Housing and Social Cohesion
Do housing policies and housing assistance make a difference to Australian communities?

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Social cohesion in policy context

- ‘Social cohesion’ old concept with extensive academic lineage (Durkheim onwards)
- Historically, interest in concept ebbs and flows, increasing in times of unrest & change
- Internationally, social cohesion seen as counterpoint to economic policy emphasis
- In Australia (and US) greater interest in social capital
- Governments now interested in how public policy promotes/weakens cohesive society
Social cohesion, housing & place

- Within housing policy it is often assumed housing policy and housing assistance impacts positively on social cohesion, e.g. via:
  - Neighbourhood renewal programs
  - Tenure and social mix
  - Land release promoting mix of occupancy types
- ...but does housing policy and assistance affect communities in this way?
- Existing evidence is disparate, patchy and mixed
This research

- AHURI funded project 2005-2007: ‘Housing, housing assistance & social cohesion’
- Dual aims:
  - Clarify conceptually the relationship between social cohesion, housing and place
  - Undertake exploratory empirical investigation of these relationships in the Australian context
Social cohesion as a policy concept

- Social connectedness (social capital)
  - Emphasis on social processes

- Inequalities (social exclusion)
  - Emphasis on economic processes

- Cultural norms and context

Macro

Micro
Housing and social cohesion

- Housing generally conceptualised as an indicator of the inequalities dimension
  e.g. Berger-Schmitt and Noll (2000)
- Or as having greatest impact on inequalities e.g. Czasny (2002); Forrest and Kearns (2001); Berry (2003)
- Relationships between housing, social connectedness and cultural norms less extensively researched
Key empirical question:

Is there a direct relationship between housing and social connectedness dimension of social cohesion, or is this relationship always mediated by inequalities?
Potential relationships between housing and social cohesion

Social Cohesion

- Connectedness
- Cultural norms
- Inequalities

‘Housing’

- Housing assistance
  - Housing attributes
  - Place characteristics
Data and Method

- Exploratory statistical approach
- 2 data sets used:
  - HILDA Wave 4 (N=10,565)
  - AIFS Social Capital Survey (N=1,506)
- Regression models predicting 5 key indicators of social connectedness:
  - ‘Perceived social support’ (HILDA)
  - ‘Voluntary work’; ‘Civic action’ (AIFS)
  - ‘Perceived neighbourhood interaction’;
    ‘Feel part of community’ (HILDA)
Key findings

1. There is a direct relationship between housing and social connectedness.

   This relationship is stronger for some aspects of social connectedness and some housing/place attributes than others.
Aspects of housing most conducive to social connectedness include: security of tenure, especially home ownership; stability; living in ‘untroubled’ neighbourhoods & rural areas

Aspects of social connectedness most likely to be influenced by housing policy and assistance include: support networks; neighbourhood ties

Aspects of social connectedness least likely to be influenced by housing policy and assistance include: ‘vertical relationships’ such as volunteering and civic action
Key findings

2. There is also a direct relationship between inequalities and social connectedness
   - These relationships sometimes more powerful than the housing-connectedness relationship
   - Most influential aspects of inequality on social connectedness include: financial hardship and poor health (education has mixed results)
   - Hence in some cases housing/place attributes may be considered as proxy for inequalities
Qualified conclusions from exploratory research

- Housing policy aimed at ‘strengthening communities’ is on right track
- However housing still has a critical role to play in reducing household inequalities, which can in turn influence other aspects of socially cohesive communities
Implications for housing policy

- Increasing opportunities for home ownership and other forms of housing security
- Decreasing non-chosen mobility resulting from policies such as renewal schemes
- Decreasing clustering of disadvantage and its contribution to ‘problem’ neighbourhoods
- Increasing locational choice
Publications to date


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