


Public housing in Australia: A case of advanced urban marginality?

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Abstract

The decision in the early 1990s to cut back on the building of public housing intensified the already dire shortage of affordable housing and increased the marginalisation of the sector. To be eligible for public housing, new entrants usually have to be in ‘greatest need’. This study argues that the shift in the eligibility criteria for accessing public housing means that public housing estates increasingly reflect what Loïc Wacquant calls ‘advanced urban marginality’. The article assesses whether the features of advanced urban marginality that are identified by Wacquant capture and can be usefully used to analyse the shifts and contemporary characteristics of public housing. The article draws on existing data and in-depth interviews with 33 older (aged more than 65 years) public housing tenants in Sydney, Australia, to analyse the residualisation of public housing using the features of advanced marginality identified by Wacquant – ‘wage labour as a vector of social instability and life insecurity’, ‘functional disconnection from macroeconomic trends’, ‘territorial fixation and stigmatisation’, ‘spatial alienation and the dissolution of place’, ‘loss of hinterland’ and ‘social fragmentation and symbolic splintering’. The study concludes that although Wacquant’s analysis is useful and captures much of what has occurred in public housing estates in Sydney, in many instances, public housing remains a source of pride for its tenants and provides them with the basis for a good life.

JEL Codes: I14, I38, J14

Keywords

Advanced urban marginality, anti-social behaviour, greatest need, older tenants, public housing, residualisation

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Introduction

The article draws on Loïc Wacquant's analysis of 'neighbourhoods of relegation' in Chicago and Paris and his concept of 'advanced urban marginality' to analyse the changing composition of public housing in Australia. The article assesses whether the features of advanced urban marginality that are identified by Wacquant capture and can be fruitfully used to analyse the shifts and contemporary characteristics of public housing. Wacquant argues that a new regime of spatialised poverty has developed in advanced cities since the demise of the Fordist–Keynesian compact (Wacquant, 2008, 2010). The communal black ghetto in the United States and many of the traditional working-class neighbourhoods in Western Europe have been superseded and are characterised by advanced urban marginality. He identifies six key features of advanced urban marginality – 'wage labour as a vector of social instability and life insecurity', 'functional disconnection from macroeconomic trends', 'territorial fixation and stigmatisation', 'spatial alienation and the dissolution of place', 'loss of hinterland' and 'social fragmentation and symbolic splintering' (Wacquant, 2008). Wacquant proposes that these properties can serve as empirical benchmarks for comparing urban dispossession across time and space. Furthermore, they can be used to highlight the role of the state in the production of marginality. These properties are discussed in turn to analyse the changing social composition of public housing estates in Australia, focusing mainly on Sydney. What is argued is that Wacquant's analysis does capture, to a large extent, the changing nature of public housing in Australia. However, the features that define advanced urban marginality are unevenly spread and are dissipated by government income support, longevity of residence and social connections. Prior to assessing the usefulness of Wacquant's framework for analysing public housing, the policy processes that encouraged the residualisation of public housing in Australia are sketched.

Policy and the residualisation of public housing in Australia

Although public housing in Australia has never constituted more than 6% of the housing stock, historically, it has played a crucial role in the housing of low-income families, who have not had the financial capacity to purchase their own homes or rent in the private rental market (Troy, 2012). From its inception in 1945, public housing was restricted to low-income families, and up to the 1980s, most public housing households had at least one employed adult, and the majority were occupied by couples or nuclear families (Hayward, 1996). In 1984, the Labor Party's Platform Constitution stated that all households have the right to affordable and adequate housing and the 'public housing sector should be developed as a viable and positive housing sector for the community' (Troy, 2012: 192). Between 1985 and 1995, there was a substantial endeavour by the Labor government to increase the supply of public housing, and about 140,000 homes were built in this period so that by the mid-1990s, there were just fewer than 390,000 dwellings (McIntosh, 1997; Troy, 2012).

The late 1980s heralded a fundamental shift in government policy. The failure to make a substantial dent in the public housing waiting list despite the substantial

building programme (in 1984, there were 140,684 people on the waiting list; in 1988, 198,063 people and in 1993, 232,208 people), fuelled the argument that a better solution to the housing affordability crisis facing a substantial proportion of low-income households was to facilitate their entry into the private rental market (McIntosh, 1997). The number of new public houses built contracted and the Commonwealth Rental Assistance scheme grew considerably (Troy, 2012). Commonwealth Rental Assistance allows individuals and couples who are dependent on income support from government to claim rent assistance if they are renting in the private rental market. From the early 1990s, the rent assistance that could be claimed increased substantially as did the number of people eligible. The number of Commonwealth Rent Assistance recipients increased from 685,000 in 1989–1990 to about 970,000 in 1993–1994, equivalent to about 1 in 18 Australians (Wilkinson, 2005). In 1995, in his last year in office, the then Labor Party prime minister, Paul Keating, summed up this new approach when he stated that the government's policy should be to 'reduce public housing waiting lists by improving the scope for people to choose private rental accommodation' (Wilkinson, 2005: 25).

The budget for Commonwealth Rent Assistance increased from just under AUD\$500m in 1985–1986 to over AUD\$1.5b in 1993–1994. In the same period, funding for public housing was slashed, declining from AUD\$2.5b to about AUD\$1.5b (dollar amounts are constant AUD\$2000; Johnston, 2002). By the mid-1990s, expenditure on Commonwealth Rent Assistance 'increased from approximately one quarter of CSHA [public housing] expenditure in 1984–85 to approximately one and a half times the expenditure on CSHA by 1994–95' (McIntosh and Phillips, 2001).

The triumph of the conservative Coalition government in 1996 accelerated the decline of public housing. In the 10 years, from 1993–1994 to 2003–2004, federal government spending on public housing decreased by 54% in real terms from AUD\$2.797b in 1993–1994 to AUD\$1.284b in 2003–2004 (2003\$), while in the same period, the amount allocated for rent assistance increased by 7% in real terms from AUD\$1.79b to AUD\$1.922b (National Shelter and Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS), 2003: 7). The public housing stock declined from just under 389,000 dwellings in June 1995 to 335,000 in June 2005 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2005; McIntosh, 1997; Troy, 2012). Even if we take community housing (housing subsidised by government but managed by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) rather than State Housing Authorities) into account, one estimate is that social housing (public and community housing) dropped by almost 9% between 2000/2001 and 2004/2005 (Hall and Berry, 2007: 12). By 2010, social housing accounted for only 4.5% of the total housing stock (Jacobs et al., 2010).

In 2008, there was a temporary boost to public housing. In response to the global financial crisis AUD\$6.3b was budgeted to construct 19,300 public housing dwellings. This was a welcome policy shift (the programme has now ended), but it only made a slight dent on the waiting list for public housing; in June 2010, there were 210,000 people on the waiting list, of whom 64,000 were classified as being in 'greatest need' (AIHW, 2011). An unspecified number of applicants had given up and dropped off the waiting list.

Difficulty accessing public housing and the changing tenant composition

The decline in the supply of public housing has made it exceptionally difficult to access this housing tenure. It is now restricted to people who are assessed to be in 'greatest need' (Atkinson et al., 2007; Jacobs et al., 2010). Housing New South Wales, the largest state housing authority in Australia, has explicitly described the shift in its eligibility policy and the resultant change in the social composition of its public housing tenants:

The NSW public housing system has gradually changed its role. It is no longer a general provider of housing to low income working families as it was in post war [World War 2] Australia. Public housing has increasingly had to focus on those in greatest need – predominantly people dependent on social security payments ... In the early 1970s over 70 per cent of applicants for public housing were couples with children, 17 per cent were married couples and 12 per cent were elderly singles. Sole parents and single people were predominantly ineligible for public housing. Today, over a third of applicants are single, another third are single parents and only 11 per cent are couples with children. Over a quarter of our subsidised tenants are on the disability support pension, and nearly a third of household heads are over 65 years of age. (New South Wales (NSW) Government, 2005)

A recent report based on an inquiry into public housing in Victoria, Australia's second most populous state, highlighted the intensification of disadvantage among public housing tenants:

Since the mid-1990s, governments across Australia have responded to the gap between supply and demand for public housing by targeting access according to people's needs ... These policy changes have resulted in a gradual change in the tenant profile. With increasing numbers of allocations based on tenants' housing and special needs, people living in public housing have increasingly experienced homelessness, mental illness, disability, family violence and alcohol and/or drug dependence. (Parliament of Victoria, 2010: 17)

Nationally, in June 2009, 50.6% of public housing households were constituted by a single adult, 18.8% were single parent households, 9.1% were couple only and 6.7% were couples with children (AIHW, 2010). With each passing year, the population of public housing has become more marginal. Nationwide in 2009/2010, 75% of newly assisted public housing tenants were those in 'greatest need' compared to 51% in 2007/2008 and 42% in 2006/2007 (AIHW, 2008, 2011). The end result of this allocation policy is that a significant proportion of more recent public housing tenants are severely disadvantaged – unemployed, poor, socially excluded and with little prospect of mobility (Jacobs and Arthurson, 2003; Palmer et al., 2004, 2005). Their disadvantage is often compounded by physical and/or psychiatric disabilities. The question that is addressed in the remainder of the article is to what extent does public housing now reflect the features of advanced urban marginality identified by Wacquant?

Methodology

Besides relevant statistical data, this article draws on data from 31 semi-structured interviews including two couples, making a total of 33 interviewees. All the interviewees were dependent on the age pension and resident in Sydney. The interviewees are profiled in Table 1.

Fourteen interviewees were between 65 and 70 years of age, 8 between 71 and 75 years of age and 11 between 76 and 85 years of age. Nine were male and 24 female.

Table 1. Profile of public housing tenants interviewed.

Interviewee	Sex	Age (years)	Number of years in current accommodation	Marital status	Location
1	F	68	16	Widowed	Inner ring
2	F	84	27	Widowed	Inner ring
3	F	68	20	Divorced	Inner ring
4	F	72	19	Widowed	Inner ring
5	F	70	40	Widowed	Inner ring
6	F	70	26	Never married	Inner ring
7	F	70	24	Divorced	Inner ring
8	F	85	27	Widowed	Inner ring
9	M	72	21	Never married	Inner ring
10	F	85	46	Widowed	Inner ring
11	F	68	16	Widowed	Inner ring
12	F	70	23	Divorced	Inner ring
13	M	75	18	Divorced	Inner ring
14	F	71	20	Widowed	Inner ring
15	M	70	9	Widowed	Inner ring
16	M	68	12	Divorced	Inner ring
17/18	Couple	75/80	12	Married	Inner ring
19	F	77	21	Widow	Inner ring
20	F	77	17	Married	Inner ring
21	F	75	10	Married	Inner ring
22/23	Couple	76/81	18	Married	Inner ring
24	F	75	35	Widow	Outer ring
25	F	75	3	Widow	Outer ring
26	F	70	2	Widow	Outer ring
27	M	70	3	Widow	Outer ring
28	F	70	13	Widow	Outer ring
29	F	68	20	Widow	Outer ring
30	M	76	11	Widow	Outer ring
31	F	78	8	Widow	Outer ring
32	M	75	41	Widow	Outer ring
33	F	68	15	Widow	Outer ring

M: male; F: female.

Longevity of residence was common – only 5 had been in public housing for less than 10 years, 9 had been in public housing for 10–19 years and 14 for 20 years or more. They were purposively selected on the basis of their age and housing tenure. Ten interviewees resided in the Mount Druitt area in the outer west about 40 km from the Central Business District (CBD), and the remainder resided in Sydney's inner-city neighbourhoods.

Interviewees were recruited through advertisements placed on appropriate notice boards, organisations catering to seniors, advertisements in seniors' publications and through word of mouth. The focus was on older tenants as this study is part of a broader study on the impact of housing tenure on older people. Moreover, many of the interviewees were long-term tenants and thus had an historical perspective and were able to comment on the shift in tenant composition.

In the rest of the article, experiences reported by the 33 interview participants are organised thematically according to whether they illuminate elements of Wacquant's typology of 'neighbourhoods of relegation'. In the interview quotations, all names used are pseudonyms.

'Wage labour as a vector of social instability and life insecurity'

Wacquant argues that in advanced economies during the Fordist phase, 'wage labour tended to homogenise the workforce', and employment provided security and solidarity for the working class (Wacquant, 2008: 267). However, in the present period of what Wacquant calls 'desocialised wage labour', employment 'no longer provides a common temporal and social framework', rather it is a 'source of social fragmentation and precariousness for those confined to the border zones of the employment sphere' (Wacquant, 2008: 234). This certainly captures the status of the majority of public housing tenants of working age. The majority are either jobless or in casual, intermittent and precarious employment. Those who are employed are, in the main, confined to the 'border zones of the employment sphere'. Between 1981 and 2001, the number of jobless households in public housing increased from 43% to 66% and the number of disability support pensioners from 8% to 26% (Hughes, 2006). By 2009–2010, 40% of the residents were dependent on a disability support pension (AIHW, 2011). For those residents who are employed, the data suggest that the majority are in precarious employment. This is partially indicated by the high proportion of public housing tenants in part-time employment or looking for work. In August–September 2010, less than half of public housing tenants were in the workforce. Only 15.8% were employed full-time, while 17.3% were employed part-time. A further 15.2% had been looking for work in the past 4 weeks (AIHW, 2012).

The older public housing tenants interviewed were acutely aware of the changing status of public housing tenants and their position in the labour market. They had all lived through the Fordist era of substantial job security, high levels of unionisation and near full-employment. The crucial shift commented on was that historically, nuclear families were dominant and most of the men were employed in stable, albeit low-paid jobs, whereas in the contemporary period, most tenants are unemployed and a proportion engage in anti-social behaviour (Dalton and Rowe, 2004; Palmer et al., 2004, 2005). A key descriptor used by the

interviewees to describe new residents was that many have ‘problems’. A tenant, who has lived in public housing for over 30 years, summed up the change:

Around where I live it’s not only elderly people that are accommodated. We have a lot of people with problems ... When I first came here it was more for low-income earners ... My husband was still working and my son was still at home doing an apprenticeship. There were a lot of people like that. (Daisy, 70 years)

Another long-time resident had a similar analysis:

It used to be working families or older residents whose families have grown up, but nowadays it’s people with special needs. It’s families with problems, or singles with problems, or single mothers with problems. Alcoholism, drugs, disabilities, mental health is a really big problem. Public housing ... was increasingly being used to house people with serious mental health problems ... The requirements to be ... eligible for public housing now are very strict. Low income is not enough. You have to have other needs as well and so you’re getting more and more problem tenants. (Debbie, 72 years)

A major concern for many of the interviewees was the placing of people with serious mental health issues and/or substance abuse problems in public housing with minimal or no support. In NSW, the Richmond Report (1983) recommended the shutting down of most psychiatric hospitals and emphasised that people with psychiatric disabilities be supported in the community. In the last two decades, most psychiatric hospitals have been closed, and an increasing number of people with psychiatric disabilities have been placed in public housing. Jim (72 years), who was very active in the local Tenants’ Association and had been in public housing for 21 years, had the following observation:

Since the Richmond Report, I think there’s been a downward trend because see now there’s nowhere for the people to go ... So what they’re doing they’re putting the majority of them [sic] into public housing and there’s no social equilibrium as such ... People with the drug problem they need rehabilitation as well you know which they’re not getting. So they just wander around aimlessly ...

It does appear that for the majority of public housing tenants who were in the workforce, wage labour was a ‘vector of social instability and life insecurity’. However, perhaps more significantly, for most public housing tenants, wage labour was not a possibility. This is elaborated in the following section.

‘Functional disconnection from macroeconomic trends’

Whereas previously unemployment was a function of cyclical shifts in the economy, Wacquant concludes that in the contemporary period, for a proportion of the population and neighbourhoods, a strong economy does not necessarily have much impact on their situation, but an economic slowdown worsens an already dire situation and increases the gap between ‘neighbourhoods of relegation’ and the rest of the city. Thus, with regard to

households in neighbourhoods characterised by advanced marginality, Wacquant (2008) concludes,

Social conditions and life chances changed very little, if at all, during the boom years of the 1980s and the second half of the 1990s, but they worsened noticeably during phases of slowdown and recession. (p. 236)

This is true of Australia's public housing estates where the proportion of tenants that are unemployed in the labour market has continued to rise despite constant economic growth since the early 1990s. In 2001, 75% of public housing tenants were not in the labour market; only 16% were employed and 8% were actively looking for work (Hughes, 2006). In 2006, despite more than a decade of strong economic growth, the position of public housing tenants had barely improved. Atkinson and Jacobs (2008) estimate that in 2006, only 26% of public housing tenants were employed compared to 46% of home owners, 77% of home purchasers and 65% of private renters. Approximately 62% of public housing tenants were not in the labour market. If we focus only on the 18- to 64-year-old age group, in 2007–2008, 51.6% of men in public housing aged between 18 and 64 years were not in the workforce compared to 12.4% of men in this age group who were not resident in public housing. The figure for women in public housing was even more alarming – 64% of female public housing tenants aged between 18 and 64 years were not in the labour force, compared to 26.2% of women in this age group not resident in public housing (Saugeres and Hulse, 2010).

The disconnection of public housing tenants from macroeconomic trends has certainly been accentuated by the changing composition of the tenant population. Whatever the economic conditions, for a substantial proportion of working-age tenants who have accessed public housing over the last decade, the possibility of obtaining formal employment appears negligible. Many have little or no formal training, have physical and/or psychiatric disabilities, have been dependent on government benefits for an extended period and have little or no support from family. Weaker economic conditions would make the slim possibility of formal employment even more remote.

'Territorial fixation and stigmatisation'

In the contemporary period, Wacquant argues that advanced urban marginality is concentrated in certain neighbourhoods and a stigma of place coalesces. These areas are 'perceived by both outsiders and insiders as social purgatories, leprous badlands at the heart of post-industrial metropolis where only the refuse of society would agree to dwell' (Wacquant, 2008: 237). Territorial stigmatisation also frays the local social fabric and encourages 'the rasping of interpersonal ties' (Wacquant, 2010: 215). As indicated, public housing is now reserved primarily for individuals in greatest need. A proportion of these new tenants do participate in anti-social behaviour – excessive noise, vandalism, drug use and dealing and inappropriate interaction were the ones most often mentioned by interviewees. This anti-social behaviour, if pervasive, can encourage stigmatisation and avoidance of the housing estates concerned (Arthurson and Jacobs, 2006; Palmer

et al., 2005). They are presented as dysfunctional and dangerous spaces that are to be avoided if at all possible.

A few of the interviewees had an extremely negative view of their housing complex and felt constantly threatened and anxious about some of their fellow tenants. Mavis (72 years) who lives in an inner-city neighbourhood, painted a bleak picture:

I haven't got very good neighbours and it's not a happy place. There's six floors and I'm on the fifth floor and ... they fight all the time; throw their furniture over the balcony ... How would you like to be in bed and at one o'clock in the morning, someone starts throwing the furniture over the balcony from the next floor and half of it lands on your balcony ... That's very scary.

Jane (68 years) lived in the same neighbourhood as Mavis. She had a similar narrative:

It's frightening at times; very frightening to go outside, either day or night ... And I mean to the extent that you know there's been so many problems that they have had to put cameras ... in the lifts and at the front of the building ... Now before I get in that lift I make sure that someone I know is in there or you know otherwise I don't get in.

These interviewees spoke of how the reputation of the complex meant that their families and friends refuse to come and visit them:

It's got such a bad reputation, the place now, that you know like my relatives and that, they don't like to come now because there's graffiti everywhere and we've got damage to property all the time and it means that a lot of people don't want to come here and even I suppose myself [don't want to be here]. That's why I come down here [the community centre] ... I'm down here [at the local community centre in a nearby neighbourhood] five days a week. (Mavis, 72 years)

Jane and Mavis live in a neighbourhood that is particularly disadvantaged and where disorderly behaviour in some public housing blocks is a major problem. Interviewees in other public housing estates had far more positive perceptions of their housing complex and immediate neighbourhood.

An 85-year-old tenant who has been living in the same public housing unit for 46 years, vigorously defended her housing complex. She lives in a modernist high-density public housing estate of over 500 units in Sydney's inner city:

There a lot of good people living here but they never get a mention. They're very, very good people. They mind their own business and we have a talk and we all go shopping, but you don't hear that. You don't hear the good things. You don't hear what they do at the [community] centre. They give ... people that come a cup of coffee and they'll give them something to eat. You don't hear that on television. All you hear on television is people jumping over balconies and drug addicts and what goes on here – the fights and everything. You never hear the good nice things ... (Helen, 85 years)

Helen points to a significant issue – the creation of a stigmatising narrative by the mass media and policymakers of public housing tenants. There is a tendency to portray public

housing tenants and spaces as dysfunctional. In his study of narratives around public housing tenants in Queensland, Marston (2000) concludes,

With the assistance of the mass media, tenants are constructed in behavioural terms as undeserving 'layabouts'. The state government's housing 'reform' policies construct 'bad tenants' as the problem, while simultaneously promoting tighter eligibility and private sector management practices as the solution. (p. 366)

In a study of the discourse surrounding the justification of social mix, Darcy (2010) illustrates how the NSW Department of Housing implicitly depicts public housing areas as dysfunctional due to the concentration of public housing tenants.

What the interviews suggest is that the broad stroke media portrayals of public housing complexes as overwhelmingly dysfunctional fail to capture the rich sense of place that often prevails.

'Spatial alienation and the dissolution of place'

This process involves residents losing their affinity with a place. A neighbourhood that historically was viewed as homely and a safe refuge of 'shared meaning' becomes a locality brimming with fear and alienation. Wacquant (2008) states that in the contemporary period, many neighbourhoods

have been gradually reduced from communal 'places' bathed in shared emotions and joint meanings, supported by practices and institutions of mutuality, to indifferent 'spaces' of mere survival and relentless contest. (p. 241)

There are public housing estates in Australia that have moved from places to spaces (Bessant et al., 2003; Digney, 1999). A few of the interviewees viewed their public housing complex as places that had become 'indifferent spaces'. Substance abuse and drug dealing by tenants are often major factors precipitating this change. Disorderly and anti-social behaviour by some residual tenants was viewed as a serious issue by some interviewees. Bella (75 years) lives in a particularly disadvantaged inner-city neighbourhood:

You wouldn't run out and buy a place in it ... It's well, where do you start ... There's so many drug addicts and drunks and the people you know swear non-stop. They use the foulest language which doesn't go down terribly well. They're, I guess, they're a very anti-social lot of people. Rules are made to be broken around our way I'm afraid.

Mavis had a similar perception. The constant movement of tenants means she has little or no knowledge of her fellow residents, and she is fearful of some of the more recent arrivals:

Well, as I said, it's scary. People come and go in Housing Commission [public housing] and you don't know who you've got. And now I've got this neighbour who is causing the trouble, but you don't know who the others are. And they come and go all the time. You wouldn't know your neighbour. In the old days you did, but not now. (Mavis, 72 years)

However, despite increasing dysfunctionality in their surrounds, most of the older public housing tenants interviewed had a strong sense of place. Many have been in their current accommodation for many years, feel comfortable and at home, and have no desire to move. A common phrase was ‘You would have to carry me out in a box’. Their long residential histories mean that they have been able to form trusting and close relationships with fellow residents. A male tenant of a large high-density inner-city housing complex told of how older neighbours relied on him. The quote displays the trust between long-standing tenants:

I have neighbours come to me and ask, ‘Can I mind their house keys’, and I do this for them, do that for them. I’ve got another neighbour over in the other block. She’s currently in hospital ... I’ve been collecting her mail and just making sure that her flat’s okay ... I’m like an uncertified social worker ... I’ve told them, ‘You’re welcome, if it’s a serious issue, to knock on my door any time of day or night’. (Jim, 72 years)

The sense of neighbourliness is echoed in public housing estates on the outskirts of Sydney. Length of residence and the high concentration of older tenants encourage strong social ties. Interviewees can walk to their friends, and there are public spaces close to their homes where they can meet:

Well, it’s a kind of a community. Like we all know each other, because we are all around the same age. We can sit around and have a chat with each other. You see the benches out there under the trees? ... Often we just sit out there and have a yarn with each other. Sometimes ... we just drop by each other’s place and have a yarn ... This community room gets used quite a bit ... It’s like a little community here ... Most of us have been here for a while so we all know each other. (Beth, 70 years)

The interviews suggest that for some interviewees, and in some public housing complexes, there has been dissolution of place as described by Wacquant. Nevertheless, other interviewees live in complexes that for various reasons have facilitated the creation of rich spaces. In these complexes, interviewees have constant and dense social contacts and a strong sense of place.

‘Loss of hinterland’

Drawing on classic studies of working-class community in earlier periods, Wacquant argues that in the past, individuals who lost their jobs could seek sanctuary in their neighbourhood. Fellow residents would look after the unemployed person until they re-entered the labour market, and often they would be able to assist them in their quest to find employment. In the contemporary phase of advanced urban marginality, Wacquant (2008) concludes that this is no longer likely:

Individuals durably excluded from paid employment in neighbourhoods of relegation cannot readily rely on collective informal support while they wait for new work which, moreover, may well never come or come only in the guise of insecure and intermittent sub-employment. (p. 244)

The labour market participation data on public housing tenants do suggest that many public housing residents have little or no chance of re-entering the labour market. Many of the more recent arrivals in public housing have permanently left the world of work or were never in it, and most have been dependent on social security for an extended period (AIHW, 2010). As one interviewee observed when reflecting on the more recent entrants into public housing, 'They are mostly young and jobless'. It is highly unlikely that these residents would be able to garner support from fellow tenants. Fellow residents would certainly not have the financial resources.

It is likely that a proportion of public housing residents is isolated and has little or no support base. This is probably most likely in the case of the younger single-person households. However, with regard to support, the situation is certainly not totally bleak. As illustrated, among the older public housing tenants interviewed, there is a good deal of mutual assistance and support. Betty (76 years), a Mount Druitt resident, commented, 'Every one is very caring. We all check on each other's health and how we are doing. I wouldn't want to change anything in my life now'. The government age pension and the affordable rent allow these residents to lead an active albeit frugal life.

'Social fragmentation and symbolic splintering'

In the contemporary period, Wacquant contends that the working class becomes fractured, and its ability to mobilise using the traditional working-class discourse, utilising class and trade unionism, is severely weakened. There is

class decomposition rather than class consolidation ... Those who are subjected to its tropism and caught in its swirl therefore find themselves disconnected from the traditional instruments of mobilization and representation of constituted groups and, as a consequence, deprived of a language, a repertoire of shared images and signs through which to conceive a collective destiny and to project possible alternative futures. (Wacquant, 2008: 244–245)

This was not tested empirically, and it is difficult to reach a definitive conclusion, but certainly, the lack of any substantial link with the labour market means that most contemporary public housing tenants have little or no notion of a class identity, and there is a good deal of fragmentation. Many of the interviewees, especially those in the inner-city neighbourhoods, view younger residents, especially single men, as threatening and not trustworthy. The lack of a class identity is accentuated by the dominant discourse emphasising social exclusion rather than class.

Policy issues emerging

The findings suggest that the implications of advanced urban marginality for public housing are significant. Although public housing is now geared towards accommodating people in 'greatest need', there has been minimal discussion in Australia of the implications and how people in public housing are to be supported (Atkinson et al., 2007; Jacobs et al., 2010). The role of the State Housing Authorities has been extended, and they are now expected to 'build social cohesion and improve community wellbeing' (NSW

Government, 2011). This is usually done by sub-contracting the role to a non-profit organisation. Thus, in NSW, there is a 'Housing Communities Program', and relevant organisations are invited to apply for monies from Housing NSW to be used to employ people whose primary role is to develop programmes to enhance social cohesion and well-being. The State Housing Authority, through sub-contracting NGOs and together with the 'respectable' tenants, is thus expected to govern 'problematic populations' (Flint, 2006). However, what the research suggests is that there is a fundamental flaw in this approach. By cutting down on the provision of public housing and ensuring that most of the new tenants are people in greatest need, the capacity of the contracted NGO to make a significant difference is limited. The task is simply too great. The end result is that most public housing tenants are left to fend for themselves all or a good deal of the time, despite often requiring substantial support.

The data suggest that there is a need for a substantial expansion in numbers of support workers. A possible model is the first stage of The Mental Health Housing and Accommodation Support Initiative (HASI) for people with mental illness. HASI was an expensive but highly effective intervention (Muir et al., 2008). The gist of the HASI initiative was that people with serious mental health problems were placed in public or community housing with extensive support; for every two clients, there was a full-time support worker. The intensive support meant that many HASI clients made substantial progress over time (Muir et al., 2008).

Often the most valuable support for vulnerable tenants is provided by neighbours. As indicated, despite increasing residualisation, in many public housing complexes, there are strong social networks and residents do 'look out' for their fellow residents (Morris, 2012). Another policy response could involve a major endeavour to increase the capacity of public housing residents to organise and encourage social cohesion within their complexes. Housing NSW has introduced a number of community initiatives, and in 2008, it set up a Social Housing Tenants' Advisory Committee 'to provide feedback and comment to Housing NSW on matters that help to improve policies, operations and service delivery for the benefit of social housing tenants' (NSW Government, 2012). Residualisation and tenant turnover make it challenging to sustain cohesion and tenant initiatives. What is required is a substantial expansion of the number of community workers employed and for these workers to have the requisite resources to put community building programmes in place.

A costly and questionable policy response by governments, driven by perceived advanced urban marginality, has been the policy of 'social mix'. The policy, premised on the notion that moving owner-occupiers into neighbourhoods that were previously dominated by public housing tenants will dissipate the 'problematic populations' associated with public housing, has been the subject of much debate. The evidence suggests that enforced social mix is not necessarily a 'solution' (Arthurson, 2010; Bond et al., 2011; Darcy, 2010; Morris et al., 2012). A review of the research on social mix concluded that

in neighbourhoods where deliberate government intervention has resulted in social mix, the positive effects are usually limited to the physical urban and housing renewal aspects. Social ties for the most part remain bounded, there is not necessarily an increase in employment opportunities and the intervention can result in close friendship and kinship connections being seriously disrupted. (Morris et al., 2012: 11–12)

Another policy response has been to steadily shift the ownership and administration of public housing to community housing providers managed by NGOs. It is projected that by 2014 about 35% of public housing will be under the control of the not-for-profit sector rather than state governments (Australian Government, 2010). The latter is presented as a more flexible and responsive housing provider manager. However, there is the possibility that in the future, community housing providers could be less willing to accommodate people in 'greatest need', and their capacity to support these tenants may be even less than that of the State Housing Authorities (Jacobs et al., 2010).

Conclusion

The article has set out to examine whether the features that Wacquant identifies as constituting advanced urban marginality reflect contemporary public housing in Australia. The evidence presented suggests that Wacquant's analysis is useful but is not the whole story. Public housing is the place of residence for the most marginalised sections of the housed population. Many tenants are poor and disadvantaged, have minimal skills, often have mental and or physical health issues and negligible or no prospect of finding employment. The more able and functional public housing residents are expected to cope with challenging and unpredictable neighbours. A section of these more recent tenants do not subscribe to what Rose (2001) has called the 'grammars of living', which broadly prescribes what is acceptable behaviour. Many of the older tenants interviewed felt that their public housing complexes had changed fundamentally. A common complaint was that a proportion of the newer tenants required support but were placed in public housing with minimal or no assistance and that this was an unfair imposition on other residents, many of whom had been in public housing for a considerable period of time and were content and proud public housing tenants. Interviewees were seriously aggrieved by the settlement of tenants who did not respect them or their housing complex. However, nearly all the interviewees had developed ways of managing the situation, and in most cases, their everyday lives during daylight hours were not dramatically affected. Moreover, even within the same housing complex, interviewees were in different situations and had varied experiences. Thus, some of the interviewees had difficult neighbours who engaged in disorderly behaviour on a regular basis and undermined the quality of life of nearby tenants, while others had concerned and generous neighbours who they could usually rely on.

By making public housing a scarce resource and thereby limiting its access mainly to citizens who are victims of advanced urban marginality, government is perpetuating and intensifying public housing's stigmatised and excluded status. Ideally, what is required is a major expansion of affordable housing so that all citizens have the capacity to access decent, affordable and secure housing.

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