# How do housing and housing assistance relate to social cohesion?

**SOCIAL COHESION HAS THREE KEY DIMENSIONS: SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS, INEQUALITY AND CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT. MANY ASPECTS OF HOUSING, INCLUDING TENURE TYPE AND LOCATION, AFFECT THE LEVEL OF SOCIAL COHESION WITHIN A COMMUNITY.**

## KEY POINTS

- Social cohesion is a complex and multidimensional concept incorporating strengthening social connectedness, reducing inequalities, and cultural environment.

- Social cohesion can exist at various social 'scales' or levels along a continuum from the highly personal through neighbourhood to the societal level.

- Relationships between housing and various aspects of social cohesion are most pronounced at the neighbourhood level.

- Compared with owning a home, renting (public or private) is negatively associated with most of the indicators of social connectedness at a neighbourhood level: attachment to area, neighbourhood trust and cooperation, shared neighbourhood and identification with local area.

- There is a consistently strong negative association between social connectedness and living in a metropolitan area compared with living in non-metropolitan areas.

- There is a strong positive association between stability in housing and various aspects of social connectedness.

*This bulletin is based on research by **Associate Professor Kath Hulse** and **Wendy Stone** of the AHURI Swinburne-Monash Research Centre. The research developed an understanding of social cohesion as a public policy concept and undertook an empirical exploration of the links between housing, housing assistance and social cohesion.*

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# CONTEXT

Public policy debates have increasingly considered whether, and to what extent, policies are likely to strengthen or weaken social cohesion. In housing policies, reference has been made to social cohesion as a rationale for renewing or redeveloping older-style public housing estates. However, there is limited evidence about whether, and how, housing systems are related to social cohesion – particularly the impact of government housing policies and programs on social cohesion through their capacity to influence the type, tenure and location of housing.

This study had two aims: to develop an understanding of the concept of social cohesion to help frame public policy debates, and to explore empirically some of the linkages between housing, housing assistance and social cohesion.

# METHODOLOGY

The research involved an extensive review of policy and research literature on social cohesion and related concepts, such as social capital and social exclusion. This can be found in full in the Positioning Paper for this project.

Using the conceptual framework developed in the Positioning Paper, a detailed empirical exploration of the statistical relationships between housing assistance, attributes of housing and place, and dimensions of social cohesion was conducted, using four secondary data sets. Data used for secondary analysis were: the ABS General Social Survey (2002); the AHURI Entering Rental Housing Survey (2004); HILDA (2001, 2004); and the AIFS Social Capital Survey (2001).

Bivariate relationships between housing/place variables and indicators of social cohesion were explored, before the complexities of these relationships were examined using regression models. The conceptual and practical challenges in this approach are detailed in the Final Report of the project.

# KEY FINDINGS

Social cohesion as a policy concept is separate from, but draws upon, extensive academic writing on social cohesion. As a policy concept, social cohesion has at least two dimensions:

1. strengthening social connectedness (often referred to in the language of 'social capital'); and

2. reducing differences, cleavages and inequalities between groups of people and people living in different geographical areas (often referred to as the 'social exclusion' dimension of the concept).

A third, sometimes contested, dimension of social cohesion focuses on the cultural environment in which social relations take place and encompasses ideas about shared values, common purpose, attachment/belonging and shared identity.

Social cohesion can also exist at various social 'scales' or levels along a continuum from localised, highly personal 'micro' interactions to more generalised, societal-level 'macro' interactions. What happens at one level of social cohesion will affect another. Much research and policy attention on social cohesion in relation to housing has been focused on the micro scale – on neighbourhoods, in particular on 'disadvantaged' neighbourhoods, usually within cities.

Where housing has been specifically considered in previous social cohesion research, it has often been seen as one facet of inequalities; indeed, poor housing outcomes are often seen as one indicator of inequalities. In this research, housing and housing assistance measures are treated separately to enable a more thorough examination of the relationships between housing/place variables and the three dimensions of social cohesion. A key question addressed in the research is whether there are direct relationships between housing/place and social connectedness, or whether these relationships are always mediated by inequalities.

### Housing/place and inequalities

The research found that attributes of housing/place are strongly related to the inequalities dimension of social cohesion. For example, income poverty is negatively related to perceived social support, and financial difficulty is negatively related to identification with local area, but receipt of a pension or benefit is positively related to indicators of social connectedness such as attachment to area, neighbourhood cooperation and shared neighbourhood values. Poor health is negatively associated with most indicators of social connectedness examined. Lower levels of education are not negatively related to most of the indicators of social connectedness, other than voluntary work and participation in civic action.

A principal finding is that various attributes of housing and of place have direct relationships with aspects of social connectedness, over and above the effect of inequalities and other demographic characteristics. Some of the more important associations between housing/place and the social connectedness dimension of social cohesion are outlined in the text below, with a sample of indicators presented in Table 1.

**TABLE 1: INDICATORS OF SOCIAL COHESION – SELECTED EXAMPLES FROM THE RESEARCH**

| Aspect | Perceived social support* | Volunteering** | Neighbourhood interaction* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Housing Tenure | Purchasers, private and public renters all likely to feel they have more social support than owners (may be related to older age of most owners). | Private renters more likely to volunteer. | Public renters have a greater level of interaction with neighbours. |
| Neighbourhood | Feelings of social support improved when neighbourhood problems minimised. | Positive correlation with advantage of area and years lived in neighbourhood. | Higher level of neighbourhood problems increases interaction. |
| Metro/non-metro location | Positive relationship in metro areas. | Non-metro dwellers more likely to volunteer. | Living outside a major city a positive correlation. |
| Mobility/stability | Stability has a positive correlation. | Stability has a positive correlation. | Stability has a positive correlation. |

\* Based on HILDA Wave 4, Release 4.1 (2006) data
\** Based on AIFS Social Capital survey data (2001)

### Housing tenure

Relatively high levels of voluntary work are found among private renters. Renting (of any type) is, however, negatively associated with most of the variables indicating social connectedness at a neighbourhood level: attachment to area, neighbourhood trust and cooperation, shared neighbourhood and identification with local area, compared with home owners/purchasers. One difference between rental groups is that perceptions of safety in the local area are lower for public than for private tenants. Thus it appears that renting per se is associated with lower levels of neighbourhood attachment.

In contrast, becoming a home owner tends to increase levels of neighbourhood interaction for most purchasers/owners, perhaps indicating a greater social investment as well as financial investment within the local area.

### Neighbourhood

Living in areas that are disadvantaged and have high levels of reported problems, ranging from graffiti to noise pollution and traffic, is negatively associated with various aspects of social connectedness overall. However, there are increased levels of interaction with neighbours in areas where social and infrastructure problems are high, perhaps reflecting the social capital notion of 'coming together' to resolve local problems.

Housing and place also appear to be related to feelings of belonging and attachment over and above any relationship with inequalities or demographic factors. While being a couple with children and having good health are positively related to attachment to area, the number of years lived in the neighbourhood and the relative advantages of the area are particularly significant. Being a renter is negatively related to feelings of attachment and belonging, with this negative relationship being stronger for private than for public renters.

### Metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas

The analysis indicates a consistently strong negative association between social connectedness and living in a metropolitan area compared with living in non-metropolitan areas. Living in a metropolitan area is negatively associated with the extent of voluntary work a person undertakes, their likelihood to undertake civic action, their reported levels of neighbourhood interaction, their sense of feeling part of the local community, the number of neighbours they know and their overall attachment to the local area. Moving to a metropolitan area negatively affects perceived social support, reported levels of neighbourhood interaction and satisfaction with feeling part of the local community.

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### Mobility and stability

There is a strong positive association between stability in housing and various aspects of social connectedness, while mobility is negatively related with social connectedness. The findings also point to the undermining effects on social connectedness of places that are unpleasant to live in; although neighbourhood problems can make people more active in their local areas in the short term, as indicated above, ultimately they may also drive people away.

Although stability is important for public renters, the positive relation between stability and social connectedness may be undermined by poor-quality housing and high levels of disadvantage. Stability may also have other effects, with a negative association between stability and overall levels of tolerance.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Although this was exploratory research and does not provide definitive answers on all the relationships between housing, housing assistance and social cohesion, there are some clear understandings from this research that can guide housing policy:

Housing policies can improve social connectedness and cultural context through addressing inequalities. The key inequalities in this regard are income poverty and poor mental and physical health, rather than educational or other types of inequality. Healthy and affordable housing, and an environment that facilitates good health, appear to be paramount.

Housing policies can improve social connectedness directly, through enabling households to 'put down roots' in an area so that they can form social relationships based on place and develop a sense of belonging and attachment to neighbourhood. This could include assistance with home purchase and rental arrangements to enable tenants to experience sufficient control over their circumstances to be able to stay in place.

Housing policies can improve the places in which people live because, above all, place is an important part of social connectedness and cultural context. Policies could aim at enabling people to live in places not dominated by undesirable infrastructure issues such as traffic and noise pollution, and could avoid concentrating lower-income households in disadvantaged areas.

Housing assistance could include subsidies to renters that enable access to non-disadvantaged areas, provision of affordable housing of various types in scattered developments, and assistance with purchasing, through means such as rent–buy and shared equity arrangements.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

The bulletin is based on AHURI project 50300, *Housing, housing assistance and social cohesion in Australia*; Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: www.ahuri.edu.au

The following documents are available:

- Positioning Paper
- Final Report

The Final Report for AHURI project 50142, *Entering rental housing,* analyses the findings from the Entering Rental Housing Survey (2004). This report can be found on the AHURI website.

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