



## Public housing and COVID-19: contestation, challenge and change

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**To cite this article:** Emma R. Power, Dallas Rogers & Justin Kadi (2020) Public housing and COVID-19: contestation, challenge and change, International Journal of Housing Policy, 20:3, 313-319, DOI: [10.1080/19491247.2020.1797991](https://doi.org/10.1080/19491247.2020.1797991)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/19491247.2020.1797991>



Published online: 21 Aug 2020.



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EDITORIAL



## Public housing and COVID-19: contestation, challenge and change

In our last Editorial we reflected on the central role of housing in the COVID-19 pandemic (Rogers & Power, 2020). As this Issue goes to press, housing continues to play an integral role, both in the progression of the pandemic and responses to it.

In Australia, where we are based and the government response to the pandemic has largely been well coordinated, there has been particular focus on public housing. An infection cluster in a high-rise public housing block in Melbourne led to a rapid hard-lockdown. This was a lockdown unlike any seen in Australia to this point, with the community surrounded by police and residents unable to leave their units for any purpose other than a medical emergency. Astonishingly, many reported learning of the lockdown on the television or arriving home to find their units surrounded by a heavy police presence (Henriques-Gomes, 2020a). In the period since, debates about the resourcing of public housing and support for residents have escalated. In the first days of the public housing lockdown reports emerged of broken lifts requiring residents to crowd together to get in and out of the high rise flats, insufficient, culturally inappropriate and out-of-date food provided to detained residents, inadequate cleaning and supplies of sanitiser and related resources, and limited access to language-appropriate resources about COVID-19 (Henriques-Gomes, 2020b; Molloy, 2020). It is likely that these factors not only made it difficult for residents to cope in lockdown, but also accelerated the spread of the virus. In turn, there are broader questions emerging in the public debate about the purpose of public and social housing and how housing might be better designed and resourced to enable residents to respond to the pandemic.

Public and social housing residents often face stigmatisation in the media and public life (Sisson, 2020). For many the lockdown was an extension of this. The acting Australian Chief Medical Officer, Paul Kelly, referred to the public housing high-rise buildings as “vertical cruise ships” (Murray-Atfield, 2020). This statement discursively linked the public housing community to a number of highly publicised and contentious COVID-19 ‘cruise ship’ cases in Australia (in the most high profile case, known as the Ruby Princess debacle, at least 22 people died from COVID-19 related illness. These are small numbers by international standards but significant within the context of Australia’s 111 COVID-19 related deaths to date. The

outbreak went on to become one of Australia's largest source of COVID-19 infections, and the handling of the outbreak is currently the subject of an inquiry (McKinnell, 2020)). The Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Council of Social Services described the public housing lockdown as "confronting": "No-one has done anything wrong on the estate, but it looks like a crime scene. The police presence is very strong. I expected a much stronger public health presence on site" (Molloy, 2020). One health expert based in the local hospital argued that while "the lockdown was probably a necessary measure, it needed to be rolled out in such a way that residents were seen as partners with government, not detainees of government" (Davey, 2020). Challenging a discourse that public and social housing residents are in need of paternalistic government support, he described how residents had translated public health information into 10 different languages within 24 hours, a task that he argued would otherwise take government at least six months.

For housing researchers these debates about the place, role and resourcing of public and social housing are familiar, though they are made more pointed in the milieu of a global pandemic. In this context we publish our latest Virtual Special Issue on *The Transformation of Social Housing* (Kadi, 2020). This is the fourth in a series of Virtual Special Issues (the first addressed "Housing in China", edited by Richard Ronald; the second "Housing and disadvantaged groups", edited by Peter Mackie, and the third, "Private rental housing in Europe", edited by Tom Moore). The latest Virtual Special Issue, edited by Justin Kadi, looks at the transformation of social housing before and after the Global Financial Crisis. It speaks to current debates about the multi-faceted restructuring of, as well as the future outlook for, the sector, which have intensified in the context of growing demand for de commodified housing since the Global Financial Crisis (Freemark, 2019; Morris, 2019; Nelson & Lewis, 2019; van Gent & Hochstenbach, 2020) and now in the context of COVID-19. Social housing has seen a long-term decline in many contexts since the late 1970s. Housing policy has overall moved away from bricks and mortar to individual subsidies and towards more market-oriented provision models. The privatisation of social housing units has occurred alongside the liberalisation of rental and credit markets and declining public investments in de commodified housing. This has led to considerable changes with regard to the role of social housing in the wider housing system, how the sector is provided, and for whom.

In selecting the papers, Kadi's aim was twofold: first, to include a broad global coverage and, second, to address different aspects of the multi-faceted changes that the social housing sector has undergone in recent years. The collection includes research on twelve countries across five continents. For Europe, it provides insight into the restructuring of social housing in England since the 1980s (Malpass & Victory, 2010), the impact of EU regulation on Dutch social housing (Elsinga et al., 2008), the exclusion of disadvantaged people from social housing in France (Ball, 2009), the

long-term evolution of social housing policy in Switzerland since the 19th century (Lawson, 2009), the decline of public housing in Sweden from a universally accessible to a more residual sector (Grander, 2017), the impact of privatisation of Swedish public housing on spatial inequalities (Andersson & Turner, 2014), as well as social housing stigmatisation in Ireland (Norris et al., 2019).

For Australia, it includes research on problems, policies and the future role of public housing (Jacobs et al., 2013), as well as on tenant self-organising in public housing as a collective political project (Darcy & Rogers, 2014). For North-America, there is piece on the spatial and social impacts of the dismantling of public housing since the 1990s (Goetz, 2012), as well as one on the impacts of the demolition of public housing since the Global Financial Crisis on the lived experience of home of those displaced (Manzo, 2014). For South-America, there is a paper on the management of properties in light of weak government support and the role the 'third sector' plays in Chile in this context (Vergara et al., 2019). Finally, for Asia, the issue includes a piece on the transformation of the Chinese housing system and new social housing policies (Wang & Murie, 2011), one on a public housing model in Singapore, where inhabitants purchase their home from the government (Chua, 2015), and one on the specificities and transferability of Hong Kong's public housing policies (Chiu, 2010).

The Virtual Special Issue does not seek to provide a coherent narrative of how public and social housing has transformed in recent decades. Rather, it serves as starting point to better understand the comprehensive restructuring of public and social housing in countries worldwide. The collection shows how multi-dimensional these changes have been. It also highlights the continuing contextual differences in the definition, structure, policies, and trajectories of social and public housing in different countries. COVID-19 brings new challenges and opportunities for these sectors. As we noted in our Editorial in Issue 2 (Rogers & Power, 2020) housing scholars have an important role to play in the pandemic addressing the effects of housing policies and provisions, the consequences of housing policy change, and directing new pandemic-informed housing futures. We contribute from the vast platform of research and wealth of knowledge that we have of housing, including public and social housing. The papers in this Virtual Special Issue are part of that knowledge.

### Our new issue – issue 3, 2020

And now we turn to the contents of this issue, which presents six new papers that make a series of valuable methodological and empirical contributions to our discipline.

While Adriana Mihaela Soaita, Bilge Serin and Jenny Preece's (2020) *A methodological quest for systematic literature mapping*, was written pre-COVID-19 it has particular utility and relevance for the COVID-19 period. The article outlines a systematic method for working through a large

volume of peer reviewed scholarship in an attempt to link research evidence to evidence-based policy making. With rapid housing policy making taking place in many countries (Rogers & Power, 2020), this methodologically-focused article presents a useful guide for scholars seeking to contribute to these housing policy making efforts.

David Robinson, Stephen Green and Ian Wilson's (2020) *Housing options for older people in a reimagined housing system: a case study from England*, presents a case study of housing provision within a context of an ageing population in the United Kingdom. The article pushes beyond the traditional binary choice between either ageing in place or moving into specialist residential care. COVID-19 has exposed the vulnerability of elderly people in residential care in the United Kingdom and beyond, making this analysis of new 'user-centred' housing services for elderly people even more important. Martina Mikeszová and Martin Lux's (2020) *Dilemmas of housing-asset-based welfare in the post-socialist context: the case of the Czech Republic*, presents a focused look at housing-based welfare within a post-socialist context. Using the Czech Republic as a national case, the authors interviewed people aged between 40 and 55 in three Czech municipalities about using housing as an instrument to store and withdraw wealth. Surprisingly, the people they interviewed were not likely to use reverse mortgage or similar schemes without the introduction of additional, complementary incentives.

John Windie Ansah et al.'s (2020) *'House to let': housing agents, social networks and Ghana's housing law and policy*, analyses the informal network of housing agents that underwrites the allocation and provision of housing in Ghana. Drawing on interviews with housing agents, a rent control departmental officer, landlords and tenants the analysis shows the housing agents are driven by more-than-economic interests, with maintaining social relationships being a key driver of their actions. Finally, Albert Adu-Gyamfi et al. (2020) also focuses on Ghana, *Homeownership aspirations: drawing on the experiences of renters and landlords in a deregulated private rental sector*. This study looks at the homeownership ambitions of renters in Kumasi, Ghana's second largest city. The study finds the homeownership ambitions of renters are influenced by their current rental situation and the available tenure forms, which include co-locating (i.e., co-occupation) with landlords and being subjected to their exploitative rental practices. For example, some landlords require rent in advance while others have increased rent or add utility bills to rent with little to no notice.

Peter Boelhouwer's (2020) *The housing market in The Netherlands as a driver for social inequalities: proposals for reform* is the sixth paper in this Issue. Boelhouwer's *Policy Review* argues that the Dutch housing market has fuelled social inequality and political and economic instability. The paper notes the particular impact of the Global Financial Crisis on housing opportunities in the nation. It can now serve as an important foundation for

understanding COVID-19 related effects in the housing market since that date, and in establishing a series of policy recommendations that might ameliorate growing tenure-driven housing inequality.

Rounding out the Issue is a collection of three Book Reviews: Bruce Judd's review of Tomoko Kubo and Yoshimichi Yui's *The rise of vacant housing in post-growth Japan*, Tahire Erman's review of Hazel Easthope's *The politics and practices of apartment living*, and Tony Manzi's review of John Flint and Ryan Powell's *Class, ethnicity and state in the polarized metropolis: putting Wacquant to work*.

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