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Addressing the stigmatisation of social housing

THE STIGMATISATION OF SOCIAL HOUSING IS A POLICY PROBLEM IN ITS OWN RIGHT, EXTERNAL TO THE MATERIAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF POVERTY AND DISADVANTAGE. THE PROCESSES BY WHICH STIGMA IS PRODUCED AND REPRODUCED NEED TO BE UNDERSTOOD AND TACKLED PROACTIVELY.

KEY POINTS

- Stigmatisation is a process by which individuals and groups are judged to have negative characteristics that transgress social norms. Because of stigmatisation, social housing is widely viewed as a drain on resources, rather than a worthwhile investment in assisting those who are less fortunate.
- Social theory is useful for understanding stigmatisation as a process that is distinct from, but related to, the material circumstances of poverty and disadvantage. It shows that stigma is not a natural or inevitable outcome of disadvantage. Instead, stigmatisation should be understood as a complex process shaped by powerful social groups, such as the media.
- Negative depictions of social housing are over represented in the media; this results from commercial pressures for journalists to provide entertaining stories at the expense of positive or everyday living.
- Stigmatisation of social housing has negative impacts on wellbeing outcomes for residents and on neighbourhood amenity. It can also operate as a 'policy blockage', for example hindering efforts to improve 'social mix'.

*This bulletin is based on research conducted by **Associate Professor Keith Jacobs**, **Dr Kathy Arthurson** and colleagues at the AHURI Southern Research Centre. The research team established an Investigative Panel to explore the impact of stigma for residents living in social housing neighbourhoods, and consider the scope for housing organisations to put in place measures to address its most pernicious effects.*

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- Some of the most successful innovations to tackle stigma have sought to influence the media reporting of social housing, in particular encouraging media outlets to develop an understanding of the issues that confront organisations managing social housing.

CONTEXT

The stigmatisation of social housing neighbourhoods in Australia can be traced to under-investment in social housing, which contributes to poor maintenance, and allocation of housing to the most disadvantaged and marginalised tenants. These policies have unintentionally reinforced a sense of social division and undermined subsequent efforts to improve the welfare of residents. Previous AHURI research has found that there is a need to address poor perceptions of social housing in the wider community, and that changes in such attitudes will not be brought about simply by reinvesting in public housing (AHURI project 40561). In order to address these attitudes, it is necessary to understand how stigmatisation of social housing works. This Investigative Panel research project sought to develop understandings of the stigmatisation of social housing through targeted discussions and utilisation of social theory.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research team established an Investigative Panel with key stakeholders from academia, the media and the housing sector to discuss problems of, and solutions to, the stigmatisation of social housing. The panel met three times over five months:

- The first meeting canvassed opinions from the panel regarding the causes and effects of stigmatisation.
- The second meeting included experts from the wider Melbourne housing sector, including social housing residents, housing sector professionals and senior media educators. At this meeting, the panel sought to connect practical and experiential observations with more theoretical understandings of stigma. The panel contextualised the stigmatisation of social housing within three 'narrative frameworks' that underpin housing policy intervention: the 'pathological frame', in which individuals are blamed for their own circumstances; the 'structural inequality' frame, which foregrounds the significance of structural inequality in producing disadvantage; and the 'reconstitutive frame', in which disadvantage is viewed as amenable to bureaucratic fixes.
- The third meeting operated as a review process for collating evidence, identifying gaps in knowledge and proposing suggestions for future research.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Understanding stigma as a particular response to disadvantage

Social theory provides a framework for understanding how stigma operates in formulating perceptions of people's social worth. Social theory reveals the role that powerful groups, such as the media, play in reinforcing dominant representations of disadvantaged neighbourhoods that establish cause and responsibility solely with the people who live there.

Stigma is not natural or given. Stigmatisation is a particular response to disadvantage: rather than understanding disadvantage as a product of structural inequality, disadvantage is 'pathologised' and located as a problem within the individuals themselves. Disadvantage experienced within social housing neighbourhoods is explained as a consequence of deteriorating social values, and individuals are blamed for their predicament.

The panel agreed that contemporary housing policies in Australia are largely underpinned by 'pathological' and 'reconstitutive' narratives, which attribute responsibility with residents and assume the effectiveness of bureaucratic fixes. In contrast, the 'structural inequality' frame, which has significant resource implications, has little support within Australian policy communities.

The panel noted that stigmatisation is most evident in societies with high levels of inequality between rich and poor. Stigma experienced by residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods is a phenomenon that can be attributed to enduring social divisions within society.

The panel also agreed that in Australia the problems of stigmatisation have been entrenched further by the valorisation of home ownership as the preferred housing tenure, as compared to both social housing and the private rental sector.

Stigma has negative effects on social housing residents and neighbourhoods

As disadvantage is pathologised, social housing residents are perceived as inherently problematic and undeserving.

Stigmatised neighbourhoods attract poorer quality, substandard services, lowered local amenity, and fewer employment opportunities. The panel discussed evidence of postcode discrimination, with employers turning away applicants from certain neighbourhoods with poor reputations.

Further, stigmatisation may operate as a brake on policy interventions that aim to improve the living conditions and opportunities of residents living in these locations, by reducing public support for investment in social housing.

The significant role of the media

Panel members agreed that the media has a significant influence on how social housing estates are viewed by the wider public. The media contributes to stigmatisation by releasing negative depictions of social housing neighbourhoods. These negative stories—often featuring images of 'problem families' and 'neighbours from hell'—are over represented, which is a result of commercial pressures for journalists to provide entertaining stories at the expense of positive or everyday living.

There was consensus in the Melbourne panel workshop (with social housing workers, residents and media personnel) that 'good news is not news'; good news stories about social housing are not as profitable to run as negative ones.

The panel noted evidence from the UK that suggests residents of social housing estates consider media representations of their neighbourhoods at odds with their experience. Panel members with first-hand knowledge of social housing neighbourhoods agreed that there was not a lack of good news stories, but a lack of interest from commercial media in printing these. Good news stories were often shared with commercial media, but rarely acted upon.

The panel noted that even when positive news stories are written, reporters tend to contextualise the social housing estate as being fraught with crime and poverty in order to justify the 'newsworthiness' of the story.

How is stigma being tackled?

Engaging with external stakeholders

The panel found that strategies that are specifically tailored to the perceptions of small groups of influential business representatives (real estate professionals, local businesses, property developers), welfare professionals (teachers, medical staff) and local residents (prospective first time buyers, parents with school age children) can have a positive impact.

Engaging with the media

Accounts from the Melbourne panel workshop revealed that some community groups and tenant representative groups from social housing estates in Victoria were using community media to publish counter-stories in response to negative stories appearing in the mainstream media. In some instances, this resulted in mainstream media outlets picking up the counter-stories.

Campaigning for social housing

Australia has no national lobby or tenants' organisation with sufficient financial resources to effectively campaign for social housing; much of the work in this area is undertaken by welfare agencies. Yes In My Back Yard (YIMBY) campaigns have been established internationally by tenant activists to promote social housing; there are not yet equivalent campaigns in Australia.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The stigmatisation of social housing is a policy problem in its own right, external to the material circumstances of poverty and inequality.

For housing organisations and tenant groups, there are practical measures that can help to shift some of the most negative perceptions about public housing. There is a need for social housing agencies to have space in their work program for regular dialogue with a wide range of external stakeholders, residents, community representatives and personnel from agencies across government, to explicitly address stigma. Social housing agencies could also develop proactive media strategies to increase the amount of positive reporting of social housing.

Influencing the way the media portrays these neighbourhoods will not have a direct impact on the systemic problems associated with inequality, but it can challenge negative stereotypes that fuel discrimination and prejudice.

Social housing would also benefit from an enhanced lobbying agency or national campaign (such as YIMBY) that is able to provide key policy-makers and politicians with more material to address stigma.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 40600, *The problem of social housing stigmatisation and innovations that can minimise its effects* (Investigative Panel).

Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: www.ahuri.edu.au or by contacting AHURI Limited on +61 3 9660 2300.

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