

Social exclusion and housing

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION IS NO MORE USEFUL THAN THE WIDELY USED CONCEPTS OF POVERTY AND INEQUALITY WHEN EXPLORING ISSUES OF DISADVANTAGE AND HOUSING. BUT IT IS POTENTIALLY HELPFUL TO FOCUS ATTENTION ON THE ROLE THAT BOTH INDIVIDUAL AGENCY AND STRUCTURAL FACTORS PLAY IN DETERMINING POVERTY AND INEQUALITY.

KEY POINTS

- While the term 'social exclusion' is frequently used to describe public housing estates characterised by problematic housing and concentrations of disadvantaged individuals, to date there has been little consideration in Australia of the various meanings ascribed to social exclusion, or, given its European origins, assessment of its applicability within the Australian context.
- Merely applying the term social exclusion as a label to describe disadvantaged areas, such as housing estates, is counterproductive, adding to the stigma of the areas without assisting in understanding the underlying processes leading to disadvantage.
- Any consideration and use of social exclusion in relation to housing needs to recognise that disadvantage is not just confined to social housing estates but can also be found within the owner occupied and low-income private rental housing sectors.
- The main value of social exclusion is at the level of policy implementation. In stressing the interconnected aspects of deprivation, it provides support for housing policies that seek to adopt a multi-agency or 'joined up' government approach, coordinating housing policy with investment in education, health, welfare, transport, crime prevention and employment.
- Much of the findings of the review of the international literature on housing and social exclusion are relevant for Australia.

Based on research by Kathy Arthurson and Keith Jacobs, AHURI Southern Research Centre, which reviewed the international academic and policy literature to assess whether the concept of social exclusion adds to an understanding of the relationship between poverty, inequality and housing and whether the term is relevant to Australian housing policy debate.



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CONTEXT

Recently, social exclusion has been introduced as an important issue for Australian housing and urban policy. Nonetheless, despite drawing on the idea of social exclusion in policy development, there is limited investigation in Australia of the problems associated with the concept, or appraisal of its relevance to Australian housing policy. Researchers have questioned the analytical clarity and conceptual value of social exclusion, suggesting that this approach is merely another way of re-badging old debates under new terminology. Thus, the topic of social exclusion and housing is 'at the policy horizon' and will shape future Australian research and housing policy agendas.

The term 'social exclusion' originates from France where, in the mid 1970s, it was used to refer to individuals, including those with mental health and substance abuse problems, who were unable to access welfare entitlements. The election in 1997 of a Labour Government in the United Kingdom led to social exclusion being given centre stage in government social policy. A 'Social Exclusion Unit' was established within the Prime Minister's policy team, charged with the specific task of coordinating government policies to address poverty and social inequality.

Social exclusion is a well-established term in the UK and other parts of Europe, with a substantial critical literature available that assesses its pragmatic policy value. Hence, it was thought constructive to summarise the lessons of the UK and European literature, in order to assess the value and relevance of social exclusion for Australian housing policy. This task formed the basis for undertaking the current project.

In assessing the relevance of the concept of social exclusion for Australian housing policy, questions that were addressed including:

- How is the concept of social exclusion used and what are the various meanings ascribed to it?
- How do social exclusion, housing tenure and housing policy interrelate?
- What issues are associated with adopting the concept of social exclusion in housing policy?

- What are the implications for Australian housing policy?

FINDINGS

HOW THE CONCEPT IS USED AND VARIOUS MEANINGS ASCRIBED TO IT

The review highlights that any assessment of social exclusion needs to distinguish between its academic and political use. Academics usually deploy the concept analytically, to explain poverty and social disadvantage. Social exclusion is used politically to justify new forms of policy intervention, such as policies emphasising social control and sanctions for 'anti-social tenants'.

Academic use of social exclusion

In general, academics conclude that the concept of social exclusion is imprecise and adds little to existing debates about poverty and inequality. The causes of social exclusion are numerous, ranging from lack of access to housing and other services to family breakdown, teenage crime and pregnancy. This makes it difficult to provide definitional clarity to identify the causes of social exclusion and to target effective policy interventions.

Despite these misgivings, social exclusion has some academic utility through highlighting the significance of both structural processes (i.e. contemporary social and economic conditions) and individual agency (the extent to which individuals can act to change their life circumstances) and how these two factors interact to accentuate disadvantage.

Political deployment

In the political arena, the way social exclusion is used differs depending on the systems of values that underlie the concept of social exclusion and the way these values are reflected in different explanations of the causes of inequality. Such an ideological approach may be conservative or progressive in direction. For example, within social democratic debates, the term is often used to justify a 'redistributionist discourse', which emphasises poverty and the lack of full citizenship as the main causal factors of inequality. This leads to housing policy that supports government investment in social housing, open access and direct public ownership and administration of social housing.

Within the neo-liberal tradition, social exclusion policies are often informed by what is termed 'the moral underclass discourse'. This discourse purports that individuals are generally culpable for their material circumstances, so government policies should be deployed to deter individuals from remaining welfare dependent. In housing policy, it may lead to policies that support privatisation and headleasing of social housing, private rental assistance/benefit schemes and policies to change social mix in estate regeneration.

THE INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL EXCLUSION, HOUSING TENURE AND HOUSING POLICY

Much of the findings of the review of the international literature on housing and social exclusion are relevant for Australia. Recent UK research suggests that housing policies aimed at tackling area-based deprivation (including, for example, social housing estates) are insufficient. In order to address the wider problems associated with social exclusion, policies must embrace other policy areas including education, health, welfare, transport, crime prevention, training and employment.

Other findings are that social exclusion is not confined to any one form of housing tenure and that individuals who reside in poverty can be found within the owner occupied, low income private-rental and social housing sectors.

The European literature makes a key distinction between exploring the processes of 'exclusion through housing' and 'exclusion from housing' that has particular relevance for Australian debates. The key point is the need not just to consider the ways that housing adds to or ameliorates social exclusion, but to also take account of the social and economic consequences of exclusion from housing for people on low-incomes. From this point of view, the policy imperative is to focus not just on visible problems but to also take account of the social and economic consequences for low-income tenants of not gaining access to, or maintaining access to, social housing.

ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH ADOPTING THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN HOUSING POLICY

Based on the findings of the review the researchers' view is that, in terms of housing policy, social exclusion is inadequate when merely used to describe pockets of poverty and disadvantage, such as on housing estates. It is more useful when adopted to present a set of ideas about the processes leading to disadvantage.

Social exclusion's main value is at the level of policy implementation. In stressing the interconnected aspects of deprivation, the concept of social exclusion can be used to endorse housing policies that seek to adopt a multi-agency or 'joined up' government approach. This is where problems are not tackled in isolation but recognise the complexity and inter-related nature of inequality – stressing the need to coordinate housing policy with other policy portfolios including investment in education, transport, employment and training and crime prevention.

However, these types of government policy initiatives to address social exclusion prove difficult to evaluate. Specifically, housing interventions are mixed in with other government policies implemented to address social exclusion, which makes it problematic to isolate the effects of individual policy interventions.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

If social exclusion becomes a key part of the Australian housing and social policy agenda then:

- Policy makers will need to be precise about how they use the term. As the review highlights, the large variation in the types of social groups portrayed as socially excluded and the multitude of causes attributed to social exclusion makes it difficult to target policy interventions; just about anyone or anything can be considered socially excluded. It will also be important to state whether they are merely using the term to describe concentrations of disadvantage on housing estates, or as a way of identifying how different social processes interact to cause disadvantage.

- Policies to address social exclusion will need to consider more than public housing estates so that an understanding of the potential for, and incidence of, social exclusion in other housing tenures is not neglected. Inequality also exists in low-income private rental and the homeownership sectors.
- Housing policy will need to integrate with other social and economic policies if the institutional capacity of government to address social exclusion is to be advanced. However, it is important that housing policy is seen as one small, but integral, part of approaches to address social exclusion. Many of the causes of social exclusion are outside of the realm of housing policy.
- Policy analysts and researchers will need to gauge ways of evaluating pertinent policy initiatives. The difficulty of disentangling cause and effect is the major reason why social exclusion is so difficult to evaluate.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 40199 *Social exclusion and housing*. Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website (www.ahuri.edu.au) by typing the project number into the search function.

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