

Social Housing and its Bearing on the Tenants' Social Mobility

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Received: October 5, 2023; Accepted: October 20, 2023; Published: October 25, 2023

Abstract

The objective of the paper is to conceptualise how social housing impacts the life of tenants and how it affects their social mobility.

Firstly, the paper looks at defining social housing to help us get a better understanding of the subject matter. It highlights that social housing is a residential rental space provided at specific rates to be afforded by those who are considered vulnerable in society. It is a tool to improve the lives of those in vulnerable positions due to poverty, disability and mental issues to mention just a few. Children who live and grow up in stable social housing will have a better chance at accessing education, their wellbeing will be more positive, increased job prospects and a better outlook on opportunities.

Secondly, the paper addressed the impacts social housing has and its effects on social mobility for tenants. It discusses how income plays a vital role in obtaining social housing, how the wellbeing of tenants is essential in fostering a better self, how individuals who live in social housing can come together and form communities to deter crime, how living in safe social housing can impact positively effect on mental health, how it encourages tenants to find work and how it helps children strive for better and manage to break the cycle of poverty. However, notwithstanding the positive, social housing is not perfect and if not taken care of and is not funded properly then it could be a detriment to tenants' social mobility.

Methodology

Desk research was carried out to identify an in-depth understanding of the topic. Apart from this, key experts from the Faculty for Social Wellbeing shared their expertise through various informal discussions.

Keywords: housing, social housing, social mobility, provision of social housing

1. Contextualising of Social Housing

1.1 Defining Social Housing?

Social housing, although thought to be a common concept in countries around the world, is actually not available in all countries (Note 1). The definition of social housing provided by the OECD explains that it is "Residential rental accommodation provided at sub-market prices and allocated according to specific rules" (Salvi del Pero, A. et al., 2016, quoted in OECD, 2019, p.1). Unfortunately, there are variables in the providing for social housing and who is able to have access to it. In fact, social housing provision is affected by different conditions and circumstances and varies from country to country (Granath Hansson & Lundgren, 2019; Kofner, 2017, OECD 2019).

In Europe, the aftermath of World War II left people homeless and poor, which resulted in an increase of people on the poverty line (Kesternich et al., 2014). In light of this, there was an increase in government-based provisions, specifically in terms of social housing, which allowed for a noticeable shift in directing public funds (Braga & Palvarini, 2013; Kofner, 2017). Before this shift, in a lot of countries, private companies, the Church and charitable institutions used to offer and manage social housing. The idea came about to tackle the issue of homelessness amongst the working poor. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, governments began to reduce their spending on public housing provisions, thus, public housing policies were no longer a priority. Instead, local authorities or private funders were left to deal with the issue (Reeves, 2014; Braga & Palvarini, 2013). Vocal political groups at the time claimed that the sector was "inefficient, unresponsive, monopolistic and anachronistic" (Forrest & Wu, 2014, p. 135), as it did not aid the most vulnerable but rather the selected few.

Social housing at present is focused on the most vulnerable within a society, however, this emphasis has caused concern since it has led to members being excluded, discriminated against and social housing spaces being labelled as a ghetto (Forrest & Wu, 2014; Newman, 2008; Goodchild & Cole, 2001). Challenges and the risk of housing poverty are not being experienced by just the working class, however, those within the middle class have been prone to find themselves in difficulty as well and this is mainly due to the global economic crises and the transformations happening in society and its response to needs. As a result of this, the need for social housing has augmented, and as a consequence its waiting list (Braga & Palvarini, 2013; Best & Shimili, 2012; Feinstein et al., 2008).

1.2 The Objectives of Social Housing

"The main objective of social housing is to provide low-income households or vulnerable people with a decent, affordable and secure housing option" (Reeves, 2014; Newman, 2008 as quoted in Azzopardi & Cuff, 2020). These housing options, however, usually have the rent connected to one's income. On the other hand, tenure service providers and their eligibility, varies in each country (Shelter 2020; Braga & Palvarini, 2013). Nowadays, various other entities or private landlords, besides governments, are gradually offering more social housing services (Granath Hansson & Lundgren, 2019). Regardless of this shift in social housing provision, remains synched with national policies. Socio-economic positioning is used to influence one's eligibility, however, when vulnerabilities are taken into consideration, they are then at times re-evaluated regularly (Braga & Palvarini, 2013; OECD, 2019). The objective and aims of social housing is to ultimately provide housing which is secure and one that has a longer-term tenancy, ensuring stability, control over one's home and better rights (OECD, 2019; Reeves, 2014; Shelter, 2020).

For children living and being raised in social housing, the intentional outcome is that it will help foster better access to education, wellbeing, health, jobs and the retaining of employment. However, this still remains debatable (Newman, 2008; Granath Hansson & Lundgren, 2019).

1.3 The Legal Framework

The United Nations observes that satisfactory housing provision is a right and the international law states that "it is the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity", as a fundamental human right (UN, 2014, p.3). Strengthening and protecting housing rights is at the core of a number of international organisations (Tereminski, 2011). In terms of EU law, right to housing or housing assistance was recognised in 2009 when the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights was incorporated into EU law (Vassallo, 2002). Despite this legal recognition of housing, past EU social policy identified the relevance of the right to adequate housing provision and creative housing policy because of the movement in the single market (Kucs et al., 2008, p. 115). Member States of the EU are free to implement policies and interpretate the law as they see fit, however, the Treaty of Lisbon aids as a guide for the understanding of what is the right to housing and that adequate housing becomes the norm (Vassallo, 2002; Braga & Palvarini, 2013).

Governments are not obliged to provide housing to all, regardless if the right to adequate housing is implemented in law (UN, 2014). In 2020, it was estimated that globally 1.6 billion citizens were living in scant housing settings with the rate of homelessness rising drastically since 2010 (UN, 2020). In Europe, the rise in homelessness, worsening affordability, and social and housing polarisation have been a cause of concern for public policy for the last decade (Eurostat, 2018). An estimated 3 million citizens in Europe, lack adequate housing (Braga & Palvarini, 2013). Regardless of the high numbers of people who are homeless, recognising the right to suitable accommodation has become pivotal (Kucs et al., 2008).

Living in inadequate housing puts poor people in a position of choice, having to choose to prioritise their health, what to eat, what kind of shelter to choose and any further requirements (Kucs et al., 2008; Kothari, 2005). Having a place people call home gives one a sense of self which then impacts one's wellbeing along with one's integration into society, in terms of being socio-economically stable (Cicognani, 2011; Cutajar, 2018; Tereminski, 2011). The notion of suitable housing automatically ensures the preservation of communal and cultural rights including other rights such as those which are political and those which are basic civil rights (Kucs et al., 2008; Cicognani, 2011).

2. Social Housing, its Impacts and How it Contributes to Social Mobility

Social mobility is defined as "the movement in time of individuals, families, or other social units between positions of varying advantage in the system of social stratification of a society" (Muller, 2001, p.9918). Social mobility helps with new opportunities specifically for those who come from underprivileged backgrounds. In fact, education and employment are seen as the ideal ways to alleviate poverty, but not just, as family income also plays its role (Best, & Shimili, 2012; Tunstall et al., 2013; Newman, 2008). Social mobility contributes to a persons' wellbeing

who in turn can excel in society thus, society benefits from this too. The economy is bettered, opportunities become more accessible and a person's life is improved allowing them to extend their horizons (OECD, 2018; Muller, 2001).

A home helps individuals find some sort of wellbeing which correlates to their experience of home and what it means to them (Azzopardi, 2022). As a home becomes an integral part of a person, they tend to form a bond with it (Cicognani, 2011, p. 86). This effects the human psyche as it reinforces the notion that when people live in adequate housing this affects them positively and contributes to helping them in other factors in their life, be it social, cultural, economic and even psychological (Mullins et al., 2001, p. 5). However, there are those scholars who disagree with this perspective (Ellickson, 1992; Weicher, 1980 quoted in Newman, 2008; Feinstein et al., 2008).

Self-development is essential to human existence and a home provides physical attributes which contribute to this, such as space, safety and physical sufficiency (Newman, 2008, p. 897). Regardless of whether one needs to be eligible to attain a place in social housing, being given the chance to live in such housing which is affordable, gives one the opportunity to be surrounded by people from the same or similar socio-economic background looking for a better life (Newman, 2008; Braga & Palvarini, 2013; Flouri et al., 2015). Well-thought-out schemes contribute to having social housing spill over to social cohesion, as it gives people purpose again and the will to integrate with others (Braga & Palvarini, 2013; Flouri et al., 2015).

Individuals who are caught up without residence end up losing their self-worth and purpose, socially cohesive neighbourhoods are aids for people to show up for themselves, feel empowered and included (Holman & Walker, 2018; Goodchild & Cole, 2001). As a matter of fact, even those neighbourhoods that are slightly more disadvantaged than others, even with the little resources that they have tend to foster social integrity (Mullins et al., 2001; Perry & Blackaby, 2007). Good planning and infrastructure in social housing will help with building a better community and allow for the residents to feel at home fostering a better community, an advancement in social mobility and sustainability in the long run (Best & Shimili, 2012; McKee, 2008).

Social cohesion offers individuals stability and the sense of community which comes from social housing improves one's health which also directly affects social mobility (Holman & Walker, 2018). When a person is mentally sane and their overall wellbeing is improved, they are at a greater capacity of keeping a job, unlike others who are categorised as being in poor health (Jones, 2017; Dahl, 1996). Poor health, many a times, has been found to exclude people from work, finding work or holding down a job which will continue to deter their health (Jones, 2017; Dahl, 1996). The stability afforded to tenants who live in social housing has helped improve their health and as a result of this any health costs have been kept to a minimum (Taylor, 2018; Holman & Walker, 2018; Singh et al., 2019).

Depression and poor health are known to be more present amongst those who do not live in a stable home (Kushel et al., 2006; Thomson et al., 2001; Bentley et al., 2018; Prentice & Scutella, 2018; Best & Shimili, 2012), whilst homelessness brings with it increased food insecurity, a shortened lifespan, a possible risk of premature death, worse health and widespread mental health challenges (Kushel et al., 2006). Tenants could also experience a delay in accessing healthcare, increased levels of anxiety, relationship failures, loss of friendships, and access to other benefits (Boston Medical Centre, 2018; Taylor 2018; Bentley et al., 2018; Tunstall et al., 2013). Therefore, when seeking stability and finding it, tenants' lives will be drastically improved as the positives then come to out-way the negatives.

Youngsters experience home instability differently to adults as this impacts their educational prospects and achievements, contributes to depression, alcoholism, risk of teenage pregnancy and drug abuse; all this upon health issues (Tsai, 2015; Taylor, 2018). Murky and risky housing, unsafe meaning that there are issues with the structure of the building and hazardous problems are present, has contributed to sickness such as tension and nervousness. Certain health issues like the incidence of dust mites have contributed to skin and other diseases, respiratory problems, and stress due to overcrowding. Unkept housing can cause physical problems due to accidents such as slips, and falls and accessibility issues for individuals who have a physical disability (Taylor, 2018; WHO, 2018; U.S. Department of Energy, 2016; Gauci, 1999).

The environment in which social housing is located in can have positive or negative associations. At times, negative associations such as crime levels in the area can cause social exclusion which contribute to stress and mental health conditions (Bentley et al., 2018; Goodchild & Cole, 2001). Social and economic inequality have a direct effect on one's health and disrupts social integration (WHO, 2018, p. xv; Newman, 2008). In actual fact, the area is associated with negative aspects like stigma, segregation, crime and social exclusion, then there is the possibility of long-term and long-lasting effects on tenants' well-being (Taylor, 2018; Tunstall et al., 2013).

The category of tenants who live in social housing has changed over the years, seeing a shift specifically in Europe, going from those who were from vulnerable social groups directly contributing to the neighbourhoods' deprivation and segregation (Crook et al., 2016), to social housing being taken up more by pensioners and single-parent families. These families are mainly ethnic minorities and immigrants (Tunstall et al., 2013). The social economic demographic of these families is specific, as the majority of them tend to be low-income families, who's economic contribution is less than average (Scanlon et al., 2015). Due to this, they contribute to the area's socio-spatial segregation which can lead to social deprivation, namely liability, crime and community sabotage (Scanlon et al., 2015; Evans, 1998; Farrugia, 2019). Neighbourhood segregation as explained by Margery Turner (n.d) can also be affected by ethnicity or colour, further decreasing opportunities for low-income families, therefore, their social mobility and access to better opportunities which can give them access to safer amenities is not made possible.

Unfortunately, these neighbourhoods can be the breeding ground for concentrated poverty which is an area where socio-economic deprivation is found at an alarming rate or an area of high poverty (aecf.org, 2019). This specific kind of poverty accelerates the effects of poverty which continues to lower one's expectations and aspirations and it becomes increasingly difficult to leave the cycle of poverty (The Federal Reserve System, 2008; Sharkey, n.d.). The Cambridge Dictionary defines being poor as "having little money and/or few possessions" (dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/poor) which categorises someone as living on the poverty line or in the cycle of poverty. Therefore, when a person is living in poverty they are identified as being extremely poor (dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/poverty). Lumen (n.d.b) explains that the source of poverty is also in turn the consequences of poverty, hence why cycles of poverty are created. Social housing has a direct influence on what drives poverty, therefore, inhabitants of such housing find it difficult to break the cycle (Webb Memorial Trust, 2017).

Some, due to this believe that social housing can deter social mobility and segregation and not essentially a factor that creates these (Best & Shimili, 2012, Tunstall, 2013). Since social housing is a concentration of lived spaces, it is directly an effect of its environment which puts tenants at a disadvantage, essentially also contributing to the generational impediment of social mobility (Arbaci & Rae, 2013; Forrest & Wu, 2014; Causa & Johansson, 2010). Due to this, social problems will continue to be sustained (Cutajar, 2018; Best & Shimili, 2012; Goodchild & Cole, 2001). In fact, the allocation of tenants to housing is what effects the characterisation of the space, hence there could be high crime rates in the area because of the tenants (Mullins et al., 2001) or the tenants themselves could be the ones who work together to avert criminal behaviour and decrease criminal behaviour (Skubak Tillyer & Walter, 2018; Mullins et al., 2001).

The management of social housing helps the housing block to function properly in terms that there is mutual support and respect amongst the tenants who also come together to keep the area in order and manage any disruptions (Mullins et al., 2001; Dibben, personal communication, 2020, July 15; Goodchild & Cole, 2001). Tenants are key players in keeping the social unit clean which will counteract problems such as vandalism and instill a sense of purpose (Best & Shimili, 2012; Goodchild & Cole, 2001). If overall support is given to tenants, not just socially but also through their landlord, then this will counteract any negative effects, such as dependency and inequalities, and foster participation in education and work (Johnson, 2001; Best & Shimili, 2012).

Housing affordability is a fundamental pillar in determining social mobility as this usually takes up a large share of nonrefundable income of tenants (Cutajar, 2018; Braga & Palvarini, 2013). 30% is the typical percentage for housing costs (Taylor, 2018; Newman, 2008; Tunstall, 2013), and then the remaining income is distributed amongst other provisions which one may need. When tenants are over paying on housing, they then may deprive themselves of other requirements (Mullins et al., 2011; Tunstall, 2013) which will lead to feelings of deprivation having an impact on their social status (Azzopardi, 2012).

Purchasing a residence or renting a habitat within the commercial rental market is costly and there have been situations where house prices have escalated radically within a few years, making it near impossible to own a house (Central Bank of Malta, 2016; Xerri, 2017). Such housing becomes difficult to obtain especially for those low-income families, as their disposable income would not be enough to pay for it. The effects of such pressure to obtain this type of housing can cause health problems, emotional problems, mental health issues, increase in stress levels, disengagement at school for children (Newman, 2008) to name just a few. On the other hand, when tenants have the opportunity to access affordable housing, they have a better chance of staying there longer, specific problems may start to reduce and the foundation of a good home will improve their social mobility as a family (Galante, n.d.). One of the positive outcomes of access to good social housing is that for those people experiencing poverty there is a better chance of them slowly moving away from poverty as their income becomes more accessible for necessities which improve their self-sufficiency in society (Tunstall, 2013; Newman, 2008; Taylor, 2018).

Employment raises one's standard of living and aids with helping one build themselves up within a community (Cutajar, 2018), fostering social mobility. It helps adults especially, find their way out of poverty (Tunstall et al., 2013). 'Best & Shimili (2012, p. 16) state: "Employment is recognised to be the single biggest factor in determining not only adults' life chances, but also those of children and grandchildren"' (as quoted in Azzopardi & Cuff, 2020), aiding intergenerational change. Stable employment brings with it the provision of a secure income, however, not only, it allows one to preserve relationships and networks, focus on keeping a regular schedule, take on training opportunities, improved self-worth and the ability to assess possible future difficulty related to income (Hoare & Machin, 2010; Honey, 2004; Creed & Machin, 2002). Furthermore, if someone is unemployed then this will impact themselves and their families keeping them in poverty allowing for mental strain to develop. This will also affect any children living within the family causing a disruption to their progress, schooling and future employment (McClelland, 2001).

Social housing provides stability and that stability alleviates one burden for those in positions of vulnerability and helps tenants find work allowing room for better success. It does not, of course guarantee employment, however, research has shown that the stability from housing has helped tenants look for and keep a job (Best & Shimili, 2012; Tunstall et al., 2013). Location plays a vital role, especially if social housing is located close to potential employment opportunities, for example, in city centres where rent is private, but the area has opportunities for low paid workers. However, many low paid workers due to their financial situation usually choose housing which is further away from work opportunities as they would be able to meet their renting needs. However, even though distance does not hinder one from working, the commute to work and not having as much time for leisure are factors affected by this distance

(Mullins et al., 2001; Sisson, 2018; Henderson, 2017). Fletcher et al (2008), explains that individuals who live close to family and have a social network are not willing to move away for work reasons (Azzopardi & Grech, 2012).

Even though social housing and the stability that comes with it aids with helping individuals find jobs and maintain them, some have criticised it for encouraging tenants not to work and rely on social aids (Tunstall et al., 2013; Flouri et al., 2015; Feinstein et al, 2008) as many times tenants are usually unemployed (Hills, 2007). Hills (2007) explains that some tenants choose to remain unemployed due to the bureaucracy and difficulties they face with the tax and benefits system. Youths who are surrounded by adults who are jobless, are at times influenced by the resistance to work and this affects their future prospects of work (Fletcher et al., 2008). In fact, reports have concluded that it is not always about where one lives that deters one from working and remaining jobless, but it is usually the person's character and their unwillingness to work (Fletcher et al., 2008; Hills, 2007; McClelland, 2001; CSJ, 2018). Even though many tenants experience poor job quality and low pay (Fletcher et al., 2008) apart from other issues, they end up being very heavily influenced by those around them and if they have a resistance for work then this may rub off on others. Jobseekers can also feel threatened to access the employment sector because of their lack of skills and experience.

Like many effects which are experienced by individuals living in social housing, joblessness can be intergenerational, since children or grandchildren of those who are unemployed could potentially be unemployed when they come to a working age (Hills, 2007; OECD, 2018; Feinstein et al, 2008). Children's futures are greatly affected by the area social housing is located in, as if they live in a poor area, then they will continue to experience high levels of deprivation and or segregation which affects their prospects (Best & Shimili, 2012; OECD, 2018; Goodchild & Cole, 2001, Harker, 2007). Amenities around the area such as safe playgrounds, open spaces, libraries and good schools also affect a child's social mobility and prospects at school (Flouri et al., 2015; Newman and Harkness, 2002; Newman, 2008; McCulloch, 2001). If the area experiences high rates of violence and problems such as addiction, children will find it challenging to interact and will become anti-social. The affects are different depending on age, for example, younger children can show challenging behaviour and truncated educational attainment whilst children who are older can show interest in violence, become emotionally detached and be at risk of forming or being groomed into gangs which will have problematic outcomes for their futures (Flouri et al., 2015; Lambert et al., 2015; Harker, 2007).

Just like adults, children are affected deeply by their surroundings and their homes and it has been shown to affect their development and quality of life (Harker, 2007; Mullins et al., 2001; Holman & Walker, 2018). Therefore, the quality of social housing and the overall environment will definitely determine the child's development and life chances (Harker, 2007; Goodchild & Cole, 2001). Researchers have found out that children do have better chances even assuming they inhabit in civic housing, as it is the stability, the quality of the housing and the security that make the most difference (Newman and Harkness, 2002; Haurin et al., 2002; Villanueva et al., 2019)

Overall, there are benefits to social housing especially if the environment is a positive one as it can contribute to social mobility but itself alone does not cause much change (Feinstein et al, 2008). People are increasingly impacted by harmful environments and for children this stunts their development (Clair, 2019; Flouri et al., 2015). Residents within a housing unit are more likely to form supportive communities if the space they live in makes them feel like they belong (Cutajar, 2018; Goodchild & Cole, 2001). However, tenants with exposure to vulnerabilities or any social problems, social housing will not solve these problems but it will at least provide shelter (Prentice & Scutella, 2018). Taking an intersectional, multidisciplinary approach will allow tenants to benefit more from social housing and it will allow them to overcome other areas of difficulty in their lives such as education, and the opportunities to build new skills (McKay as cited in Carabott, 2020; Feinstein et al, 2008; Best, & Shimili, 2012).

3. Concluding Comments

Social housing supports people who many times are living in poverty, and who may have varying vulnerabilities such as a disability, mental health issues, illnesses, social issues etc. It is rental accommodation which can be afforded by people who struggle with making ends meet and those who lack a stable income. Social housing if looked after, can not only be called a home but a tool for those tenants who have diverse needs or vulnerabilities as it adds to a sense of self-assurance and finding stability. Social housing will become a foundation of support since tenure provides stability, security and peace of mind, and allow for tenants to have a better future.

Besides the negative associations to it, as it is often blamed for contributing to tenants remaining dependant on social welfare, their aversion to find work, contribution to crime and addiction and fostering a breeding ground for social exclusion, it has been proven that social housing is not the main cause of these negative effects. Residualisation is the reason why these problems exist in an area since it is defined as an area where a large number of households are present showcasing great need of assistance due to lack of resources and opportunities. In order for social housing to do its job and contribute positively to the area and to its tenants, it has to truly cater for people from various walks of life.

To overcome residualisation and social exclusion, best practises must be set in place such as children's spaces and play areas, green spaces for all, support services which can facilitate job opportunities, training programmes, and guidance with finances just to name a few. When community services are provided and support to tenants is evidently clear, the social housing environment can foster social cohesion, creating safer spaces for tenants. Having a place where to come together and live positively with good amenities will allow tenants to build connections which will have a huge impact on their mental wellbeing which will help their social mobility and existence within a community.

Being one of the most important areas in welfare, social housing cannot work in isolation. Policy makers need to ensure that other services are in place in order for tenants to thrive within their community. Will this be enough to get detached from the cycle of poverty. Overall, it is imperative that policy makers always keep the service users at the heart of their policy planning so that they can truly safeguard tenants' wellbeing by ensuring that social housing encourages tenants' social mobility and not hinder it.

Acknowledgments

Professor JosAnn Cutajar, Dr Andreana Dibben, Dr Charles Pace, Dr. Rachael Marie Scicluna and Annabel Cuff who abetted the study by offering knowledge proficiency and direction .

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Notes

Note 1. A 2019 OECD report states that Chile, Costa Rica, Greece, Mexico, Sweden and Turkey, have no social housing provision (OECD, 2019, p. 1).

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