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Smart cities wouldn't let housing costs drive the worse-off into deeper disadvantage

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Housing costs are driving poorer families into areas with fewer and fewer opportunities. Kate Ausburn/flickr, CC BY

In his 1972 election campaign, Gough Whitlam loudly proclaimed that in modern Australia an individual's health, wellbeing and life chances were shaped more by where they lived than by the job they held, their religion, race or ethnicity.

It was a powerful statement that spoke to an Australian population scarred by decades of urban growth unsupported by the infrastructure needed to make places decent, worthwhile environments to raise children, live a productive life and contribute to society.

Fast-forward almost 50 years and urban issues are once again on the agenda. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's Smart Cities Plan would deliver new transport infrastructure, better urban planning, and the sort of "urban visioning" that earned Whitlam praise and damnation in equal measure.

But there is a big difference this time around. The Whitlam agenda was informed by a fundamental concern with social justice, a desire to improve the lot in life of the most deprived, and a belief in a fairer Australia.

The 2016 articulation of an urban agenda has no such commitment to social ideals. Instead, it assumes building more highways, railways and trams will produce better, more productive cities that somehow give everyone a job.

Authors

Emma Baker
Reader in Housing, University of Adelaide

Andrew Beer
Dean, Research and Innovation, University of South Australia

Rebecca Bentley
Associate Professor, Centre for Health Equity, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne

We know it doesn't work that way. Our recent research has highlighted both the unequal nature of Australia's cities and the processes that keep poor places poor.

Upwardly and downwardly mobile

On average, about 15% of Australians move house each year. Generally, when they move they shift to places that are a bit better than the places they left – that is, places with good access to employment, quality environments, and social settings.

Our research suggests, however, that this statistical average hides a very interesting two-speed process that is neglected by the Smart Cities Plan. The relatively well-off and the upwardly mobile improve the areas in which they live over an extended period. The more economically vulnerable tend to make more frequent, multiple moves – living in slightly less advantaged areas each time.

To put it in plain terms, the poor move to poor areas where they may become even more disadvantaged. Meanwhile, the middle classes move through our cities gradually climbing the housing ladder.

This process has immediate as well as intergenerational implications, gradually filtering some families into areas with fewer and fewer opportunities, poorer educational outcomes, higher transport costs and few resources to deal effectively with health conditions. In some cases, jobs can't be found, or are simply too far away to be practical.

Housing affordability widens the gap

In the current climate of ongoing housing affordability "crisis" and highly localised house price differentiation, more and more Australians are forced to move through the market because of the (un)-affordability of their housing. Housing affordability should be a key question when we think about our cities.

In our new paper, we examine if housing affordability problems are concentrating some people into less advantaged areas. When we track the residential mobility of Australians, we find that housing affordability is "sorting" some people into more and less advantaged places.

Australia's housing affordability problems are much more complex than simple supply problems. Cities are shaped by the people who live within them. Some people need affordable housing responses that are smarter than the market alone can supply.

Our work indicates that some people's access to the good things smart cities have to offer is limited by the location of housing they can afford – be it ownership or rental.

Smart cities of the future will need to address the consequences of housing-generated social and economic inequalities in Australia.