,396	n.a.
Other cash income	1,780	0.6	41	0.3	n.a.	n.a.	1,821	n.a.
Not stated	21,595	7.1	2,788	20.2	n.a.	n.a.	24,383	n.a.
Total	304,532	100.0	13,817	100.0	79,737	n.a.	398,086	n.a.

Table notes:

(a) Ongoing indicates the household's tenancy has not concluded.

(b) NT data were reported for the first time in 2017–18.

(c) Detailed tenancy information for Qld were unavailable for 427 households. Excludes NT data which were not available.

(d) A household is classified as Indigenous if any member of the household identifies as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. There may be some non-Indigenous households within the SOMIH program.

(e) The disability status of the household is based on whether any member of the household reports to experience disability. Disability is the umbrella term for any or all of: an impairment of body structure or function, a limitation in activities, or a restriction in participation.

(f) The main source of household income.

1. Some characteristic data were unavailable for some households.

2. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

3. Data for households in Indigenous community housing were unavailable due to issues relating to data completeness and coverage.

Source: AIHW National Housing Assistance Data Repository.

Key demographic changes in the profile of social housing tenants over a 30 year period (between 1981 and 2011) demonstrate the effects of increased targeting. Groenhart and Burke (2014) who undertook the analysis found some overrepresentation of older persons, single parent headed families, lone person households and households in the lowest income quintile as a result of demographic shifts in society broadly. However, they concluded that the high proportion of these population cohorts within public housing was symptomatic of increased targeting during the period (Groenhart and Burke 2014: 36).

Within an increasingly complex, financialised and market-based housing system (Seelig, Thompson et al. 2009; Whitehead 2014), these demographic profiles indicate that social housing plays a critical role not only as infrastructure requiring particular forms of large scale investment and scale (Flanagan, Martin et al. 2019) but also increasingly as an infrastructure of care for tenants with complex and potentially ongoing support needs (Power and Mee 2019).

3.1.3 Entering social housing

AIHW data compiled from state housing authorities shows that homelessness or risk of homelessness are key drivers in priority housing allocations. In the 2017–18 reporting period, a total of 20,400 new allocations of public housing were made to households, 1,300 new allocations were made in SOMIH and 15,800 in community housing. A large majority of these were made to households deemed to be in greatest need (76% in public housing, 63% in SOMIH and 82% in community housing) (AIHW 2019a).

The underlying causes of 'greatest need' have changed over recent years in public and SOMIH housing, with more limited information about change over time available for community housing..

In 2017–18, of the 15,600 newly allocated public households in greatest need where the main reason was known:

- 50 per cent (7,200 households) were households experiencing homelessness, down from a peak of 60 per cent (or 9,100) in 2013–14; and
- 39 per cent were to households at risk of homelessness (or 5,600 households); an increase from 34 per cent in 2014–15.

Of those at risk of homelessness, 3,100 reported the main reason for their greatest need was that their life or safety was at risk in their accommodation. Over 1,500 households reported a health condition aggravated by housing as their main reason.

In 2017–18, the main reason for greatest need amongst new SOMIH households was similar, albeit comparatively small household numbers (around 400 new greatest need household allocations):

- 43 per cent of households (where the main reason was known) reported homelessness as the main reason for greatest need, a decrease from a peak of 53 per cent in 2015–16; and
- 40 per cent were at risk of homelessness, down from a peak of 47 per cent in 2013–14.

Based on the available data in 2017–18, of the new households in community housing in greatest need, where the main reason was known:

- 43 per cent (4,700) of households were experiencing homelessness, an increase from 3,100 in 2013–14; and
- 57 per cent (6,100) households were at risk of homelessness, an increase from 3,400 in 2013–14 (AIHW 2019b).

In breaking down the demographics of people recently allocated to public and SOMIH housing, it is evident that priority criteria are being met. For example

- 45.6 per cent of public housing tenants have one or more of caring/family responsibilities (80.1% SOMIH);
- 28.8 per cent of public housing tenants identify as Indigenous (100% SOMIH); and
- 50.2 per cent of public housing tenants are living with disability (32.3% SOMIH), compared to 18.3% of people across the population; ABS 2016a).

Qualitative data from tenants on the reasons they have moved into social housing confirms previous research and aligns to policy. Across the four study jurisdictions (New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia), the backgrounds of social housing tenants provide strong supporting evidence of the impact of targeting. Many had multiple, complex needs and housing histories that included periods of homelessness and acute housing instability.

For many of the research participants, entry into social housing was triggered by a radical change in circumstances such as loss of employment, poor health, disability, drug or alcohol issues, domestic violence or relationship breakdown. Past experience of homelessness was common amongst the participants, including periods of rough sleeping, time in crisis accommodation or living in unsafe or inadequate housing (e.g. boarding houses or caravan parks).

I've been couch-surfing since my mum passed away when I was 16. For the last 12 years I've been on and off everywhere, I haven't really had guidance to give me the stability and support that I need. Just staying with friends or staying with family or even just sleeping in my car, three, four months at a time (tenant, Tasmania).

I was quite isolated in the old place. It was very bad there, it was actually to the point where I had to sleep against the door most nights with a knife. I'm quite tiny and not very strong so I was very vulnerable. The best thing that could ever happen to me was that someone come and give me the place that I've got now (tenant, South Australia).

3.1.4 Duration of tenancies

Forty-three per cent of public tenants currently residing in social housing have lived in that tenure for 10 years or more (AIHW 2019a).

The interaction of increased targeting to those with greatest needs with limited alternative housing options has resulted in an overall increase in the proportion of public housing tenants with long tenancy durations between 2011–18. This is despite increased measures to apply market rents and employment-oriented exit strategies in some jurisdictions, and the fact that exits have outstripped new entrants (Section 2).

SOMIH data indicates that over the same time period Indigenous housing tenancies were more likely to be mid-length (AIHW 2019a), which may be related to the length of time community housing dwellings have been available (AIHW 2019a), or reflect lower life expectancy among Indigenous populations. As well, larger proportions of SOMIH populations have transferred to community housing in some jurisdictions, compared with transfer rates of public housing tenants, as discussed at Section 2 in relation to eligibility criteria.

In contrast, 14 per cent of community housing households had been in the same tenure for more than one decade and one-third (33%) had been in place for less than a year. These shorter durations are due to the relative newness of much of the community housing supply of social housing, rather than indicators of different approaches to tenancies across public and community housing (AIHW 2019a).

Over time, the proportion of households with long-term tenure has increased. For public housing, there has been an increase in the proportion of households with a tenure length of 20–29 years, rising from 9 per cent in 2010–11 to 12 per cent in 2017–18; similarly there has been an increase from 3 per cent to 5 per cent in tenure length of 30 years or more over the same period (AIHW 2109).

A number of older tenants who entered social housing in an earlier period were interviewed. These tenants entered during a period when social housing supported the low income working class. For them, social housing was a legitimate, mainstream tenure for working class households. One 67-year-old tenant reported: ‘I moved into a Housing Trust [home] when I first got married. [My son], he’s always been raised in a Housing Trust house.’ Some older tenants’ personal histories were entwined with the history of public housing, when far from being a stigmatised form of ‘welfare’, public housing was arguably the envy of the nation, providing good quality, lifetime housing for working people and families close to their places of work. Over time, public housing has shifted away from supporting the working class to supporting people who are in poverty and have far more complex needs (Hayward 1996; Chalkley 2012) as the data shows.

3.1.5 Moving within social housing

While tenant-initiated transfers within the housing system are possible, as Section 2 outlined, little is known about such pathways based on available administrative evidence.

Evidence about the extent of residential mobility within public housing and community housing suggests household formation and change are key drivers for mobility within social housing, however that internal mobility within public housing or SOMIH tenancies is extremely limited (AIHW 2018). As shown in Table 3, fewer than 10,000 households nationally living in public (2.7%) or SOMIH housing (2.5%) changed their residential address during 2016–17. These rates are low relative to the total Australian population (in 2015 an estimated 15 per cent of the population changed their residential address; ABS 2018).

Table 3: Household transfers as a proportion of all public housing and SOMIH households, 2016–17

Social housing program	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Aust
Households that transferred									
Public housing	2.4	2.4	2.7	3.6	2.9	0.4	5.1	6.6	2.7
SOMIH ^(b)	2.6	..	3	..	1.6	0.4	2.5

Source: AIHW (2018).

Of those who did move within public housing, two-thirds were women, 44 per cent were living with disability and almost 40 per cent were aged 55 years or over. Within SOMIH housing, transfers are strongly linked to gender (83% of those who transferred were women) and family status (52% were sole parent households with dependent children) (Table 4).

Significant quantitative data gaps remain about mobility between social housing types (such as public to community housing), the reasons for such mobility, and housing and tenant outcomes as a result of these moves. Point in time data about entries to social housing and exits from social housing does not capture this mobility.

Interviews suggest mobility within social housing is linked to a significant change in housing need, for example, changes in health or disability that mean a person requires a more accessible dwelling, or substantial issues with neighbours that threatened safety or created or exacerbated substantial health problems. For example, one Victorian tenant chose to leave because she felt unsafe and feared for herself and her children:

I felt unsafe with the kids, we were threatened to be raped and stuff like that. You know—we’ll come back and we’ll rape you and your kids. It was just not a safe environment (tenant, Victoria).

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Table 4: Selected demographic characteristics of transferred households, by social housing program, 2016–17

Selected characteristic	Public housing		SOMIH ^(a)	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Sex of main tenant				
Males	2,966	32.4	45	17.2
Females	6,157	67.3	217	82.8
Not stated	21	0.2	0	0.0
Household composition				
Single adult	4,266	46.7	40	15.3
Sole parent with dependent children	2,021	22.1	137	52.3
Couple only	350	3.8	5	1.9
Couple with dependent children	378	4.1	23	8.8
Group and mixed composition	1,492	16.3	57	21.8
Not stated	637	7.0	0	0.0
Indigenous status ^(b)				
Indigenous	1,976	21.6	262	100.0
Non-Indigenous	5,095	55.7	0	0.0
Not stated	2,073	22.7	0	0.0
Disability status ^(c)				
With disability	4,051	44.3	66	25.2
Without disability	2,513	27.5	98	37.4
Not stated	2,580	28.2	98	37.4
Age of main tenant				
15–24 years	485	5.3	23	8.8
25–34 years	1,686	18.4	83	31.7
35–44 years	1,740	19.0	75	28.6
45–54 years	1,792	19.6	45	17.2
55–64 years	1,629	17.8	24	9.2
65+ years	1,807	19.8	12	4.6
Not stated	5	0.1	0	0.0
Total	9,144	—	262	—

Notes: Transferred households refers to households that have located from one dwelling to another dwelling within the same housing program during the financial year. Some percentages may not total 100% due to rounding. Waitlist data are reported separately for each social housing program. Where states and territories have an integrated waitlist (NSW, Qld, WA, ACT and NT), applicants are generally counted once irrespective of the number of programs for which they are applying. Data on transferred and exited households are only available for the public housing and SOMIH programs.

(a) Data were unavailable for the NT. Refer to the Explanatory Notes for more information.

(b) A household is classified as Indigenous if any member of the household identifies as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. There may be some non-Indigenous households within the SOMIH program.

(c) The disability status of the household is based on whether any member of the household reports to experience a disability. Disability is the umbrella term for any or all of an impairment of body structure or function, a limitation in activities, or a restriction in participation.

Source: AIHW National Housing Assistance Data Repository.

3.1.6 Social housing exits (compared to new entrants)

It is not currently possible to comprehensively understand the total scale and types of transfers into, within and out of the social housing sector. AIHW data⁵ shows the relationship between entries and exits over the past decade, as well as state and territory variation in these trends, for public and SOMIH housing. It is also possible to discover the demographics of those who enter and exit social housing by type via PIA and HILDA data. However, there is currently no national publicly available data about the total number of entries, exits and transfers to and from community housing or between community and public housing.

Each year between 2011 and 2018, exits from public housing and SOMIH properties outstripped the number of newly allocated properties. On average 20,999 public housing properties and 774 SOMIH properties were allocated annually to new households, while 23,910 and 826 exited retrospectively (Table 5). This meant that while on average 7.6 per cent of public housing tenants and 8.6 per cent of SOMIH tenants were exiting each year, only 6.7 per cent were new entrants to public housing and 8 per cent to SOMIH.

In both housing types, the highest number of exits occurred in 2017–18, with 26,369 households leaving social housing (a 14% increase on the 2016–17 number of exits) and 1,020 leaving SOMIH (a 26.7% increase on 2016–17 exits; AIHW 2019a; Table 6). The increases in exits and lower entry numbers are likely a result of large-scale housing stock transfers to community housing (Pawson, Parsell et al. 2018) although data is not yet available in a comparable format (AIHW 2019a).

Table 5: Number of households entering and exiting public housing, 2011–12 to 2017–18

Year	Ongoing households ^a	Newly allocated households ^b	New allocations compared to ongoing households (%)	Households that exited ^c	Exits compared to ongoing households (%)	Percentage change from previous year of households that exited ^c (%)
2011–12	323,423	21,365	6.6	22,850	7.1	..
2012–13	321,213	21,299	6.6	23,509	7.3	2.9
2013–14	317,008	20,611	6.5	24,816	7.8	5.6
2014–15	314,963	21,410	6.8	23,455	7.4	-5.5
2015–16	312,219	20,502	6.6	23,246	7.4	-0.9
2016–17	310,483	21,387	6.9	23,123	7.4	-0.5
2017–18	304,532	20,418	6.7	26,369	8.7	14.0
Mean 2011–18	314,834	20,999	6.7	23,910	7.6	n/a

.. Not applicable

(a) Ongoing indicates the household's tenancy has not concluded.

(b) Whether the household was a new allocation for housing assistance in the financial year.

(c) Includes households living in housing stock that was transferred from public housing or SOMIH to community housing in the reference period. In 2017–18, in SA in particular, a large number of dwellings were transferred from public housing or SOMIH to community housing.

Notes:

1. Excludes NT data which were not available. The total new allocations for SOMIH in 2017–18 (including NT) was 1252.

2. Data on transferred and exited households were only available for the public housing and SOMIH programs.

3. Data may not be comparable across jurisdictions and comparisons could be misleading. See the relevant data quality statements for more information.

Source: AIHW National Housing Assistance Data Repository. Supplementary table TENANTS.9.

⁵ See: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia-2019/contents/social-housing-tenants#ten6>

3. Who is moving into, within and out of social housing?

Table 6: Number of households that entered and exited SOMIH, 2011–12 to 2017–18

Year	Ongoing households ^a	Newly allocated households ^b	New allocations compared to ongoing households (%)	Households that exited ^c	Exits compared to ongoing households (%)	Percentage change from previous year of households that exited ^c (%)
2011–12	9,692	774	8.0	646	6.7	..
2012–13	9,820	858	8.7	730	7.4	13
2013–14	9,790	777	7.9	807	8.2	10.5
2014–15	9,732	852	8.8	910	9.4	12.8
2015–16	9,660	797	8.3	869	9.0	-4.5
2016–17	9,574	719	7.5	805	8.4	-7.4
2017–18	9,200	646	7.0	1,020	11.1	26.7
Mean 2011–18	9,638	774	8.0	826	8.6	n/a

.. Not applicable

(a) Ongoing indicates the household's tenancy has not concluded.

(b) Whether the household was a new allocation for housing assistance in the financial year.

(c) Includes households living in housing stock that was transferred from public housing or SOMIH to community housing in the reference period. In 2017–18, in SA in particular, a large number of dwellings were transferred from public housing or SOMIH to community housing.

Notes

1. Excludes NT data which were not available. The total new allocations for SOMIH in 2017–18 (including NT) was 1252.

2. Data on transferred and exited households were only available for the public housing and SOMIH programs.

3. Data may not be comparable across jurisdictions and comparisons could be misleading. See the relevant data quality statements for more information.

Source: AIHW National Housing Assistance Data Repository. Supplementary table TENANTS.9.

As noted above, only small numbers of tenants exit public housing and SOMIH annually. As Table 7 shows, there are some differences between states and territories. Tasmania and Western Australia had the highest proportion of exits during 2016–17.

Table 7: Households that exited from public housing and SOMIH, by state and territory, 2016–17 (per cent)

Social housing program	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT
Public housing	5.6	5.8	8.2	10.5	7.2	11.8	4.8	7.0
SOMIH ^(b)	7.8	..	7.1	..	8.9	8.7

Source: AIHW National Housing Assistance Data Repository.

Previous research has found that social housing tenants most likely to exit either public or community housing are older people, who vacate dwellings to move to assisted living or residential care, to live with family, or who die (Wiesel, Easthope et al. 2012). It also found that where plans to move to independent living are unsuccessful, older people make up a sizeable but small proportion of returning tenants (Wiesel, Pawson et al. 2014). Currently available administrative data provide limited details about the departure tenures or rate of return to social housing among those who have previously exited. This represents one of the most substantial knowledge gaps within currently available data about social housing pathways.

HILDA and PIA data tell some of this story. Baker, Leishman et al. (2020) analysed 16 years of HILDA data and found that one third of people exiting who are part of HILDA left to go to 'other tenures', which includes 'inherently more precarious' housing situations (such as renting informally, or renting from another individual) than social or formal private rental through a real estate agent. As they explain 'given that only around 5–10 per cent of social tenants exit the system each year, the outflows are currently modest. Thus, to find that around one third of this flow is potentially unable to find more secure housing options is worrying.'

Baker, Leishman et al.'s analysis of the PIA dataset included around 10 million people in Australia over a 10 year period. They compared people who had entered and/or exited social housing to a group of people who had spent no time in social housing. Those who had used social housing were split into typologies based on their entry and exit movement patterns.

- Stable: people in social housing continuously for 10 years or more;
- Exits: people who had entered and exited social housing during the 10 years;
- Entrants: people who were not previously in social housing who entered within the 10 year window;
- Brief leavers (people who were in social housing, left and then returned);
- Brief entrants (who had come into social housing and left within the 10 years); and
- Transitional: those who came in and went out of social housing on multiple entry/exit points, who were categorised as either Unstable Leavers or Unstable Entrants.

The largest group of social housing users over the period were in the stable housing group (33.9%). Compared to other cohorts this group was most likely to include older people; people with higher levels of disability and long-term health problems; and therefore people who were not in the labour force (Table 8).

On average, exits and new entrants were younger. Interestingly, over 1 in 10 (11.3%) were transitional exits—2.8 per cent were in social housing, left briefly and then returned—while the remainder had multiple entries and exits to and from social housing. Therefore, an exit out of social housing did not necessarily mean a successful stable housing outcome. Further, on average, people who had transitional social housing experiences spent more time on social welfare/ income support than the other groups. The stable cohort spent the least amount of time receiving social security benefits relative to any of the other groups (Table 8).

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Table 8: Social housing status and changes for people in receipt of government benefits (PIA dataset)

Social housing typology	% of dataset (n=c. 10m people over 10 years)	Demographics of cohort	Rank re time in receipt of welfare benefits relative to non-social housing users (1 = highest to 6 = least) & dominant benefit type(s)*
Stable (in continuously 10 years min.)	33.9%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Older (mean age 60 years) Higher levels of disability and long-term health problems Most not in the labour force 60% female 36% born overseas 6% Indigenous Low proportion of refugees (<2%) 	6 Most likely receiving aged pension or disability pension
Exits (in – out)	14.4%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average ten years younger (mean age 50 years) than the Stable group 64% female Indigenous people over-represented (12%) 28% born overseas Refugees 2% 	5 Most likely receiving unemployment benefits or a disability pension
New entrants (out – in)	26.0%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Younger on average than Stable social tenants and Leavers (mean age 48) 15% Indigenous 32% born overseas 6% refugees 	4 Most likely receiving unemployment benefits or a disability pension
Brief leavers (in – out – in)	2.8%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mean age 47 62% female Majority born in Australia (77%) 24% Indigenous 19% born overseas 2% refugees 	1 Most likely receiving unemployment benefits or a disability pension
Brief entrants (out – in – out)	14.4%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average the youngest (mean age of 40) Most gender balanced cohort (52% female) Over 20% Indigenous 4% refugees 	3 Most likely receiving unemployment benefits
Transitional leavers and Transitional entrants (multiple entry and exit points and vice versa)	8.5%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mean age 41 and 38 years 87% Australian born people 62% and 53% female 38% Indigenous Relative under-representation of refugees (1 and <3% respectively) 	2 Most likely receiving unemployment benefits

* Aged pension, disability pension, unemployment benefits, carer and study benefits analysed.

Source: 10 years of PIA data; Table modified from Baker, Leishman et al. 2020.

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Baker, Leishman et al.'s findings show that the stable social housing group have a different age profile, social security requirement and workforce status than a number of the other cohorts. They state:

Continued stability within social housing may be considered a successful outcome for stable social housing tenants, an older (largely beyond working age) cohort. Conversely transitional leavers may not benefit from stable social housing, and a successful outcome for this group may in fact be stability in another tenure with the support of employment assistance (Baker, Leishman et al. 2020, p 27.).

It is important to note, however, that this group still requires affordable, stable and safe housing in the private market.

Evidence based on a range of purpose-designed surveys indicate that where employment pathways are secure, exits from social housing are enabled for some tenants and are encouraged within some jurisdictions via market rent setting options for income earners (see Section 2). However, the relationship between employment status and exits from social housing also depends on the relationship of employment incomes to market rents/housing costs within their geographic location. This may be why some leavers due to employment, return to social housing later on.

AIHW data (2018) shows employment for current tenants ranges from 6.6 per cent of public housing tenants engaged in full time work, to 10.8 per cent of SOMIH tenants and 6.8 per cent of community housing tenants. Unemployment rates were significantly higher among social housing tenants (18.4%) than in the general population in 2016 (5.6%) (ABS 2016b). Given the priority eligibility criteria for access to social housing and the fact that 60.1 per cent were not in the labour force, not intending to or unable to work, employment pathways affect only a relatively small proportion of tenants and tenancies. This suggests that for many tenants, employment does not necessarily offer a viable exit pathway (Table 9).

Table 9: Employment status of tenants aged 15–64 living in public housing, SOMIH and mainstream community housing, 2016 (per cent)

Employment status	Public housing	SOMIH	Mainstream community housing	All programs
Employed full time	6.6	10.8	6.8	6.8
Employed part time	14.3	9.9	17.9	14.7
Unemployed	18.0	25.9	18.9	18.4
Not intending or unable to work	45.0	26.2	40.2	43.5
Not in labour force	16.1	27.2	16.1	16.6

Notes: This table does not present raw survey data. The estimates presented here have been derived by applying weights to the raw data (survey responses) to ensure that the estimates presented represent the total population, to the extent possible. Responses to this question relate to the person in the household who completed the survey form. The response categories for employment status have been changed in the 2016 survey questionnaire, therefore estimates are not directly comparable with previous years. For the 2016 survey questionnaire respondents were asked to select one option only (the previous survey allowed multiple responses), therefore estimates are not directly comparable with previous years.

Source: AIHW 2016 National Social Housing Survey (NSHS).

Interviews undertaken in this research support recent evidence (Wiesel, Easthope et al. 2012; Wiesel, Pawson et al. 2014) showing that sustaining an exit from social housing requires a consistent income that keeps pace with the cost of living, including housing. However, even for people who are looking for work, this is not necessarily on offer in the contemporary Australian labour market where much of the low-skilled work available is intermittent, precarious and casualised (Flanagan, Levin et al. 2020).

Among the 76 tenants who were interviewed for this research, only three had exited social housing at the time of interview. While our sample is limited, in two cases, the cause was severe anti-social behaviour from neighbours that made tenants fear for their safety. This resulted in inappropriate exits from social housing due to a failure to obtain satisfactory resolution to these neighbourhood problems. It is worth noting however that neighbourhood problems were one of the few circumstances that tenants pointed to as actively causing them to want to leave social housing—other issues, such as poor quality housing, were regarded as worth tolerating in exchange for the security and stability offered by social tenure, particularly over private rental options.

3.1.7 Non-exits from social housing: benefits of secure, affordable housing

Housing safety and stability are top priorities of people across the income spectrum, including low and very low-income households (Stone, Rowley et al. forthcoming).

The safety and stability offered by social housing for the tenants interviewed was critical. As one tenant stated:

The place that I've got now is the first time that I've actually had a safe and stable place, to actually have a platform to work from. I'm a bit emotional now—even when I first got it, I didn't know what to do. It was a big shock. I'm more than grateful just to have a roof over my head and to be able to go home and feel safe at night is just such a relief. It's amazing, I didn't know what that was like before I had that place (tenant, South Australia).

Insights from Baker, Leishman et al. (2020) and housing authority satisfaction data supports the notion that for some tenants, social housing may be an optimal housing pathway destination and a cost-effective one. Evidence indicates that the needs of tenants, including those with high and complex needs, may be relatively well met within social housing (AIHW 2018).

Baker, Leishman et al. (2020) found on average people with stable social housing (there for at least 10 years) spent less time in receipt of social security than the groups of people who had transitory pathways (in and out) of social housing. Those with transitory pathways also experienced 'great levels of geographic mobility'. Baker, Leishman et al. (2020) warn that these transitory pathways could mean 'higher economic costs and greater disruption (for example, to the education of children of such individuals)'.

Housing authority satisfaction data also supports positive outcomes from social housing stability. Over 8 in 10 social housing tenants reported feeling more settled, enjoying better health, better able to cope with life events, feeling part of the local community and able to better manage rent/money and access services and public transport (Table 10).

Table 10: Self-reported benefits gained by tenants living in social housing, by social housing program, 2016 (per cent)

Benefit	Public housing	SOMIH	Mainstream community housing	All programs
Feel more settled	95.0	93.7	94.5	94.9
Enjoy better health	81.1	86.1	82.1	81.4
Feel more able to cope with life events	88.4	91.6	88.6	88.6
Feel part of the local community	82.8	88.1	83.0	83.0
Able to continue living in this area	91.4	92.9	92.6	91.6
Able to manage rent/money better	95.0	92.2	92.7	94.6
Feel more able to improve job situation	63.7	75.5	66.4	64.7
Feel more able to start or continue education/training	70.4	81.1	73.1	71.3
Have better access to services	87.7	87.2	87.6	87.6
Have better access to public transport	87.5	80.0	85.8	87.0
Other	89.8	91.2	92.2	90.1

Notes: This table does not present raw survey data. The estimates presented here have been derived by applying weights to the raw data (survey responses) to ensure that the estimates presented represent the total population, to the extent possible. Self-reported benefits relate to the person in the household who completed the survey form. Respondents were allowed to select more than one response.

Source: AIHW 2016 National Social Housing Survey (NSHS).

These findings were reinforced by the people interviewed for this research (further discussed in Section 4). Most participants found themselves on a social housing pathway (into, within or out of) for many reasons and these 'personal' pathways were complex and sometimes chaotic. For the majority of the people interviewed, living in social housing was the first time in their lives that they had felt stable and safe. This sense of security was sometimes jeopardised by neighbourhood concerns, but largely, tenants were immensely grateful for, and were fearful of losing, the security they now had.

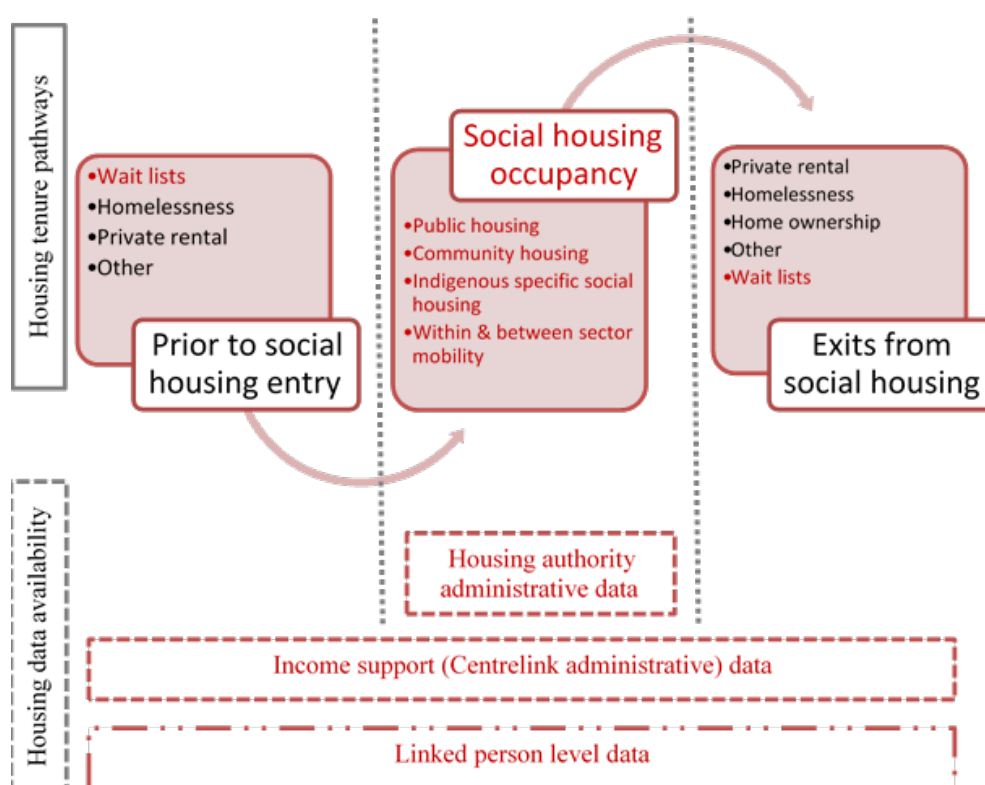
There are also substantial limitations in data about the extent to which safety and satisfaction feature within internal social housing mobility and transfers and exits. Understanding more about the conditions of safety and security in addition to adequacy, housing conditions and affordability for tenants are key aspects that need to be addressed in any improvements in housing data. Without such information, interpreting drivers and outcomes of mobility, transfers and exits remains extremely limited. Additionally, understanding how these factors feature in common or varied ways across tenant groups is critical for optimal housing responses, such as how older tenants or families, for example, are housed within current stock and within segments of the social housing system.

3.2 Housing data gaps

Internationally, policy development is increasingly reliant upon the smart use of administrative records, longitudinal tracking and incidental data capture (such as via service usage) or big data, to quantify trends, identify patterns and dynamics and to enable estimates of the impacts of policy interventions and reforms within a system context (Card, Chetty et al. 2010).

Data development in Australia is in a state of development and transition. Some data is readily available to researchers, other data is not yet available for research use, either due to its form (data structure) or access restrictions, and some data is under development. Figure 6 provides an indicative illustration of the types, scope and nature of large scale quantitative data currently available in Australia that can be used to inform programmatic aspects of housing assistance policy development—including via analysis of the complex and nuanced housing pathways of individual households within and across segments of housing programs and assistance. Jurisdictional authorities vary significantly in their preparedness to provide access to housing authority data for research purposes.

Figure 6: Visualisation of data gaps, blind spots and options for housing assistance policy development in Australia



Source: Authors.

Administrative data: Priority Investment Approach

Most recently, the Australian Government has made de-identified available data associated with the receipt of income support via its Australian Priority Investment Approach (PIA). This dataset includes individuals who have claimed, are receiving or have received social security payments or services (e.g. Aged Pension, Youth Allowance, Newstart and Disability Support Pension). The longitudinal social security dataset extracted from the Department of Human Services (DHS) will provide a rich account of social housing pathways, identify the incidence of typical and possible social housing typologies, and examine drivers, enablers and barriers for key policy groups. These data have the potential to provide the most robust form of national integrated data available at a broad scale and including rich housing-related information at individual and household levels. However, in order for the data to be used effectively for policy research, issues of cost, accessibility, structure and support for the data are in the process of being addressed to enhance data user access mechanisms and reduce data structures and challenges that render data usage difficult.

Linked administrative data

There are also developments in Australia around linking administrative datasets, for example housing with health or justice data. Linked data have considerable potential to build causal evidence bases that can support efforts to address wicked policy problems. Currently, the Australian Government supports data linkage agencies such as the ABS, AIFS and the AIHW. However, data linkage processes face challenges (see Appendix 1 for more information).

Currently, two key examples of data linkage success that include housing data exist in SA-NT and WA—these are complex, in terms of data structure, data agreements and data ethics and take lengthy periods of time to develop. Other jurisdictions are currently building capability for larger and linked data analytics. Governments in all states and territories and nationally are actively investing in data linkage capabilities. These developments will be able to fast-track and support best-practice matching of tenants to housing, support entry and exit policy development and if used in optimal ways, will improve the overall performance of the social housing sector for governments, providers as well as for future, current and past tenants.

Panel studies and survey data

Longitudinal panel studies, large national surveys and Census collections also provide considerable insights into how changes in policies over time affect population trends and outcomes. Longitudinal data investment in Australia is high quality, highly accessible and affordable for research use and plays a major role in the Australian evidence building landscape. Longitudinal analyses have in many ways fundamentally improved policy development over recent decades, however, they do not enable the depth of analysis needed about how individual household circumstances directly interact with policy and programmatic systems and allocations to inform particular policy reform, such as social housing innovation.

Further information about the current data gaps in housing data can be found in Appendix 1.

3.3 Policy implications

Administrative data (via the ABS, AIHW and Productivity Commission) highlights major trends in housing assistance and social housing provision over time and across jurisdictions. As noted in the previous section, however, data limitations curtail a deep understanding of housing pathways between housing types and how the system is navigated. Key findings and policy implications from this data are summarised below.

3.3.1 What does existing administrative data tell us about entries, exits and mobility within social housing?

Public housing remains the largest provider of social housing nationally across all states and territories and is increasingly targeted to those with the greatest and most complex needs. Entry and exit data indicate that current rates of entry to social housing remain low.

A substantial proportion of social housing tenants are female (around 62 per cent across all main forms of social housing) and over half of all social housing tenants are of non-primary working age years (either aged 55 years or over between 0 and 14 years). Not surprisingly, these same population groups (particularly women and older people) feature prominently in all entry, internal mobility and exits from social housing data in the most recent reporting periods. Most tenants have high and complex needs and age or care related barriers to labour force participation, which is likely a contributing factor to the minimal number of tenants who exit social housing each year.

In sum, the administrative data indicate strong grounds for social housing to be considered as not only infrastructure (Lawson, Pawson et al. 2019), but also as an infrastructure of care (Power and Mee 2019). The large proportion of tenants who are older, younger, have disabilities or are caring for a person with a disability implies that for many social housing tenants, public, SOMIH and community housing are optimal destinations within a housing assistance pathway.

If there is to be a 'pathway out', the question for policy is how to achieve safety, stability and affordability that meets people's needs in the private market? Safety and security of housing are critical and different lower income population cohorts with high and complex needs will have different opportunities or barriers to follow particular 'pathways'. These are significantly affected by outside factors including income (e.g. level of welfare payments, low wages) and the affordability of housing in the marketplace. Given the complex needs of entrants, the private market will need to look very different and policy makers will need to accept that there are circumstances where social housing is required (and may be more cost effective as a solution) for many people for the long-term, if not indefinitely.

3.3.2 How can existing data be used most effectively for policy innovation about social housing pathways?

Access to well-integrated data that enables a person-centred approach to social policy and housing analysis in Australia is limited. While linkage of administrative data from different spheres (such as housing with health, justice and education) is gaining traction and is underway in a number of jurisdictions, progress is slow and limited at the present time.

Missing from current evidence is holistic, mixed-method, longitudinal and cross-tenure/assistance data on social housing pathways in the context of housing assistance (public housing, community housing, and private rental assistance). Optimal policy development requires clear, contemporary evidence on (i) how we might understand social housing pathways within a changed housing policy and housing assistance context, (ii) what advances in administrative and longitudinal data can tell us about how policy innovation might best support improved social housing pathways, and (iii) the experiences and perspectives of tenants. This evidence needs to include consideration of variable regulatory frameworks, including across state/territory jurisdictions; demographic, economic and local area contexts; conditions in the wider housing market; and how experiences differ for tenants with different contextual factors and from different geographic areas. It requires a combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence.

Currently in Australia the combination of qualitative and quantitative data gaps, blind spots and access issues associated with housing assistance and social housing data means major policy decisions are based on limited evidence, limited listening to tenants and a lack of knowledge about housing pathways, what drives them and makes pathway outcomes successful. There is also a lack of evidence about how the interface between households and systems works best for tenants, housing segments and the system overall.

Australian big data evidence currently falls behind advances in similar countries, such as Canada, as well as in countries with longer histories of detailed person-level data for policy development, such as Denmark. Coordinated investment and commitment to fund, develop and enable access by research communities in a coordinated way via Australian, and state and territory governments is required for future evidence-based policy development. In the absence of expensive and time-consuming interventions within housing assistance models to test, pilot and evaluate what works well for tenants and the housing programs and assistance forms they engage with, improvements to big data are critical. Without these, assumptions and inefficiencies within complex systems of housing support cannot be addressed.

Analysis of social housing pathways in a broad housing assistance context, that considers wait lists and targeted entry, illuminates the way households with potentially similar housing and support needs are guided to stable, supported forms of housing programs in an overall context of rationing and scarcity (Jacobs, Hulse et al. 2016; Stone, Parkinson et al. 2016). Large scale longitudinal administrative and qualitative data (from a client perspective) that enables comparisons between and within the housing and living arrangements and pathways of key population groups over time, should also be used to assess how well one form of housing assistance meets the needs of any given household relative to other housing assistance options.

4. Tenant experiences of social housing pathways

- **The tenants who participated in this research did not see exiting from social housing as a genuine option for them because there were no affordable, stable alternatives:**
 - But where to? Financially it's impossible. Even if I think about it, even if I want to, even if I need to get out, but where to? Nowhere. (tenant, Victoria)
- **Their experiences and their navigation of the social housing system were shaped by relationships with providers and staff, and profoundly influenced by the level of care (or lack of care) shown to them:**
 - They don't like you when you're articulate. I heard the way they talked to people in there—you know they just want very dependent, frightened people. (tenant, NSW)
- **A diversifying social housing system increases the risk of fragmentation in access and support provision. Better integration is needed across housing and related support services. It is also needed between housing and external or non-housing systems:**
 - I was on Newstart at the time, I couldn't afford—that's the thing with being pregnant, they won't put you on parenting payments 'til six weeks, sometimes longer after you've had your child. So I struggled really hard the first six weeks of having her. Just daily food and then trying to afford the rent and stuff before my payments had come in—it was super-tight. I couldn't do anything for those six weeks. (tenant, SA)

- **For many tenants, social housing offers stability, security and sanctuary. It is ‘home’. This sense of home is incompatible with a pathway model that promotes transition out of social housing as the most desirable outcome:**
 - The greatest thing about it is knowing that ‘til the day I die I am safe. I’m coming up to now the longest I’ve ever lived anywhere. Up until then the longest I lived anywhere after I was married was 12 months. After that [it was] three months, six weeks, nine weeks, eight weeks, two weeks. Four months on, two months off, two months on, one month off. It’s huge sense of security and safety and I can plan. I can make decisions knowing I’ve got the two things you need, health and a home. (tenant, Tasmania)

This section describes findings to the Inquiry question: *How do tenants experience moving into, within and out of social housing?* More than this, it seeks to introduce tenants' voices into a policy debate that has frequently overlooked their preferences and wishes. As described in the previous chapters and expanded further below, 'pathways' policy has arisen in a context of constrained resources, reduced funding, rising demand and increased targeting to need, and arguably, it exists largely as a way to ration social housing. This is a managerial imperative but the data from this research shows that it is contradicted by the imperative felt by tenants, which is to maintain safety, stability and security *within* social housing for very real and rational reasons.

4.1 The effects of wider changes in social policy on social housing pathways

As noted in Section 2, the social housing system is a system under strain. The sustained high demand for assistance and the lack of supply are having real effects on the availability and accessibility of 'pathways' into, within and out of the system.

Policy makers are adopting a range of strategies to deal with the demand pressures. These include measures to promote or enforce the rationalisation or more 'efficient' use of available stock, diversifying the sector to encourage other providers to share the burden of meeting the need, and active renewal of property portfolios to ensure a better match between the homes available and the needs of people on waiting lists. These measures, however, are largely coping strategies—trying to make limited resources stretch further. They are not actively directed at resolving the source of these limitations, which is wider housing market dysfunction: unaffordability, instability, inaccessibility, inappropriateness, lack of supports for complex and care needs and long-term under-investment in government housing programs.

Providers were in agreement that the market does not provide low-income housing. They argued that people reliant on income support payments and facing market discrimination were particularly vulnerable—'at the mercy of the market' (provider, Tasmania)—and thought that localised responses would have only 'a trivial impact' (provider, Victoria) in the absence of federal leadership and investment.

Tenants were even more aware of the market situation. Many of the participants had direct experience of insecurity in the private rental market and a significant number had been homeless. They did not want to expose themselves to this insecurity again by moving out of social housing. But more than this, their memories of their own struggles in the private market, or of being homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness, or their observations of the stresses felt by friends and family members still living in private rental housing, had a deep affective dimension. This lived understanding of insecurity directly shaped how they felt about social housing and what it meant to them.

Now this place is the first safe place I've ever had in my adult life and I'm 72 so you know that's how special this place is (tenant, Victoria).

Social housing enabled me to live without that fear I had [of] landlords for 40 years [...] In private rental, it wasn't my home whereas in Housing, it's your home (tenant, NSW).

It was like welcoming arms moving into that house with security of tenure, down the street from my mum, no pressure, no landlord and financially it was the first time I'd felt safe in all that time (tenant, SA).

I hope to leave this place feet first...I've lived in 30 different addresses in my life, I don't want to have to move again (tenant, NSW).

4.2 Tenant experiences, behaviours and interdependencies in social housing pathways

Although individuals' stories varied widely, their underlying circumstances had much in common – income and employment status, accessibility and appropriateness of housing challenges, and shared access and internal transfer frustrations.

Most participants were previously and currently on an income support payment (such as Newstart, parenting payment or the age or disability support pension). A number had past experiences of employment but had been forced to cease working due to poor health, disability or other challenges such as drug or alcohol issues, domestic violence or relationship breakdown.

4.2.1 Accessing and transferring within social housing

Although jurisdictions offer differing levels of support to tenants working through the social housing application process, clear evidence emerged from this research of procedural issues related to the amount of supporting information tenants must collate in order to put forward a compelling application (noting that entry into social housing is highly competitive) and the lack of appropriate assistance and support with this.

Considerable labour is required from tenants as the onus is largely upon them to substantiate that they are in need, to keep in contact with the system to stay on the waiting list and to continue to demonstrate need for the duration of the time they are on the waiting list. The intersection of procedural issues and their own distressing personal circumstances (see Flanagan, Levin et al. 2020 for more) meant that many tenants regarded their own eventual tenancy as a matter of serendipity—having encountered the right worker at the right time when the right house was available—rather than as a matter of due process and objective assessment of need.

Waiting times and access experiences varied. Although those who had been in public housing for a long time remembered it as a relatively simple process, tenants who had entered the system more recently described challenges. Many found the documentation required very hard to understand and complete, particularly with other issues going on in their lives. These difficulties were reported even in cases where tenants had had access to support to help them with their application.

It was all the document collection and the lack of timelines. I'm quite articulate and semi-intelligent, I think, but I found it incredibly challenging. There were extended GP appointments, so they charge you more, there's an out of pocket 'cause they have to write letters, and then you had to go into Centrelink. When you've already got mental health issues, that's triggering. And then you need income statements (tenant, Tasmania).

The requirement to prove not just need, but degree of need, created some perverse incentives.

Their advice to me was if I had a friend with a garage, to store all my possessions and live on the street. Once I'd lived on the street for over 30 days then they could [offer me a unit] (tenant, Victoria.).

For providers focused on ensuring a successful housing outcome, allocation is another critical point in the process. However, the capacity to allocate appropriately to needs is constrained by the housing available. A number of tenants reported significant tensions with neighbours which they linked to targeting policies and a lack of other support for people with issues such as complex mental illness, drug or alcohol addiction. A few participants had been threatened or violently harassed by neighbours and had sought transfers. One tenant, a sole parent, had left her social housing property after her local housing office failed to resolve the harassment she had experienced resulting in her living in a National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) property, paying a market-linked rent she could barely afford and relying on regular emergency assistance, including food parcels.

A range of issues stymie internal transfers. These include the length of time it can take for another dwelling to become available (due to the requirement to go back on the waiting list) and the difficulty in transferring across providers in multi-provider systems (despite the existence of common housing registers (waiting lists) in most jurisdictions). Some providers expressed considerable frustration about the lack of legal levers to force older tenants living in larger properties to 'downsize' to a smaller house to free up larger homes for families on the waiting list. For some of the older tenants interviewed, however, 'moving on' conflicted with their sense of belonging and their connection to their 'home'. One older South Australian participant (early 60s) who was now a homeowner (through being left a home by her ex-husband when he died and financial help from Homestart) described that even now it was too painful to drive past her previous public housing home because:

That garden healed me during cancer, it wrapped its arms around me— I sat under this gum. I had a fishpond, I had all these daisies I planted when my mother died, it had a history. We bond with our houses.

4.2.2 Influence of housing providers and structural constraints

Tenant experiences moving into, within and even out of social housing were mediated by the level of support and care they received from providers and other services. Largely, the picture is not a positive one. While protocols exist, such as the South Australian Housing Authority's trauma-informed care in practice framework, the research evidence suggests that for individual clients 'care' and respect is too often absent.

Tenants spoke highly of individual workers with whom they had formed relationships—the person who 'bent over backwards to get me something' (tenant, SA) or who 'didn't [make] me feel judged when I was being honest about my past' (tenant, Tasmania). Yet worker turnover often undermined these relationships:

You'll be told this person is your client service officer, and the next month they're gone and someone else replaces them. And it happens all the way through in every kind of office you could mention, there's this constant changeover (tenant, NSW).

More generally, tenants spoke repeatedly about the way in which housing staff looked down upon them as inferior.

You kind of have to ask for respect, you don't necessarily receive it when you go in there [housing office]. There is a general air in the office of disrespect of tenants and assuming that we're coloured by the same brush (tenant, SA).

So if the government was ... not so up themselves and don't look down on people like we're all just dirt on their shoes then there'd be a lot more people wanting to ask for help if that makes sense (tenant, Tasmania).

They should treat people more like people—rather than just numbers (tenant, NSW).

Oh they don't care. As far as they're concerned if you don't like it you can go someplace else because we've got plenty of people to come and move in. ... That's their attitude. It used to disturb me, now I just ignore it (tenant, Victoria).

Although tenants made appreciative and critical comments about both public and community housing, community housing providers were generally regarded more positively than public housing providers. This too was related to tenants' sense of care—community housing providers were perceived as caring more about tenant wellbeing, while public housing officers were described as rude and dismissive. This may be reflective of the higher staff to tenant ratios in community housing organisations. For example, in South Australia, the public housing workers have caseloads of reportedly around 400 properties per tenancy officer, while some community housing tenancy managers have caseloads of around 100 properties.

Some social housing providers managing properties and tenancies spoke about struggling to provide sufficient support to a large number of tenants with complex needs (see Flanagan, Levin et al. 2020).

And it's expensive to try and case-manage every client 'cause you know there's a percentage of our clients who come with significantly complex needs. And they need support, but the support is a finite resource just like housing (provider, Victoria).

Shortfalls in support were particularly problematic for people trying to transition from long-term insecurity and homelessness into social housing.

They've had an awful lot of support around them in crisis accommodation and the moment they step out the door it all evaporates—they haven't got coping mechanisms. So the first thing that needs to happen is those issues need to be addressed in a systematic way; it's very, very ad hoc whether somebody has those issues addressed (provider, Tasmania)

Tenants were acutely aware of the broader social and policy context that kept them from exiting from social housing. They feared the unaffordability of the private rental market as well as the insecurities of it. Many of them have lived experience of private rental market insecurity, often overlapping with periods of homelessness, or have observed the struggles of their own family and friends who are living in the private rental market. They carry this lived experience with them, and this means their reluctance to contemplate transitioning out of social housing is not just related to fear, but rationally grounded in experience.

4.2.3 Conceptualising social housing as a pathway or a destination

Across all of the interviews, with tenants and providers, one of the most strongly emerging themes related to the role and purpose of social housing. The language of 'pathways' policy, particularly in New South Wales, constructs social housing as a 'stepping stone' for people experiencing disadvantage. Yet it was clear that for tenants, and also for many providers across all four jurisdictions, social housing is not regarded as a stepping stone but as a legitimate destination for the long-term. For tenants reliant on income support and experiencing disability or poor health or other challenges, social housing offers their best chance of stable, secure and affordable housing. For providers, the purpose of social housing is to provide that stable, secure and affordable housing—many workers argued that their role was to preserve tenancies, not disrupt them by forcing people into insecurity and homelessness.

It's a security blanket like no other when it comes to housing. One basic human right we all know is housing, stable, affordable housing for people. Who wants to give the security for life of that up? None of us (provider, Victoria).

Housing is like water. We should stop seeing housing as an investment and start seeing it as a right for people. I would always empower someone to get out of social housing if that's what they wanted, but I'd also support people to stay if it fit for them (provider, New South Wales).

In some cases, providers' contractual key performance indicators work against pathways approaches.

These arguments should not be read as a failure to understand the pressures facing the social housing system—providers and tenants were acutely aware of these—but as a clear-eyed articulation of the fact that no affordable, secure alternatives to social housing exist. Importantly, for tenants in particular, the solution to the problem lay not in finding alternatives but in building more social housing so that more people could obtain its life-changing benefits.

4.3 Policy development implications

In policy terms, 'pathways' is largely about pathways *out* of social housing to help create spaces for pathways *in*. The principal finding from this research on tenant experiences of pathways is that there is a difference, particularly for tenants but also for providers, between a policy of pathways that is pursued for the purposes of rationing supply in an underfunded and residualised system and a policy of pathways that is enabling genuine tenant choice.

That is, while tenants were open to the possibility of moving out of social housing one day, they wanted control over that decision to be in their hands, so that they could be confident that moving out would result in their lives getting better, not worse. The thought of being forced out of social housing because of the lack of supply of social housing and long waiting lists, however, was a source of fear, despair and anxiety for many people.

I'm actually really afraid of losing this place, I don't think I would survive. My thoughts, like most people in my position, are about getting through tomorrow and doing my best to get healthy and I'm not convinced I can get healthy enough to work before I die. I have a responsibility to do my best and I'm trying but I don't think it gets much better for me than this, I think this is it for me and I've got to make the most of it. I'm trying to get myself well, but when you're living a hard life, thinking in the long term is a luxury, it really is (tenant, Tasmania).

Because I had so much instability in my childhood being stable is very, very important to me so that's probably one of my biggest fears, is to have that instability again (tenant, South Australia).

For a pathways model to be workable from tenant and provider perspectives the alternatives for tenants have to offer the same attributes as social housing: long-term stability (especially important in terms of both security of tenure and for dealing with crises), affordable rents, and appropriate design (which is admittedly inconsistent across the sector). Considerable change in the dynamics and regulation of the private rental market would be required to achieve this, alongside deep subsidies for tenants reliant on income support or low wages. Research suggests that a more efficient and cost effective means of delivering an increase in the supply of appropriate and low-cost housing is direct government investment in social housing provision (Lawson, Pawson et al. 2018).

There may also be alternative options that could be achieved in the system for individual households in terms of other appropriate housing options—whether these options are about transfers or exits, to shared equity home ownership for low income households, for example. Indeed, a number of tenants interviewed aspired to home ownership.⁶ Support is needed for these moves, likely of the range, shape and form of housing brokerage/access assistance activities (Tually, Slatter et al. 2016). There are lessons from specialist homelessness services in terms of the flexible help they provide around housing access and the intensive 'walking with' assistance provided for some people with complex needs across a range of human services domains. Consideration, however, must be given to the reach and resourcing these activities require, including among specialist homelessness services, where we know from recurrent data that demand for such services is high and capacity limited.

⁶ For example, via support for rent-to-purchase style programs within social housing.

5. Reimagining social housing pathways

A key aim of this Inquiry was to consider how social housing pathways might be reimagined for more effective services, supports and policies for positive housing outcomes.

Key to this reimagining process is ensuring clarity on what is meant by the concept of a 'pathway'. There is an important distinction between pathway as an analytical concept designed to help us understand the way in which people move through housing systems and pathway as a policy concept, where the focus is on enabling or facilitating transition through the social housing system. The policy conception of pathways incorporates shorter tenancies, upskilling of existing tenants to enable them to live in the private rental market and, where possible, diversion of people away from the waiting list and into private housing alternatives.

Many of the current approaches of state and territory governments in relation to social housing pathways are strongly influenced by the policy or throughput conception of pathways. This results in the development of policies driven by a need to manage the social housing waiting list(s), rather than focusing on positive housing outcomes (affordability, stability, security, safety etc) for tenants and their households.

This throughput policy model is radically different to the ethos underpinning the social housing system historically, where social housing was often a lifetime stable housing solution for lower income workers. This change in ethos was clear in our research when comparing the fundamental difference between the rhetorical goals of policy (such as the *Future Directions* document) and the views of tenants and many frontline providers. For many interviewees, it was inappropriate to apply a throughput pathways model. Instead of offering transitional tenure, social housing provided residential stability and security to people who had never had this before and who are often facing complex health and other wellbeing issues. This was supported statistically by Baker, Leishman et al.'s research—social housing provides many people (especially those who are older and have a disability and/or long term health issue) stable, affordable housing.

Our research also finds that policies based on this approach are inconsistent with the realities available to people to traverse housing pathways. A throughput pathway assumes upward social mobility supported by employment progression (Figure 7). However, as affordable housing has become increasingly unavailable, labour market attachment more tenuous for more households and access to social housing more restrictive, a pathway out is increasingly unlikely. Firstly, a paucity of affordable housing means there is nowhere to move to, and secondly, there is a need for ongoing tenancy support. We see this confirmed in the number of people who transition in and out of social housing on multiple occasions (PIA data) and in the proportion of people who leave social housing for precarious housing situations (HILDA; Baker, Leishman et al. 2020).

Tenants and providers participating in this research were both aware that obtaining secure, long-term, affordable and appropriate housing in the private rental market was unobtainable by people on income support payments and living in poverty, and both inaccessible and financially and emotionally damaging for people vulnerable to discrimination or stigma.

The most frequent response to interview questions about housing pathways was a variation on the return question: ‘a pathway to where?’

As a result, the pathway journey looks more like Figure 8 than Figure 7.

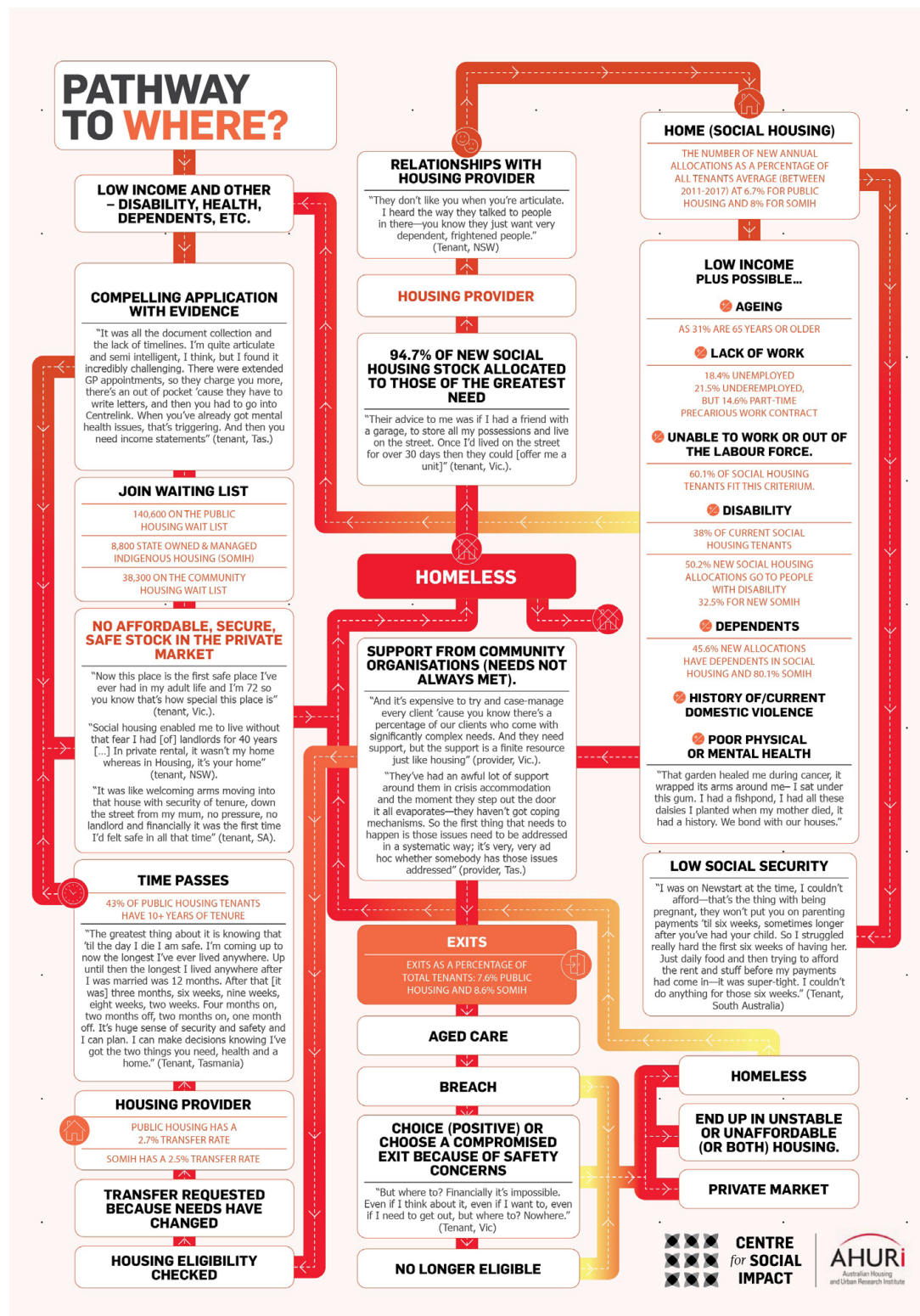
Our research highlights the need to reimagine housing pathways as a potential option for achieving positive housing outcomes—safe, affordable, secure and supported housing for people who are experiencing vulnerability.

Figure 7: Social housing policy implies a throughput pathway (an example)



Source: The Centre for Social Impact

Figure 8: Realistic social housing pathways faced by tenants and prospective tenants



Source: The Centre for Social Impact

Re-imagining housing pathways requires policy makers to go beyond homogenous entry, transfer, and exit paradigms to thinking about multiple pathways for different people under different circumstances and accept different starting and end points, including social housing as an end destination particularly for those with long-term complex needs. As part of this approach, we need to accept that long-term social housing is a legitimate (and cost effective) way to provide social housing assistance, and we need to increase its supply.

It is suggested the re-imagining of pathways requires the following:

- **Recommended reforms to the process of delivering social housing:**
 - Working from a preventative space by providing social and affordable housing for people who are low and very low-income but who do not yet have complex needs;
 - Accepting that long-term social housing is a legitimate (and cost-effective) way to provide social housing assistance;
 - Accepting that some pathways will and should end within social housing;
 - Recognising that social housing provides an infrastructure of care for other tenants/households with long-term complex needs;
 - Increasing the supply of social housing;
 - Establishing KPIs across the sector that focus on tenant outcomes, to ensure shared goals that meet the needs of tenants and their households.
- **Recommended reforms to the private market:**
 - Increasing the supply of affordable housing in the private rental market (e.g. through private rental subsidies; rental brokerage/access supports; social impact investment);
 - Ensuring appropriate, resourced supports are available for people who need them, to enable them to remain in private housing, including affordability and rental assistance schemes;
 - Creating conditions for increased housing stability in the public and private markets;
 - Providing and adequately resourcing supports when needed, to assist people who require them to maintain tenancies and for the duration of need.
- **Recommended reforms to the system:**
 - Going beyond homogenous entry, transfer, and exit paradigms to thinking about multiple pathways for different people under different circumstances and accepting different starting and end points, including social housing as an end destination;
 - Developing conceptual understandings of how complex systems work in human services and how pathways are affected by people within and outside the housing sector;
 - Improving connections between the private and public housing system;
 - Connecting affordable housing supply better with demand to ensure that pathways match household needs and that resources are used effectively and efficiently;
 - Improving linked administrative and qualitative data across the housing sector to ensure high quality evidence informed policy and practice; and
 - Establishing KPIs across the sector that focus on tenant outcomes to ensure shared goals that meet the needs of tenants and their households.

5.1 Final remarks

Fundamentally, social housing pathways must be viewed in the context of the inter-connected systems in which people live and the housing sector operates.

At the heart of the current (social) housing problem in Australia is that:

1. Demand for social housing significantly exceeds supply;
2. Policy has responded with a far too simplistic solution around 'pathways', rather than being reshaped to deal with the complexity of the situation;
3. As a result, there are inconsistencies between the policies and the pragmatic realities available to people who traverse housing pathways.

If we are to reimagine social housing pathways, the solution needs to move away from managing waitlists by rationing supply, to embark on changing the system to construct realistic pathways to best enable positive tenant outcomes. As a society, it is critical we can answer the most frequent question that emerged in this research project: **'A pathway to where?'**

We need to recognise that there will be multiple pathways for different people, including social housing as a legitimate end point, and viable alternatives to social housing that are affordable, appropriate, stable and safe.

Future policy needs to acknowledge the key influences that shape social housing pathways and the complexity of the situation, including:

- Jurisdictional context;
- Long-term underfunding of social housing resulting in a lack of supply relative to demand, which has led to the rationalisation of social housing to people with increasingly complex needs;
- The state of the private rental market;
- Affordability schemes in the private rental market;
- Inadequate income support payments;
- The adequacy of housing subsidies (e.g. CRA) and the appropriateness of other taxation subsidies;
- The intersection of housing policy with other systems, structures and policies, such as income support and employment systems, and important social supports such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and aged care supports;
- Supports available in the private market for people with complex needs;
- Improved collaboration and coordination within the housing system to support tenants to navigate not only their social housing pathway, but their housing pathway more broadly.

Collaboration between multiple stakeholders in the housing system—federal government, state and territory housing authorities and community housing providers, the private sector, landlords and real estate agents, and tenants' groups, community groups and peak housing associations, as well as providers across a range of other areas of the human services system (e.g. employment services, health and mental health, disability, drug and alcohol services, Centrelink and Indigenous-specific and -controlled services)—is critical in redesigning the system.

Further, it would involve improved connections and information flows (including data linkages and availability for data analysis) to coordinate social housing with other parts of the housing support system, including crisis accommodation, transitional housing, supported accommodation and specialist homelessness services.

Reimagining requires looking at how systems interact, and reshifting the focus from managing waiting lists as the centre of policy and practice, to an outcome that truly puts people at the heart of the housing system and building system capacities to ensure the right home for everyone.

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Appendix 1:

Data gaps

Internationally, leading edge policy development is increasingly reliant upon the smart use of administrative records, longitudinal tracking and incidental data capture (such as via service usage) or 'big data', to quantify trends, identify patterns and dynamics and to enable estimates of the impacts of policy interventions and reforms within a system context (Card, Chetty et al. 2010). Data innovations have the ability to replace expensive, time consuming and sometimes ethically questionable pilot studies, controlled experiments and programmatic interventions while enabling a high level of reliability for evidence building and policy making.

Data development in the Australian context is in a state of development and transition. Some data has been invested in over time and is made readily available to researchers, other data is not yet available for research use, either due to its form (data structure) or access restrictions, and some data is still under development.

Housing authority data held at state and territory levels and including information related to wait lists, allocations, tenancy offers and entries to social housing, mobility within public and community housing and exits from social housing programs is relatively restricted in scope, as data is collected for administrative rather than research purposes. Since this data is collected for specific administrative purposes, it provides limited information about the events and drivers or assistance mechanisms engaged with by tenants prior to entry to social housing, their wellbeing or attitudes/values within social housing, nor about what happens to them if they exit social housing and do not apply for re-entry. Jurisdictional authorities vary significantly in their preparedness to enable access to such data for research purposes. Hence there is considerable restriction on the capacity of researchers (within or outside of government) to build a comparative evidence base that can be used to for 'observational studies' such as how well particular interventions and policy changes work in a given location, relative to others.

Administrative data: Priority Investment Approach

Recently, the Australian Government made available data associated with the receipt of income support by households in the years 2001 and 2015 for research to approved users, via its Australian Priority Investment Approach (PIA). The longitudinal social security dataset extracted from the Department of Human Services (DHS) will provide a rich account of social housing pathways, identify the incidence of typical and possible social housing typologies and examine drivers, enablers and barriers for key policy groups. These data have the potential to provide the most robust form of national integrated data currently available at a broad scale and including rich housing-related information at individual and household levels.

This dataset holds a significant amount of de-identified, sensitive, and personal information about individuals, their housing circumstances, income support/housing assistance receipt, demographic characteristics and transitions related to income support as well as insights into the linkages between housing and health, education and employment. Significantly, the PIA data include dedicated foci on the population cohorts identified as being of key policy relevance in terms of entering social housing, including elderly Australians, households which have dependent children, and persons living with disability or significant ill health and their carers. The data also include age cohort identifiers, enabling detailed analysis of the housing assistance and social housing pathways of older men and women.

The Australian Priority Investment Approach to Welfare (PIA) policy initiative was established as part of the 2015-16 Budget, following a comprehensive review of Australia's welfare system. The initiative uses data analysis to identify groups at risk of long-term welfare dependence. As part of the PIA, in September 2016, the Minister for Social Services announced a plan to allow limited public access to PIA data.

A synthetic version of the PIA data has been created to provide access to administrative data for general users while maintaining the privacy of individuals. The synthetic PIA data relates to individuals who have made a claim for, are receiving or have received payments or services administered under social security law. This includes benefit types such as Aged Pension, Youth Allowance, Newstart and Disability Support Pension. The synthetic data contains a limited number of variables suitable for research, while maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of individuals. The synthetic dataset has been created by applying a privacy-preserving algorithm on the original PIA data. This process results in each person's true data being modified such that the overall group data very closely represents that of the original dataset, yet no one individual's data remains in the synthetic dataset. That is, the dataset is a combination of synthetic records that, when combined, reflect the shape of the original dataset.

The synthetic PIA data contains a series of point-in-time quarterly snapshots dated from July 2001 to June 2015. This results in 56 separate quarters of administrative data. Each quarter includes 31 variables that are consistent across all quarters. There are approximately 5 million individual records represented in each quarter.

The PIA/DOMINO data represent a substantial step towards opening administrative data up for research purposes at the national level. In order for the data to be most effective for policy oriented research for housing policy, issues of cost, accessibility, structure and support for the data will need to be addressed. Currently, while it is possible to gain secure access to the data and researchers like Baker, Leishman et al. (2020) have begun to do so, the upfront cost of doing so (approximately \$6,000 per data user), the access mechanism (via a secure data portal that is sub-contracted to government), and data structure (key variables and data points separately housed in discrete data sets that require linking by data users) as well as a lack of web-based support for users of the type developed by the ABS or DSS for large data, are likely to undermine early uptake of the data for research purposes. These issues can be readily addressed via government investment in development of these access and use support tools.

Additionally, when linked with spatial data such as postcode, regional markers or state and territory jurisdiction codes, the data will enable spatial analysis of the types of locations and local housing markets that appear to best support particular types of housing stability or mobility.

Linked administrative data

In addition to the administrative data that are newly available via PIA/DOMINO, there are ongoing developments in Australia to link suites of data from one administrative system with another, for example, housing with health or justice data. Linked data have considerable potential to build causal evidence bases that can ultimately address long-term wicked problems within policy contexts. The possibilities of linking data across, within and between jurisdictional boundaries as well as between, within and across sectors are considerable for policy design and research purposes.

Currently, the Australian Government supports three data linkage agencies in Australia, the ABS, AIFS and the AIHW, and data linkage represents the cusp of big data in social policy terms in Australia. However, linkage processes face many challenges. Linkages are made by non-government approved data users on a user-pays basis and take considerable time, which is typically unavailable to researchers within the timeframes associated with funded research. High costs and complexity around coordination of jurisdictional stakeholders can substantially limit the ability of would-be data users to access linked data. Consequently, in a user-pays system, these challenges hamper a coordinated development approach to data linkage supported by the governments and data custodians involved in data development, for approved research access and use. Research access to ethically approved policy realms matched across jurisdictional boundaries can take years to achieve. Linked SA-NT health data is one example of researcher-initiated linked data now available under limited and restricted conditions following a multiple year development process.

Two key examples of data linkage success exist—these are complex, in terms of data structure, data agreements and data ethics, and take long periods of time to develop. While all jurisdictional governments are building capability for larger and linked data analytics, it is the SA-NT and WA data linkage projects that are currently most well developed.



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