

The Attitudes of Public Housing Tenants in Australia

Abstract

In this research we asked three important questions, firstly who lives in public housing, secondly what are their attitudes regarding a range of public and private institutions, and thirdly what social and political behaviours do they exhibit compared to people in other housing tenures. The results suggest that public tenants experience a greater sense of exclusion than homeowners, homebuyers and private renters.

Public tenants in Australia have higher rates of unemployment, lower incomes, lower levels of education and poorer health than people in other housing tenures. They are also less trusting of other citizens and of people who are 'different'. They have less confidence in institutions such as the police and banks but exhibit higher levels of confidence in the armed forces and some public servants. Public housing tenants appear more disadvantaged and disenfranchised than people in other housing tenures in spite of affordable rents and security of tenure. Therefore state housing authorities may need to address a range of education, employment and health issues that stretch beyond the provision of affordable housing if they want to create healthy social housing communities.

Introduction

The 'battlers' are often neglected in the housing literature (Jacobs, Marston and Darcy, 2003), and they are particularly understudied in quantitative research (Donoghue and Tranter, 2003) due to the limited size of the social housing sector in national survey data. In this research we attempt to address these two issues. The paper examines the attitudes and behaviour of tenants in public housing and locates public housing attitudes in the wider housing context.

The research asked three questions, firstly who lives in public housing, secondly what are their attitudes regarding a range of public and private institutions, and thirdly what behaviours do public tenants exhibit compared, to people in other housing tenures, in terms of a range of institutions. Following a discussion of the data and methods, we will discuss public housing attitudes and suggest that they reflect the views of public housing tenants generally.

It is worth noting that public housing is currently offered through two Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA) programs, that include main-stream public housing (333,000 households at 30 June 2007) and state owned and managed Indigenous housing (SOMIH) (13,000 households at 30 June 2007). (AIHW 2008)

The political discourse in Australia under the Howard Government was neoliberal, as opposed to the 'third way' advocated by Giddens (1996) and new Labour in the UK. However both ideologies promote 'third sector' or private engagement in the state to complement public services intended to promote disadvantaged citizens' health and well-being.

The new political climate in Canberra presents an opportunity for unemployed and disadvantaged citizens who require affordable housing. The emphasis is still on market-based solutions such as saving for homeownership and limited interventions in terms of private rental relief and public housing development. The reluctance of the private sector to invest in what they regard as 'high risk, low return' social housing ventures has stymied the development of low cost housing so far. However, the ideological driven market-based social housing agenda is perhaps the main factor in the decline of public housing. It is worth noting that the same processes have been going on in the UK along side the 'social inclusion' approach of the Labour Government for over a decade, so this is not something exclusive to Australia or neo-liberalism.

The concentration of disadvantaged citizens in public housing has resulted in what Castells' (1998) refers to as the 'fourth world' of social exclusions. Public tenants tend to be less educated, participate less in the labour force and have lower incomes than people in other tenures. The socio-demographic factors that are exhibited by disadvantaged people concentrated in public housing are also reflected in their limited access to the internet and use of information technology.

Data and Methods

In the following empirical section we examine public housing attitudes, we explore the socio-demographic background of public tenants and the attitudes they present in terms of political, private and public institutions; in terms of concepts such as confidence, happiness and trust in other people. We compare their responses on certain indicators to those in other housing tenures.

This research is based upon survey from the 2003 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA), a nationally representative sample of Australian adults aged 18 and above (Gibson et al. 2004). The AuSSA data were obtained from the Australian Social Science Data Archive at the Australian National University. The 2003 AuSSA was the first in a biennial series of surveys administered by a team of researchers through the Australian National University. The survey was a mail out mail back administration to respondents selected systematically from the Australian electoral roll. It had a response rate of 44 per cent and a sample size of 4,270 cases.

We present the results of cross-tabulations, ordinary least squares (OLS) and logistic regression analysis to examine associations between our dependent and independent variables in a multivariate context. Housing tenure is operationalised as a dichotomous dependent variable for the logistic regression analysis (1 = public housing; 0 = other housing tenures). Two self rated scales are modeled using OLS regression, a health scale ('How would you rate your health in general', Responses: Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor) and a Happiness scale ('All in all, how happy are you with your life these days?' 10-point scale ranging from 0 Extremely unhappy, to 10 Extremely Happy).

Results

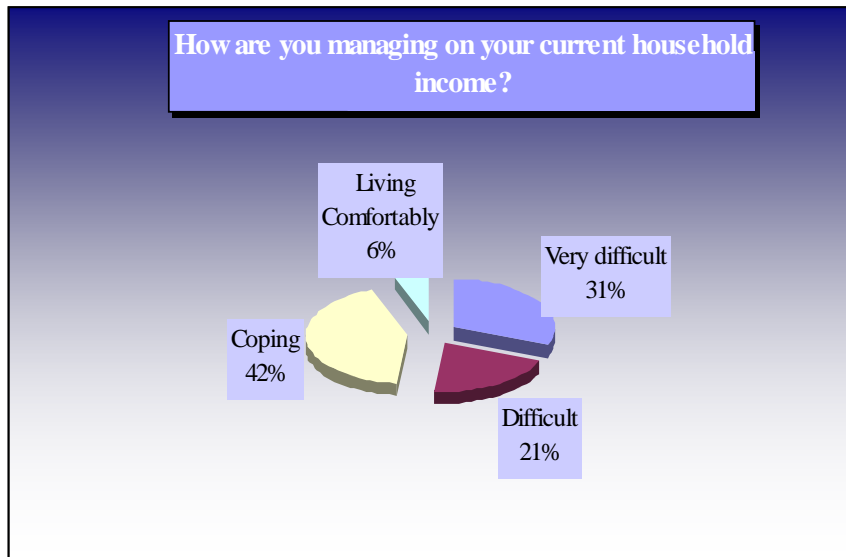
The public tenants in the ASSA sample consisted of households of 'one adult without children' (46.6 per cent): two adults with no children (18 per cent); one adult with a child or children (11 per cent); two adults and child or children (10 per cent); and three or more adults with children (13.7 per cent). Over 59 per cent of the respondents were women and the majority (66 per cent) were aged between 35 and 64. In terms of education the majority (56.7 per cent) did not progress beyond grade 10 at high school and only seven per cent were graduates (compared to 22.5 per cent in the sample).

Only 26 per cent of public tenants were married compared to 64.9 per cent in other housing tenures. However more than 28 per cent of public tenants were divorced compared to 8.0 per cent other tenures. The majority of public tenants 68 per cent also reported that they do not live with a partner compared to 31 per cent in other tenures. Public tenants are also more likely to be unemployed, casual or part time workers than people in other tenures. It will also come as no surprise to learn that public tenants have a lower income than people in other housing. Public housing is targeted at people on a Commonwealth pension or benefit and if they gain employment they are encouraged to move into the private rental market, or to seek homeownership.

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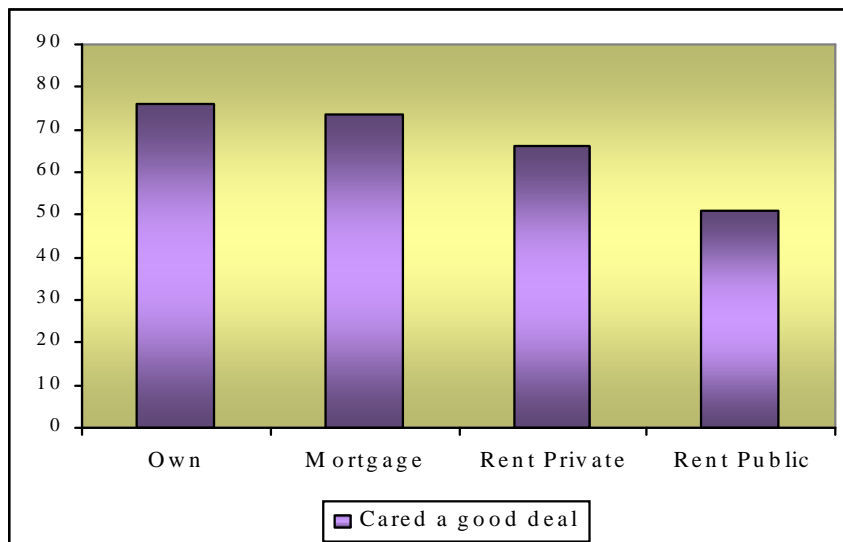
The majority of public tenants (52 per cent) reported that they find it difficult to manage on their income, even though they have more affordable rent than people in private rental (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Management of Household Income



Public tenants are less likely to care who wins the next election than homeowners, buyers or private renters (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Care which party wins the election

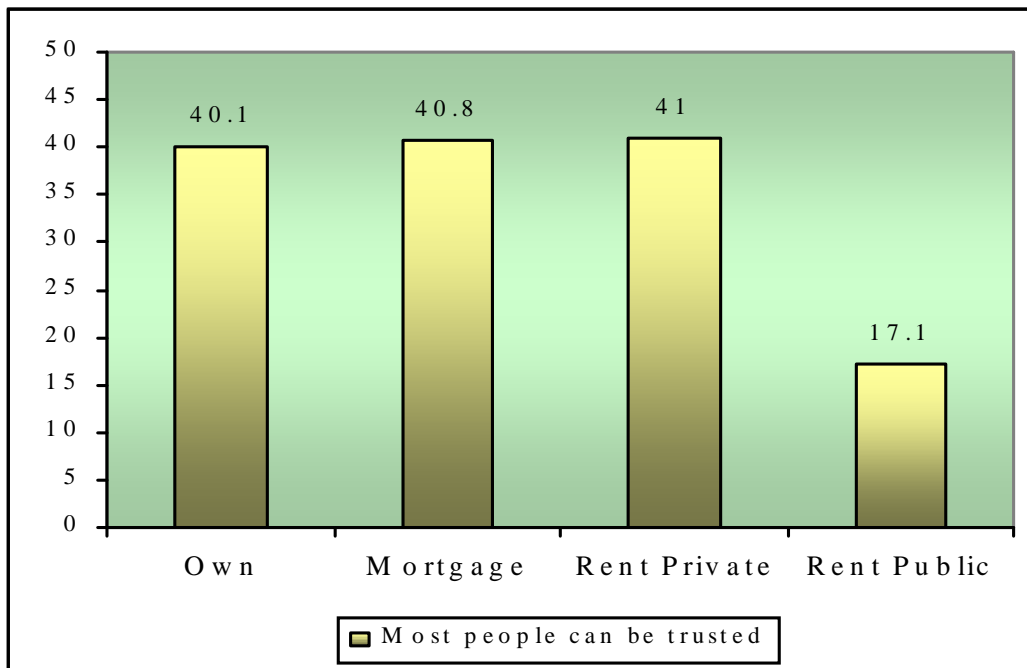


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This may reflect apathy and/or marginalisation but voting patterns of public tenants in the 2004 election indicates the majority (56 per cent) supported the Labor party with only about a quarter being Liberal voters.

Public tenants have much lower levels of interpersonal trust than people in other housing tenures (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Trust in Others



They also are more likely to support harsher prison sentences, the death penalty for murder and believe that immigrants increase crime. However, they are twice as likely to support the claim that single parents can bring up children as well as a couple. Public tenants indicate that they are less healthy than people in other housing tenures; only 33 per cent indicated they were healthy compared to 68 per cent of homebuyers. Public tenants are also less likely to be happy than owners, buyers or private renters.

Multivariate Analysis

In this section we analyse the social and political background of public housing tenure using logistic regression analysis in order to statistically control for correlations between the independent variables. As the dependent variable we analyse is dichotomous, we apply binary logistic regression (see Long, 1997). We compare the attitudes social and political background of people in public housing with those in other housing tenures. Housing tenure is modeled on the basis of sex, age, secondary educational attainment, self assessed social class location, size of household, personal income, political party identification and marital status. As these are multiple regression models, the odds ratios presented are net of, or control for, the impact of all other independent variables in the regression equation. The results

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suggest major differences in the social and political attitudes of public tenants compared to people in other housing tenures.

There are no statistically significant gender or age differences at the 95 per cent level, however those with less than year 10 education are more likely than those with more education to live in public housing compared to other tenures (Table 1).

Table 1: Correlates of Public Housing tenancy (odds ratio)

| | |
|-----------------------------|---------|
| Men | 1.0 |
| <i>Aged</i> | |
| 18-29 | 1.0 |
| 30-49 | 1.2 |
| Aged 50 and over | 1 |
| <i>Education</i> | |
| Less than High School | 2.0** |
| Completed Grade 10 | 1.6 |
| Grade 12 or above | 1 |
| <i>Personal Income</i> | |
| \$0 – 20,799 | 12.8*** |
| \$20,800 – 31,199 | 7.7*** |
| Above \$31,199 | 1 |
| <i>Self Assessed Class</i> | |
| No Class location | 4.5*** |
| Working Class | 2.2** |
| Upper and Middle | 1 |
| <i>Single Occupant Home</i> | |
| Other occupancies | 1 |
| <i>Marital Status</i> | |
| Single | 6.0*** |
| Separated | 3.6** |
| Divorced | 6.1*** |
| Widowed | 2.8** |
| Married/de facto | 1 |
| <i>Party Identification</i> | |
| Labor Party | 2.4*** |
| No Party Identification | 1.8* |
| Other Party Identification | 1 |
| Nagelkerke R ² | .28 |

* p< .05 ** p< .01 *** p< .001

Source Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2003)

Low-income earners are over represented, as are those who see themselves as working class, or not belonging to any class. Marital status is also associated with housing tenure. Those

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who are married or in de facto relationships are less likely to be in public housing than any other statuses. Labor party and those who do not identify with any political party are more likely than Coalition or other party identifiers to live in public housing.

The second set of multiple regression analyses, in this case based upon OLS regression considers how those in different housing tenures vary according to their self rated health status and overall happiness, controlling for a range of social background factors that are known correlates of these measures. While health status measured in this way is based on respondents' own assessments and cannot fully capture the multidimensional nature of health status, has been employed extensively in studies of health status and does serve as a useful proxy for psychological and biological dimensions of health (see Burstrom and Fredlund 2001; Idler and Benyamini 1997).

The regression results indicate that those in public housing tend to have poorer health even after accounting important correlates such as age, sex education and social class and income (Table 2).

Table 2: Correlates of Self Assessed Health (OLS regression coefficients)

| | Health | Happiness |
|----------------------------|---------|-----------|
| Constant | 74.0 | 83.1 |
| Men | -3.2*** | -1.2 |
| <i>Aged</i> | | |
| 18-29 | 6.9*** | -5.5*** |
| 30-49 | 1.6 | -5.0*** |
| Aged 50 and over | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Education</i> | | |
| Less than High School | -5.2*** | -0.8 |
| Completed Grade 10 | -2.6* | -0.7 |
| Grade 12 or above | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Personal Income</i> | | |
| \$0 – 20,799 | -7.3*** | -1.1 |
| \$20,800 – 31,199 | -1.8 | -0.5 |
| Above \$31,199 | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Self Assessed Class</i> | | |
| No Class location | -7.3*** | -3.3** |
| Working Class | -6.7*** | -3.3*** |
| Upper and Middle | 0 | 0 |
| Single Occupant Home | -3.8*** | -4.7*** |
| Other occupancies | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Housing Tenure</i> | | |
| Private Rental | -2.5 | -3.4** |
| Public Housing | -5.9* | -12.0*** |
| Own, Mortgage or Other | 0 | 0 |
| R ² | .10 | .05 |
| N | (3,734) | (3,705) |

Notes: * p < .05 ** p < .01 Dependent variables Self assessed Health and Happiness scales re-scored to range 0 = poor to 100 = excellent. Source Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2003)

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On average, people in public housing score approximately 6 points lower than home owners or mortgagees on the 0 to 100 health scale, even after controlling for other important indicators of health status. Public tenants are also substantially less happy with their lives in general compared to homeowners. On a scale ranging from 0 (extremely unhappy) to 100 (extremely happy) public tenants score 12 points lower than homeowners and mortgagees. These results, while perhaps not surprising, provide strong empirical evidence that public housing is associated with disadvantage in terms of health and overall life satisfaction.

Discussion

Public housing in Australia has been in decline in actual and financial terms since 1996 (Berry, 2005). Public housing now comprises less than 5 per cent of the national housing stock (AIHW, 2008). However there is an expectation that the Rudd Labor government will develop a National Affordable Housing Agreement, revive public housing fortunes and increase the supply of social housing in Australia.

In contrast to public housing, government support for homeownership has long been bipartisan, and the majority of Australians, just under 70 per cent, either own or are buying there home (AIHW 2008). Recent government policies have tended to focus on homeownership, with the First Home Buyers Scheme explicitly pitched as the 'Great Australian Dream' (Liberal Party of Australia 2001). The First Home Buyers Scheme was not even means tested or targeted, in contrast to social housing funding.

Even with increased financial assistance from the Rudd Labor Government, via the National Affordable Housing Agreement, public housing will probably only stop shrinking, it is doubtful that it will expand in the next three years. Federal Labor has indicated that public housing has a large role to play in social housing policy. However, the former Labor leader Latham proposed that the "management and control of public housing needs to pass from government departments to self governing associations" (2000, p. 217). This move would require the government to provide recurrent funding as in the UK to self-governing housing associations in order for them to deliver viable and sustainable social housing outcomes (Pawson 2007).

One of the major problems with public housing, as previously mentioned, is the continued targeting and concentration of the most disadvantaged members of the community in public housing stock. The social and political attitudes of public tenants identified in this paper suggest that the continued concentration of disadvantaged households may well foster and sustain a culture of apathy, distrust and exclusion.

In contrast community-housing providers (via tenants) are able to attract funding that is unavailable to State Housing Authorities from Commonwealth Rent Assistance. They also have the capacity to diversity their tenancy mix and provide a more flexible and response service to meet the needs of the tenants (see Donoghue and Tranter 2005).

Conclusion

The public housing sector comprises a small but important aspect of the housing market, and while state governments promote community housing options through the transfer of public housing stock to NGOs, little is known about the attitudes of people housed by either the public or community sector.

Our research is by no means a comprehensive study of public housing attitudes in Australia. However, through an analysis of national survey data we are able to gain important insights into the social attitudes of public tenants, and show that there are considerable differences between public housing tenants and people in other housing tenures.

Public housing tenants experience a greater sense of social exclusion than homeowners, homebuyers and private renters. They have higher rates of unemployment, lower incomes, lower levels of education and poorer health. They are less trusting of other citizens and of people who are 'different', and they also have less confidence in institutions such as the police and banks.

Our findings suggest that public housing tenants are disadvantaged in terms of several social indicators. Governments need to address a range of support issues that stretch beyond the mere provision of affordable housing if they continue to target public housing at the most disadvantaged members of the community.

State governments need to provide a range of improved services to address education, employment and health issues in order to assist public tenants. There is a need to connect the provision of affordable housing with services that promote the health, happiness and well-being of public housing tenants if governments really want to foster social inclusion.

Our research also suggests that survey based housing research in Australia should aim to select samples of adequate size regarding people in social housing tenures, in order to enable more detailed quantitative analyses of this small but important social group.

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