



REVIEW

Gatekeepers of the Undesired? A systematic review on local housing policy and the settlement of vulnerable groups

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Abstract

A neglected dimension of housing policy is how municipalities use it as a gatekeeping mechanism to exclude vulnerable groups and thereby control their territory. To examine this topic, we apply a systematic review that draws on the international academic literature and utilizes three bibliometric analyses. First, statistical analysis reveals the field's growth and how it is characterized by publications often combining an impressive set of data and methods. Second, the material is explored through network analysis, emphasizing how a few important journals lead the distribution of knowledge. Finally, a thematic analysis highlights consistency in the detrimental effects of exclusionary policies across different contexts. A distinction between planned excluding practices and policies with such unintended effects are also evident. The analysis underscores the conflict between individual responsibilities and societal obligations, where current policies tend to place substantial burdens on the individual.

Keywords: housing policy; municipalities; systematic review; vulnerable groups

Introduction

The right to housing is a fundamental principle in international human rights law and conventions, and pertains for all individuals, but the principle is less frequently realized for vulnerable groups, particularly immigrants (Brown et al. 2022; Bengtsson et al. 2022). As DeLuca and Rosen (2022) argue, housing is an aspect of assets distribution that determines access also to other resources, shapes exposure to racial and economic segregation, and influences the unequal generation of wealth.

Access to housing is fundamental to ensure suitable living conditions in other domains and to facilitate integration (Ager and Strang 2008).

In housing studies, it is common to theorize from both welfare and housing regimes, as in the classic work of Kemeny (2006), discussing dual versus integrated rental markets. Dewilde (2017) have demonstrated regimes to have explanatory value, meaning that they can explain housing conditions and costs for the individual. At the same time, Clapham (2018) has shown how neoliberalism has reshaped different housing regimes toward financialization.

In this study, we have focused on local housing policies' contribution to mechanisms of gatekeeping. We also strive to provide contextual analysis of such circumstances when our design enables us to (Ager and Strang 2008). While such housing regimes are typically a national concern, they are rarely independent of regional and local governments, which often display some autonomy to establish their own regulations (Maclennan and O'Sullivan 2013). Such policies can include ambitions to exclude certain groups from long-term settlement, as they represent unwanted populations, thereby violating their right to adequate housing. We specify these groups as socially vulnerable people in general and immigrants in particular.¹ However, the state of the art for research regarding these exclusionary practices is scattered across disciplines and it lacks a comprehensive underlying perspective, including a focus on various geographies. This study emphasizes this neglected dimension of housing policy with the acknowledgment of local governments as active policymakers, and thereby aims to refine the extant literature by exploiting the strategy of systematic reviews (SR). We raise the following question:

- What is the current state of knowledge regarding municipalities' exploitation of housing policy as a tool for gatekeeping and controlling vulnerable groups' long-term residence?

Our ambition in addressing this question will be realized inductively, since the current literature lacks formalized theoretical frameworks. We focus on the contribution of local housing policies to mechanisms of gatekeeping. We still strive to provide contextual analysis of national variations when our design allows.

This objective enables future theoretical contributions that are guided by a few analytical distinctions. To start with, our focus on the local political level follows from several arguments. First, the policy area of housing is in most countries to some extent decentralized to local or regional governmental levels (Hananel 2014; Maclennan and O'Sullivan 2013). They tend to bear responsibility for ensuring housing as well as relationships and regulation of commercial housing developers for long-term residents within their respective territories. Second, the field of migration studies, which is of relevance due to our focus, has witnessed a

¹We specify the broad term of vulnerable groups further in our review by utilizing a set of more detailed keywords with the aim to capture people in a state of poverty and homelessness. Concerning immigrants, our empirical interest is focused on this group, and we use various keywords to comprehend this group empirically, as nomenclature may vary (exact keywords can be found in the supplementary material). For the same reason, the various use of words (migrants, immigrants) will also be applied throughout the review.

tremendous recent outpouring in research covering the local level, summarized within the concept of a “local turn” (Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten 2017).

Since local governments lack the traditional tools to control who resides within their respective territories, the design of their housing policy will in practice constitute an additional option for exercising control.² In the domain of migration policy, housing policies as *de facto* exclusionary practices have come to serve as tangible measure for enforcing migration control (Hollifield et al. 2022; Money 1999). Already in the 1980s, Hammar (1985) problematized the clear-cut distinction between policies of migration control and policies of social integration, arguing that the latter category also may function to restrict or even prohibit long-term settlement. Arguing that elements of migration control and settlement cannot always be kept analytically distinct from each other, they exemplified how policies of settlement, such as granting housing, can be exploited as a way to expel immigrants from a society. More recently, Filindra & Goodman (2019) emphasized that contemporary research actually fails to maintain such distinctions and seldom uses data specific enough to connect settlement measures to territorial exclusion. Such challenges are frequent, even in the subnational political arena (Lidén and Nyhlén 2022; Varsanyi 2010).

The outline of the systematic review

The method underlying the SR is designed in several steps and in an iterative process with a pragmatic approach, as advocated by Mays et al. (2005). Initially, search strategies are developed collaboratively by our research team and bibliometric experts from Linköping University and Mid Sweden University. Thereafter multiple draft rounds allow gradual refinement, culminating in the final model, which we describe below.

The general search strategy

The approach of the SR was divided into two phases: an extensive search (ES) and a narrow search (NS). The ES encompassed literature on vulnerable groups in a broad context, while the NS specifically targeted research on individuals with immigrant backgrounds. This differentiation holds profound significance for the SR, influencing methodological strategies, analytical approaches, and the resulting conclusions.

We manage these distinctions through our search strategies, drawing on concepts previously utilized in the field (see e.g. Holmqvist et al. 2022; Korver-Glenn, 2018), and structure our search around four key segments:

1. Local housing policy;
2. Vulnerable groups (ES) OR immigrants (NS);
3. The gatekeeping mechanism;
4. Exclusion of topics distant from our ambition.

²The local level does have some tools, as zoning, see for example Trounstein (2018), for a more elaborated discussion.

The phrasing of the exact search strings, including Boolean operators, can be found in the supplementary material. Our choice of keywords stems from both prior field knowledge and the refinement of preliminary searches (Snyder 2019).

We imposed temporal and spatial limitations on the search, applying a 2005 cut-off to exclude dated research due to its declining relevance in the contemporary context, thus echoing the methodological scoping framework set out by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). Our searches encompassed *Scopus* and *Web of Science* databases as a spatial delimitation, renowned for their particularly comprehensive coverage of social sciences and cross-disciplinary content.

In addition to the standardized approach, we employed supplementary strategies for the NS. All reviewed publications adhered to a coding scheme, designating some as *prominent* ($n = 27$), indicating a study to be of particular importance for the purposes of our study. These were in turn subject to manual searches in two ways; (i) scrutinizing their bibliographies for relevant literature that would otherwise be missed, and (ii) reviewing publications citing them to identify future-relevant works. Consequently, the strategies resulted in a manual extension of the NS ($n = 17$). This was done to capture any additional pertinent literature that might have been overlooked in the database search (Munn *et al.* 2018). Together, these two categories of *prominent publications* ($n = 44$), laid the ground for a subsequent thematic analysis. Furthermore, in line with Ali *et al.* (2014), we introduced a feature to identify publications misaligned with the study's purpose, leading to the exclusion of *irrelevant* literature ($n = 16$). A figure further describing this process can be found in the supplementary material.

The coding of publications and reliability tests

The coding of collected publications followed two strategies, automatic and manual, with both strategies carefully considering relevant search variables (Mays *et al.* 2005). The automatic code covered both datasets, sourced from previously mentioned databases, with variables such as publication year, field of study, publisher's impact, and citations.

The manual coding was exclusively built upon the publications in the NS, with each item having been reviewed by a member of the research team. Some followed predefined categories (e.g. publication type, data), while others were open in nature (e.g. research questions, empirical focus), allowing for flexibility and ensuring the most comprehensive coverage (Arksey and O'Malley 2005). Specific themes aligning with the study's purpose were identified, each associated with one to three keywords. These themes were derived through content rephrasing or direct quotations.

A comprehensive description of all variables, together with the coding scheme, is presented in the supplementary material.

To ensure reliability, two intercoder tests were conducted of the NS (Snyder 2019). The first test reviewed *prominent* and *irrelevant* publications, with a different coder validating initial classifications. Final classifications required consensus.³ The

³If both coders agreed a publication was irrelevant, it was excluded. In cases of coder disagreement, the publication received no coding in that category. For a publication to be classified as prominent, agreement from both coders was required.

second test involved recoding 10 randomly chosen publications, focusing on manually extracted variables like publication type, empirical focus, data, and methods. The results showed a coder consistency of 97.5%.

Analytical strategy

We employed three distinct methodological approaches to comprehensively analyze our research material. These approaches mutually reinforce one another, providing multifaceted insights into the corpus of publications.

First, we conducted statistical analyses, examining key variables such as publication types, temporal distribution, citations, impact factors, geographic coverage, data sources, methodologies, and subject classifications. We did this in order to synthesize an international bird's-eye view of the field (Rosenthal & DiMatteo, 2001). The inclusion of the ES or the NS dataset depended on data availability, with descriptive statistics aiding in data elucidation.

Second, to conduct a more comprehensive analysis of the content, we utilized the VOSviewer software to generate network-based visual representations of associations. These network analyses were crafted using keywords and publication sources from the ES. They effectively demonstrate the relative importance and interconnections between items through the use of different circle sizes, showcasing keyword or reference co-occurrences through connecting lines, and distinguishing item clusters using varying colors. The primary benefit of employing this technique is its ability to efficiently cluster publications, to see overarching patterns and to analyze a vast number of publications (van Eck and Waltman 2017).

Last, we performed a thematic analysis, concentrating on the *prominent* publications aligned with our study's objectives (Snyder 2019). By doing this, we have followed the logic developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) but also take into account results from the findings generated by our statistical and network analyses. The publications are categorized into five thematic domains, established through an inductive process that identifies prevalent subject matter threads within the material. As Thomas and Harden (2008) point out, this step-by-step approach lends structure and depth to the thematic distillation and analysis.

This approach is not without limitations. We particularly identify three challenges. First, there is always a risk of not covering the complete population of relevant literature and thereby risk missing out on relevant research. Drawing on not just one but two of the most extensive databases, as well as including a longer time frame for our search, are strategies applied to mitigate such problems. Furthermore, support from bibliographic experts has been another way to minimize these risks (Ali et al. 2014). Second, preunderstandings and researchers' experiences risk producing biased results (Munn et al. 2018). We have addressed this potential problem by carefully describing our approach and applying various intercoder tests. Third, due to limited space, we have not been able to systematically categorize local gatekeeping practices in relation to national housing regimes. We leave this important task for future research.

Table 1. Summary of material

	Narrow search	Extensive search
Journal articles	107	540
Book sections	13	43
Books	2	32
Conference papers	1	22
Complete <i>n</i> of publications	123	637
Whereof... publications classified as prominent	44	
Whereof... prominent publications manually added	17	

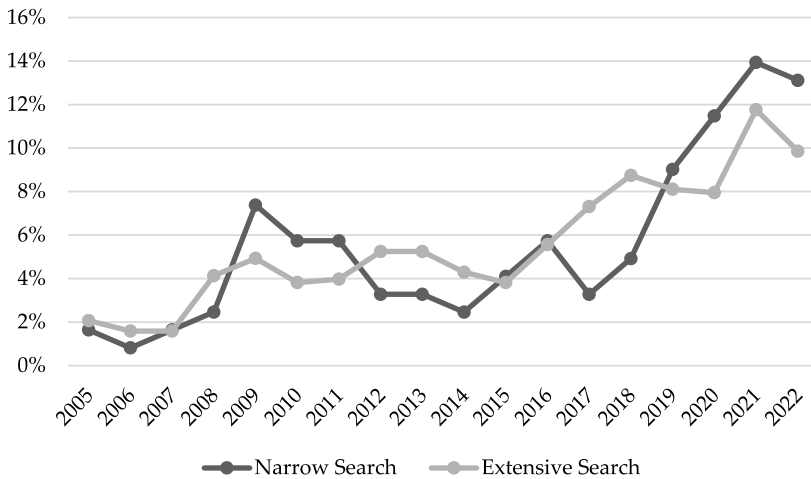


Figure 1. Share of publications per year. *Notes:* The share of publications per year is annually calculated for each year and in relation to the complete number of publications in the NS and ES respectively. Publications from 2023 have been excluded in this calculation, consisting of one item in the narrow search and three in the extensive search.

Results

This section is divided into three parts: statistical analysis of the publications, visualization of the material, and the thematic analysis of the publications.

Statistical analysis of the publications

This analysis delves into publication trends within the two search strings, examining annual publication counts, citation frequencies, and scientific rankings, highlighting both shared and differing aspects between these categories. The findings shed light on publication patterns in the realms of the extensive and the NS. The NS here represents the version in which irrelevant publications have been excluded while the manually added relevant publications are included. A compilation is presented in Table 1, demonstrating the total scope of the material and its composition, which is particularly dominated by journal articles.

The extracted descriptive data reveals a mostly congruent pattern in both the ES and the NS with respect to annual publication counts, see Figure 1. During the initial

Table 2. Data and methods in the analyzed publications of the narrow search

Data	Sum of all data	Research methods	
<i>Qualitative data</i>	44% (54)	Interviews	7% (9)
		Document studies	11% (14)
		Observations	2% (2)
		Combination of multiple qualitative methods	18% (22)
<i>Quantitative data</i>	30% (37)	Surveys	11% (14)
		Statistics	15% (18)
		Experiment	1% (1)
		Combination of multiple quantitative methods	3% (4)
<i>Mixed data</i>	26% (32)	Combination of multiple qualitative and quantitative methods	26% (32)
		Other	6% (7)

phase of the observation period spanning 2005–2007, both search categories exhibit the lowest frequency of publications. Subsequently, both categories manifest an overall upward trajectory in publication counts in the years that follow and a particular increase since 2019.

The frequency of citations per publication delineates analogous trajectories for both the NS and the ES. Predominantly, citations cluster within the interval of 0–20 citations per publication, with the subsequent most substantial cluster spanning 21–40 citations, succeeded by a great diminution in count. Noteworthy is the absence of any publication in the NS amassing more than 200 citations, while a duo of publications in the ES assembles over 400 citations.

A qualitative categorization procedure was applied to the NS, wherein the publications were initially encoded at a local level. Subsequently, the NS subset underwent further reclassification, this time at a continental level. The frequency data indicate that publications in the NS predominantly has the empirical geographical focus on Europe, followed by Asia and North America.

This has been followed by a qualitative reading and categorization of the nature of data and methodology in the NS (see Table 2). The most common type of data used was qualitative data (44%), followed by quantitative data (30%) and finally mixed data (26%), with mixed data denoting studies that draw on both types of data. Furthermore, different uses of research methods come into evidence. An observable preference towards a combination of multiple qualitative methods emerges (18%), while document studies also are quite commonly used (11%). In contrast to the qualitative data, a blend of quantitative methods (3%) was not the most common, but rather drawing on official statistics or register data (15%). Despite mixed data being the least common data type overall, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (such as surveys and interviews) surprisingly constitutes the most common methodological approach (26%) overall. The category labeled “other” encompasses observations that could not be categorized into any of the other pre-established options (for example, entirely theoretical publications), but they all apply qualitative data.

Data categorization based on subject discipline has been automatically generated through the search engines Scopus and Web of Science, for both the NS and the ES.

Table 3. Mean values by citations and rank on the Norwegian list

Norwegian list	Narrow search					Extensive search				
	None	Rank 1	Rank 2	Mean	Total	None	Rank 1	Rank 2	Mean	Total
Citations	2.2	18.0	53	21.8	–	3.1	15.8	37.2	18.3	–
N	5	79	24	–	108	43	419	110	–	572
Percentage	4.6	73.1	22.2	–	100	8.4	73.2	19.2	–	100

Note: 15 observations in the narrow search and 65 observations in the extensive search observations constitute missing data in the dataset.

As some publications are occasionally tagged with multiple subject disciplines, the primary subject discipline has been subsequently determined through manual qualitative assessment. This assessment was undertaken to transform the data into distinct and mutually exclusive primary categories. The outcome reveals that social sciences are the overwhelmingly predominant subject discipline in both the NS (43%) and the ES (44%), followed by environmental science as the next most prevalent discipline (NS = 33%, ES = 23%). A detailed presentation is given in the supplementary material.

In a comparison of means, we also observe a clear trend indicating that the higher a publication is ranked on the Norwegian list, the greater the number of citations the publication can be expected to have (see Table 3). In the case of the NS, we see that a rank 1 publication has a mean citation count of 18, while a rank 2 publication has a mean value almost three times as high, at 53. Similar patterns are also found in the ES, with the notable exception of a slightly lower overall citation per rank compared to the NS.

Visualizations

The network analyses of the material that the ES comprises are performed in two versions, drawing both on keywords and on publications.

The first produces five clusters, differently colored (see Figure 2). The most centrally placed node is, not unexpectedly based on the search string, *housing policy*, but also *housing* and *urban housing* are frequent. *Housing policy* is in itself linked to keywords recovered in all clusters and occurs in a substantial share of all publications. Among the clusters, housing policy and urban housing are concepts that are frequently applied simultaneously (yellow), together with housing markets and the geographical connection to the USA. Another cluster revolves around the nodes of housing and poverty which are viable combinations (purple). Not surprisingly, segregation (blue) is a keyword associated with the term neighborhood while gentrification (green) is closer related to cities and displacement. Finally, affordable housing and inequality (red) are categorized together with what appear to be studies covering China. There are also examples of how the constitution of the networks points to some unanticipated outcomes. Although poverty and segregation are linked to each other in the visualization, they still represent different clusters. Yet they refer to phenomena with close associations.

The second illustration provides helpful information on the structure of publications and applies relations through the co-occurrence of similar references

Table 4. Overview of the thematic analysis

Main theme	Subthemes	Publications per theme
Explicit exclusionary policies for migrants	Discriminatory policies manifest in legal texts and other guiding documents Lack of formal opportunities and support Unequal treatment during policy implementation	9
Residential segregation	Secondary repercussions of policies Tools of desegregation (by social or housing mix policy) Policies of allocation	9
Economic aspects of housing and housing policy	Individual factors and ability to acquire or rent housing Affordable housing for immigrants How markets shape the housing situation	6
Municipal housing policies, governance, and policy results	Understanding of how the housing policy domain is permeated by multilayered and complex governance Small and middle-sized villages and cities on how to craft policies How immigrants perceive local housing policies as challenging Quantitative patterns in restrictive housing policies	14
Housing and internal migration in China	Internal migrants Housing policy to satisfy local interests in promoting city specialization Local policy to attract “desirable” migrants	5

The third way in which exclusionary policies affect migrants is through *unequal treatment during policy implementation*. Hanhörster and Lobato (2021) emphasize the absence of clear guidelines for service providers, resulting in disparities in migrant treatment in the housing market. This underscores the importance of individual discretion among service providers and the organizational culture within housing companies and municipalities. Even if a policy does not explicitly specify certain actions, the prevailing cultural or local context can still lead to exclusion of certain groups (Hanhörster and Lobato 2021). In the literature, this discrimination is discussed primarily in two ways. The first deals with discrimination based on appearance, for instance based on arbitrary perceptions of the local housing providers (e.g. Oliveri, 2009). The second deals with the challenges and uncertainties that occur with the practical implementation of policies and illustrate the complexities inherent in translating policy intentions into effective action (El-Kayed & Hamann, 2018).

The final subtheme concerns *secondary repercussions of policies*. Such consequences extend across various domains, encompassing aspects such as economic implications, social segregation, and the erosion of trust within the affected communities. Oliveri (2009) delves into the extensive ramifications of segregation along the USA southern border. These consequences may include reduced property values and limited access to societal support, primarily affecting migrant-dense areas. Another focus in the literature is on how similar effects can be

found in the vastly different context in China, underscoring seemingly universal implications of exclusionary policies. Here, Huang and Yi (2015) reveal analogous effects, as the Chinese Government's establishment of committees and regulations pertaining to housing space and occupancy in rental properties can yield adverse repercussions for migrants. While these regulations aim to regulate housing standards, they result in higher housing costs and less availability of affordable housing options for migrants.

Residential segregation

Literature found on processes of residential segregation or desegregation departs largely from a Eurocentric perspective, with only one publication from Asia (Zhu *et al.* 2022) and one note covering North America (Guzman 2010).⁴ Residential segregation refers to the spatial distribution of different household categories within cities, which can result from individual choices, structural causes, or exclusionary mechanisms in housing policy. Arbaçi (2008) highlights the role of the housing system and the tradition of promoting ownership over rental dwellings as factors that further marginalize and geographically exclude households with fewer resources, contributing to segregation. Central in this strand is the importance of local housing policy for the steering internal migration and mobility patterns. This theme focuses on how segregation has been constructed and reconstructed in cities and how this process can be combated. (2008)

The discussions of *tools of desegregation*, is within this theme mainly represented by research on the potential of *social or housing mix policy*, where a mix in housing can contribute to a redistribution of household categories between neighborhoods. This theme thus highlights how housing distribution and allocation can block, or open, the inflow of marginalized households to some parts of a given city.

We find studies discussing various social mix schemes in different national contexts. The more indirect social mix policy used in Sweden, where tenure mix is seen as a tool to increase the population mix, is seen as a less effective method but also as less at risk for being exclusionary, as it aims to increase the ability to choose where to reside (Andersson, Bråmås, and Holmqvist 2010; E. Holmqvist and Bergsten 2009). In Germany (Münch 2009), allocation has been the principal policy tool influencing segregation, which works by setting different population quotas and through bans to decrease ethnic population concentrations. This strategy, though, risks contributing to exclusion. Finland's social mix policy is presented as a positive example, where it has influenced housing allocation through quotas and increased ethnic diversity (Dhalmann and Vilka 2009; Skifter Andersen *et al.* 2016). *Policies of allocation* to social housing have thus been identified as both a cause of and a possible solution to segregation, and as a tool to integrate as well as a strategy to block out different household categories from neighborhoods.

⁴That the search string of prominent publications of the narrow search only identified one example of American studies on the theme of segregation might be one explanation for to the lack of studies discussing zoning, which is especially important in the American context.

The social mix policy can contribute to gatekeeping and displacement of certain groups (mainly ethnic minorities) between neighborhoods within a city, rather than to gatekeeping at municipal borders (Bricocoli & Cucca, 2016; Zhu et al. 2022).

Economic aspects of housing and housing policy

This theme explores the diverse economic aspects of housing, including migrant housing loans' terms and accessibility (Kandyliis and Maloutas 2017; Liu, Li, and Greene 2020), economic inequality, socioeconomic factors' impacts and the housing market (Simone & Walks, 2019). These studies mainly cover North America and Europe.

One of the publications directed towards *individual factors*, such as the economic situation of migrants and their *ability to acquire or rent* (Liu, Li, and Greene 2020), focuses explicitly on inequality in the rental market regarding the possibility for migrants to rent housing in the Chinese private housing market. The authors find that the cost pressure regarding rents varies geographically between different cities in China and that the variations follow clear geographical patterns. This creates different pressures on migrants depending on where they live, and these differences can be linked to the political-administrative system as well as to political and economic factors.

Kandyliis and Maloutas (2017) approach the issue of *affordable housing* for immigrants from a different angle, highlighting the consequences of a *laissez-faire* strategy by the Greek government. The lack of policy affects immigrants' ability to secure housing, posing significant challenges for those unable to afford it.

In another study Simone & Walks (2019) examine the effect between federal policies encouraging homeownership, metropolitan housing costs, and neighborhoods immigrant debt levels in Canada. In their study, they show that this group has a higher debt burden than native-born Canadians, particularly in neighborhoods in metropolitan areas with a high concentration of immigrants. The authors argue that these patterns are related to an understanding of our knowledge of the distribution of debt and wealth in urban environments and how this distribution interacts with national policies as well as financial resilience and vulnerability related to the flow of immigrants.

A final subtheme emphasizes *how markets shape the housing situation* for immigrants. In an article with a particular focus on refugees, Bernt et al. (2022) examine the impact that informal agents have on the housing market that offers housing for refugees. The study analyses how these agents affect how new segregation patterns arise, with a particular focus on different types of disadvantaged areas. This type of housing agent also gives rise to a less regulated shadow economy where the housing offered is often of questionable quality. In this, refugees are a particularly vulnerable group. Another study that focuses on refugees as a vulnerable group when it comes to housing is Teixeira (2011), which focuses on newly arrived immigrants with low incomes and what their housing experiences look like and what coping strategies they have.

Municipal housing policies, governance and policy results

This theme covers governance and policy results from the admission and dispersal of migrants across local societies to long-term objectives for facilitating integration.

It should be emphasized that scholars underscore the severe challenges that immigrants face when struggling to obtain housing (Brown *et al.* 2022; Werner *et al.* 2018), driven by a general housing shortage and relatively low proportions of public housing. One alternative for refugees that have been left without accommodation is squatting. The occurrence of squatting, interpreted as a failure of the local migration regime, has rather fueled mortification and social degradation further (Bolzoni, Gargiulo, and Manocchi 2015).

Using such challenges as an entry point, the literature provides insights into an *understanding of how the housing policy area is permeated by multilayered and complex governance* that is analytically best understood as being grounded at the local level (Eckardt 2018). This is particularly acknowledged when accounting for the multitude of actors that are present when accommodating immigrants. The policies reached in such settings are in the limelight of several studies. Examining the situation in three German cities, Hanhörster *et al.* (2022) state that for local communities to ensure well-functioning reception, such actors need to simultaneously maintain vital prerequisites: accessibility, affordability, permeability, and assured amenities and networks related to arrival. However, the different governing logics affecting involved actors can interfere with such requirements. Different drivers can both create horizontal tensions and discriminatory practices (Hanhörster *et al.* 2022).

With such objectives emphasized, several contributions draw on bottom-up examples from *small and middle-sized villages and cities on how to craft policies*, in Europe (Gardesse and Lelévrier 2020; Ulceluse, Bock, and Haartsen 2022; Vergou, Arvanitidis, and Manetos 2021) as well as in an American context (McConnell and Miraftab 2009), although housing policies regimes create various preconditions. The European studies pertain to the results of placements of refugees or labor immigrants, often driven by displacement policies to achieve social mixes. It becomes of particular interest how local governments exploit their discretion by launching bottom-up policies conjointly with civil society actors that strive to deliver better and more meaningful reception. However, these policy options are never exercised in a vacuum (Aerne & Bonoli 2023; McConnell & Miraftab (2009). They emphasize that policy decisions are not made in isolation, as seen in their analysis of labor migrants entering a historically racially exclusive rural American community. Despite improved conditions for the current migrant groups, such as increased homeownership and reduced segregation, subsequent policies have worsened their housing situation where, for example, policies for land use have been enforced.

Another subtheme emphasizes how *immigrants themselves perceive local housing policies as challenging*. Skovgaard Nielsen *et al.* (2015) emphasize how local contexts and policies can collide with cultural preferences among immigrants. Focusing on the Somali population in the Nordic countries, the challenge of acquiring stable and affordable housing was emphasized, making it even more difficult to account for individual and cultural preferences. From another angle, Ulceluse *et al.* (2022) contend that placement location, whether at villages' outskirts, their centers or in more remote areas in the Netherlands, is something that influences impressions. While the first two options offer chances for stronger connections, they can still lead

to feelings of exclusion if the settled population's behavior is distancing, unlike what more isolated placements entail.

A few studies *assess quantitative patterns in restrictive housing policies*. Walker and Leitner (2011) scrutinize how USA local governments propose and implement inclusionary or exclusionary policies for immigrants, including housing access. In a Swedish context, Holmqvist et al. (2022) investigate municipalities' long-term housing policies, ranging from none to various provisions for temporary housing to provision of permanent housing. Both studies reveal geographical patterns, indicating more restrictive policies in the American South and in Swedish metropolitan areas. Despite similarities, differences exist. Walker and Leitner (2011) associate foreign-born population growth with exclusionary policies, while Holmqvist et al. (2022) find that prior refugee reception correlates with more generous housing policies. Both studies note that support for right-wing parties is linked to local governments maintaining stricter policies.

Housing and internal migration in China

Focusing on the Chinese context, this strand of literature deviates in a couple of respects from the other studies reviewed so far. First, the focus is on *internal migrants*, migrating from rural areas to find work near Chinese megacities. The movement of these migrants are regulated by a so-called Hukou-based system in which a kind of "local citizenship" is assigned at birth (Huang and Ren 2022). Another unique feature is the authoritarian and centralized political system, suggesting that local governments have less freedom to design their own policy. However, similar to the European context, many scholars (Huang and Ren 2022; Shen and Li 2022) have pointed to significant local variations.

One main theme in the literature focuses on how local governments design unique *housing policy to satisfy local interests in promoting city specialization and development*. In this process, the balance between meeting the need for labor and keeping migrants deportable is highlighted. For instance, Ling (2021) claims that the demand for labor encourages local governments to supply dwellings to rural migrants and circumvent the Hukou-based system to increase the labor force. By doing so, Ling (2021) argues that local government seek to navigate so-called "formal informality", referring to the process of formalizing nontraditional housing by bureaucratic means. For example, rural migrants have been offered standardized cargo containers as accommodation in urban Shanghai. This has contributed to exploitation of rural migrants who must adhere to a de-territorialized approach to homemaking (Ling, 2021). In the recent decade, however, scholars have highlighted the implementation of gradually inclusive housing policies towards migrants (Huang & Ren, 2022), combined with the development of an increasingly conscious economic model focusing on added values compared to mere growth, referred to as economic upgrading (Shen & Li, 2022). Even so, Shen & Li (2022) emphasize that migrants with lower socioeconomic statuses experience an even more precarious status following this development, as many businesses now have less demand for unskilled labor.

Another subtheme in the literature focuses on the ambitions of *local policy to attract "desirable" migrants* (Shen & Li, 2022; Zhu et al. 2022). For instance,

Zhu et al. (2022) point to strategies of creaming and symbolic public policy, aiming to relabel the attributes of settled migrant workers. The strategy of “creaming” refers to a strict selection of migrants, in which those with desired skills are entitled the same rights as city residents. However, only a few migrants are eligible for such treatment (Zhu et al. 2022). The relabeling of the attributes assigned to the migrant population has resulted in changed perceptions of migrants in China. Zhu et al. (2022) suggest that the focus on deservingness has contributed to a positive change in the public perception of migrants in the last decades, going hand in hand with a more inclusionary policy agenda.

From an empirical perspective, however, Huang & Ren (2022) show that subsidized housing in China has not become more readily available. Yet, even if the subsidized housing schemes focus on a certain group of migrants, Zhu et al. (2019) highlight links within the housing system. The authors argue that local housing programs aiming to urbanize local farmers also promote interregional migration, as the beneficiaries of the program often lease their rural dwellings. By renting rural dwellings, the author argues that the often low-skilled interregional migrants enable further migration for others and contribute to economic growth in a migratory chain, which they argue is an aspect often overlooked in the current public debate (Zhu et al. 2019).

Discussion

In the following sections, we discuss the main findings of the review.

An interdisciplinary field combining data and methods

Our systematic review points out several characteristics of the research field. This field is interdisciplinary and the social sciences as well as the environmental sciences are the disciplines to which studies most often belong. The ES particularly points out a dominance of social sciences in general. The trend is towards an increasing number of publications over the studied years, mostly consisting of scientific articles. Journals within the broad field of geography are specifically important. Hence, it is not the social sciences in general that are essential but social science perspectives in geography, often focused on the area of urban and housing studies. The strong inherent links between the covered references in these fields demonstrate this.

Higher-ranked studies, classified as level 2 according to the Norwegian list, exhibit more robust citation records – aligning with the observed “Matthew effect,” meaning that publications in more prestigious journals or from reputable publishers also tend to garner more attention from scholars (Drivas and Kremmydas 2020).

Analyzing the application of data and methods underscores the field’s versatility. One-quarter of studies in the NS combine both quantitative and qualitative data, showcasing a commitment to diverse research approaches. Even among publications exclusively relying on one type of data, a common thread is the integration of different methods within the same study, a hallmark amplified by the interdisciplinary approach. We consider this as a general strength and something of a trademark for the research that is amplified by its interdisciplinarity.

Analytical differences between explicit policy schemes and indirect effects

The thematic analysis of the field yields intertwined conclusions, distinguishing explicit policy schemes from indirect and unplanned consequences. The material conveys how local governments employ exclusionary practices as gatekeeping mechanisms, regulated by legal frameworks, disproportionately affecting future population regulation (Arroyo, 2021; El-Kayed & Hamann, 2018). Notably, municipalities favoring exclusionary policies often align with the success of right-wing parties (Holmqvist et al. 2022; Walker & Leitner, 2011). These policies, diverging from universal welfare provisions, introduce additional hurdles for vulnerable groups, exacerbating housing challenges. The differentiation in welfare support disproportionately impacts immigrants, echoing discriminatory practices and perpetuating persistent inequalities (McConnell and Miraftab 2009; Skovgaard Nielsen et al. 2015). It is reminiscent of Tilly's (1998) concept of a durable inequality, that is persistent over time and where the lack of the resources associated with housing can have repercussion on access to the provision of other resources.

On the other hand, indirect policy effects, though unintended and with sometimes benevolent motives, can still function as exclusionary mechanisms. The analysis of the literature points out how economic incentives prevail at the expense of other values. Policies designed to foster home ownership (Arbaci 2008; Logan, Fang, and Zhang 2009; Simone and Walks 2019) are typically not intended to complicate the housing situation for the individual, yet they tend to create a dominating policy frame that can suppress options that would otherwise be supportive for those for whom access to home ownership is closed. Similarly, well-intentioned efforts to preserve individual autonomy in residence selection can lead to unintended self-segregation (Rebelo, 2010), contributing to challenging conditions in segregated areas. Thus, a nuanced analysis of these complex policies is crucial to anticipate and mitigate unintended consequences, minimizing exacerbating circumstances.

The occurrence of consistency in outcomes of excluding practices while their conceptualization differs

The literature consistently underscores the detrimental impact of exclusionary policies on migrant groups, evident in diverse contexts such as the USA southern border, Chinese megacities, and old European cities (El-Kayed & Hamann, 2018; Huang & Yi, 2015; Oliveri, 2009). Institutional differences in both housing (Kemeny, 2006) and migration regimes (Hammar, 1985) still create disparities between them, but there is no housing regime that seems immune against these exclusionary policies. Notably, network analysis of keywords reveals geographical variations in conceptualization, with distinct clusters for North American (*urban housing, race*), Chinese (*affordable housing and urbanization*), and West European studies (*neighborhood, segregation, and social housing*).

Despite geographical variations concerning key terms, we argue that similarities across contexts prevail. Studies reveal striking parallels in the consequences of exclusionary policies across different contexts. These policies result in enduring segregation effects, reduced property values, and limited support for migrants in various regions. Oliveri (2009) demonstrates this in USA border regions, and

Huang & Yi (2015) uncover similar effects in China, where government regulations lead to higher costs and less affordable housing for migrants. Similarly, Münch (2009) underscores parallel outcomes of differential policies in Europe. This consistency of consequences across geographical and cultural contexts underlines the universality of the issues involved, and imply that processes of diffusion, whereby societies learn from and imitate each other (Rogers, Singahl, and Quinlan 2008).

Profound tensions between individual responsibility and societal obligations

Our review also points to significant tensions between individual responsibilities and societal obligations in providing housing and fundamental human rights (Kandylis and Maloutas 2017; Liu, Li, and Greene 2020). While societies generally acknowledge the state's responsibility in this regard, economic constraints, desires, and broader societal goals often clash with this commitment. Variations exist in how societies allocate responsibilities – with some imposing demanding expectations on citizens, together with policies acting as tools to exclude or to create obstacles for immigrants, effectively shifting a substantial burden onto them as individuals through profit- and market-oriented housing policies. Something that can be related to the dominant perspective of financialization (Simone & Walks, 2019). The intricate governance of this policy area further influences this delicate balance (Eckardt, 2018).

For example, one study reveals the profound impact of the absence of formal employment contracts among refugees, emphasizing individual responsibility in the absence of comprehensive societal interventions (Brown *et al.* 2022). Similarly, laissez-faire approaches serve as poignant examples of how policy decisions can have substantial consequences for those in need of housing, showcasing the government's societal obligation and its effect on individual responsibility (Kandylis and Maloutas 2017). The literature paints a complex picture of challenges and nuances in individual and societal roles in ensuring housing access, emphasizing the necessity for a comprehensive, context-specific approach. It also contributes to the ongoing debate on the shift from previous public responsibilities to increased reliance on the individual (Mounk 2017).

Conclusions and directions for further research

Housing, as a fundamental human right, is an aspect of human life that significantly influences access to resource and to wealth distribution (DeLuca & Rosen, 2022), and for which local governments are active policymakers (Hananel 2014; Maclennan and O'Sullivan 2013). This study is motivated by understanding how housing provision shapes the overall distribution of wealth, particularly through its role as a gatekeeper for vulnerable groups like immigrants.

The research field is growing, led by a few important journals, and it is characterized by publications that often combine different types of data and methods. Our thematic analysis highlights consistency in the detrimental effects of planned or unintended exclusionary policies across different geographical contexts and housing regimes. Thus, even if our review scopes across very different housing

markets and regimes, gatekeeping mechanisms are present with similar consequences. The analysis underscores the conflict between individual responsibilities and societal obligations, where current policies tend to place substantial burdens on the individual.

In addition to the analyzed publications' explicit content, it is crucial to address the lacunae within the reviewed literature. First, there is a notable absence of studies directly covering mechanisms that overtly discriminate based on visible external attributes. When discussed, this aspect is often framed as a potential indirect consequence of grassroots bureaucrats' interpretation of policies, rather than being explicitly addressed (Sala Pala 2010). Second, geographically, research from specific regions such as Asia (beyond China), South America, and Africa is limited. Third, absent in the current research are also contributions covering the political dimensions of understanding local policymaking. Local policies on housing production and zoning could, for example, be of interest to future studies on local policymaking that contributes to the gatekeeping of local communities. With some exceptions (Holmqvist et al. 2022; Walker & Leitner, 2011), the ways in which partisan motives drive the gatekeeping of local housing policies are generally not investigated.

We see significant potential to build upon the groundwork laid out in this study. We identify a pressing need for research that rigorously and explicitly probes the underlying rationales behind housing policies, irrespective of their political and geographical contexts. This approach would serve as means to bridge the chasms between diverse geographical and cultural spheres, fostering a more holistic comprehension of the field and facilitating the transferability of insights across nations and contexts.

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