



# RESEARCH BRIEF

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## Policy solutions to social housing stigmatisation in Aotearoa

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### Executive Summary

This policy brief discusses social housing stigmatisation as a process and experience that has detrimental effects on social housing tenants. The brief also highlights the role social housing policy must play in addressing stigmatisation, thereby, ensuring the wellbeing and community inclusion of social housing residents. The discussion and recommendations in this brief are based on a review of evidence for the WERO (Working to End Racial Oppression) research project, examining how neighbours' perceptions as well as policies and practices of social housing provision impact social housing tenants' experiences of wellbeing and neighbourhood inclusion.

Stigmatisation is based on negative perceptions of social housing tenants' behaviour and spaces, but evidence shows that stigmatisation is directly linked to social housing policies. Policy approaches that favour disinvestment are associated with an undersupply of social housing and rising housing insecurity, poor housing design and quality, the material degradation of dwellings over time, and insufficient support mechanisms for residents. International evidence shows that residualising social housing (i.e., only providing housing to those with the most complex and urgent need), as well as disinvestment, exacerbate stigmatisation.

Because stigmatisation reinforces the idea that social housing residents are problematic, social housing policy approaches largely aim at changing people's behaviour. In Aotearoa, the recent directive to abolish the Sustainable Tenancies Framework is exemplary of a punitive model of threatening to evict residents for poor behaviour. Similarly, mixed tenure housing developments, designed to break up ostensibly problematic spatial concentrations of low-income households, have become a popular model to encourage behaviour change.

Instead, adequate investment, effective housing management and support, alongside planning and design principles for housing that respond to the specific cultural needs of diverse groups are key to addressing stigmatisation and enhancing outcomes for social housing residents. These outcomes include housing security and stability but also extend to improved health, education, employment, and social wellbeing outcomes.

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*Research undertaken within the WERO: Working to End Racial Oppression research programme has been developed in relation to the Takarangi framework. The Takarangi is a double spiral pattern prominent in Māori carving that is also depicted in the background of this brief. In WERO, the Takarangi framework has shaped our work on the values and ethics of all research that we undertake to address racism. Further information on the Takarangi is available online: <https://wero.ac.nz/research/takarangi-wero-values-and-roadmap/>*

While stigmatisation affects all social housing residents in Aotearoa, Māori experience higher levels of housing insecurity and are subject to higher levels of stereotyping and stigmatisation related to poor housing and neighbourhood deprivation. This finding has implications for the Crown's obligations under te Tiriti o Waitangi to provide housing and support equitable housing outcomes and any recommendations to reduce the state's role in the provision of social housing should be considered in this context.

## Introduction

This brief is part of the research programme Working to End Racial Oppression (WERO). A key aim of one WERO project is to examine social housing tenant inclusion in neighbourhoods in relation to neighbours' perceptions and the role social housing provision plays in tenant wellbeing and community inclusion. While there is no clear consensus about the meaning of terms such as wellbeing and community inclusion (Ministry of Social Development, 2020), in this brief, we regard wellbeing and community inclusion as intertwined aspects: secure housing enables inclusion in social, economic and cultural spaces and this inclusion, in turn, affects wellbeing outcomes (Haman, et al., 2021; Howden-Chapman et al., 2021).

We explore how social housing policy may influence inclusion and wellbeing along with examining its potential to influence negative views about social housing (i.e., stigma). To support this analysis, we discuss how social housing policy can increase the chances that tenants will live well in their homes and communities.

With this brief, we aim to inform policy debate at a critical time of social housing policy review in Aotearoa. Recommendations emerging from recent government funded social housing policy reviews indicate a desire to reduce the government's role in providing and managing social housing and to increase Māori and community-based provision in the sector instead. Overall, the coalition government has indicated a preference for reducing the state's role in the provision of social housing.

The wider purpose of this brief is to contribute to discussions about the different approaches to social housing and the implications of policy decisions

for those seeking housing support. The review of evidence we conducted clearly signals that social housing stigmatisation is a key factor that undermines social housing tenants' wellbeing and community inclusion. It is, therefore, important to understand its drivers as well as policy levers that can address and prevent stigmatisation.

## Review of evidence

We reviewed social housing policies along with the history of social housing policy in Aotearoa to understand the drivers for policy changes that have been introduced at different points in time. We looked at social housing policies in other countries to identify examples of national social housing programmes in order to understand how varied forms of social housing provision connect to inclusion, wellbeing and stigma. We also examined housing research literature alongside evidence provided by community-based housing interest groups to determine how inclusion, wellbeing and stigma were being defined and experienced in a social housing context.

## What is social housing stigma(tisation)?

Internationally, a growing body of research is examining social housing stigma(tisation) (Ejiogu and Denedo, 2021; Jacobs and Flanagan, 2013; Jahiu, 2024; Norris et al. 2019). Stigma – or a poor reputation – is attached to social housing residents and their behaviours as well as to the places they inhabit (Smets and Kusenbach, 2020). Stigma pathologises social housing tenants' "identity, behaviour and home" (Jahiu 2024, p. 340) insofar as people's behaviours are portrayed as inherently problematic (De Decker and Pannecouke 2004) and their homes (dwellings and neighbourhoods) are discredited as dangerous or notorious.

Social housing stigma is the result of an active process of denigrating low-income households, housing areas and dwellings based on perceptions of tenure, location and the people who live there (Horgan, 2020; Slater, 2018). While other neighbourhood residents may engage in stigmatisation, researchers have highlighted that "powerful actors, including the state" (Smets and

Kusenbach, 2020, p. 3) as well as “influential social groups, including policymakers and media” shape and reinforce negative stereotypes (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute [AHURI], 2012, p. 2). Recent New Zealand media reports, for instance, have described neighbourhood tensions related to social housing developments, with some reports clearly indicating the existence of social housing related stigma and racism (Williams, 2021).

While stigmatisation frames ‘problematic’ tenant behaviour as the cause of social housing stigma, research shows that problems arise from policy-driven residualisation and a lack of investment rather than being primarily driven by ‘problem tenants’. Notably, social housing stigma is uncommon in much of Western Europe where the sector is significantly larger (Norris et al., 2019). This shows that there is less deficit framing when social housing is accessible for a greater share of low-income households, not only those with the most complex needs. Further, research from Australia has shown that a lack of investment in social housing is responsible for poorly maintained houses and complexes which adds to stigma experienced by social housing tenants. Overall, the impact of limited investment is that social housing is more likely to be associated with poverty and social limitation rather than being understood as a secure basis that enables communities to flourish (AHURI, 2012).

One problem is that, in a catch 22, social housing policies that aim to enhance tenant wellbeing and community inclusion are informed by dominant conceptions of social housing stigma. As a result, policy approaches prioritise behaviour change rather than structural change. Indeed, some commentators have suggested that the stigmatisation of social housing tenants may be used to justify further disinvestment through obscuring, “the culpability of governments and the failure of markets to provide affordable housing, adequate incomes and social support” (Sisson and Chatterjee, 2020, para. 27). The inadequate and limited provision of social housing, then, results in further residualisation, compounding the problem of stigmatisation (Murphy, 2020).

## **A Tiriti lens for structural change in social housing policy**

In Aotearoa, stigma related to low-income housing and neighbourhoods disproportionately affects Māori (Lewis et al., 2020). Māori are also disproportionately affected by housing insecurity and any effective response to Māori housing need must include social housing provision (Waitangi Tribunal, 2024). Policies that ensure an adequate supply of social housing must be accompanied by policies that ensure social housing is culturally adequate, such as housing that supports positive connections within communities (Lawson-Te Aho et al., 2019). Social housing development strategies that partner with iwi and hapū to ensure a sustained focus on meeting Māori housing needs are crucial and require ongoing commitment. This commitment must include support for development approaches that provide the types of housing Māori identify as necessary to meet ongoing housing requirements (Child Poverty Action Group and Public Housing Futures, 2024; Kāinga Ora, 2021). While adequate financial investment in social housing can help create better outcomes and avoid stigma, adequate cultural investment is also necessary to ensure the benefits of measures that aim to prevent stigma and enhance outcomes are equitable. This requires that the structure and process of investment for Māori housing be examined through a Tiriti o Waitangi lens (Waitangi Tribunal, 2024).

The Crown’s obligation to account for Māori housing deprivation has recently been examined through a Waitangi Tribunal hearing focused on Māori and homelessness (WAI 2750 Housing Policy and Services Kaupapa Inquiry, stage one). The WAI 2750 claim raises important questions about how Māori housing inequities can be addressed. The current state of Māori housing has been linked to colonisation, an ongoing process of dispossession and alienation from whenua that counts severe Māori housing deprivation as one of its legacies (Poata-Smith, 2013). The Tribunal, in its stage one report, ‘Kāinga Kore’, states that, “in the face of the levels of homelessness Māori have experienced in recent years, the Crown must begin to rectify its failure to protect kāinga by providing housing” (Waitangi Tribunal, 2024, p. 126). In turn, the report

critiques the decrease in social housing provision as detrimental to Māori given that social housing is a resource “on which Māori heavily rely” (p. xiii).

The Tribunal's discussion of Crown housing provision duties, however, does not change the reality that social housing policy only supports temporary tenancies rather than viewing social housing as a long term or home for life option (Murphy, 2020). Cementing approaches that conceive of housing only as short-term crisis intervention rather than a secure, stable and well maintained social good threatens Māori goals of achieving adequate and equitable housing provision for Māori.

Aligned with its emphasis on devolution as a strategy for enhancing social housing responsiveness – including in terms of increasing supply and supporting localised planning and provision – the government commissioned review of social housing also describes the potential to increase the role that Māori (including iwi and hapū organisations) play in the provision and management of social housing (English, et al. 2024). However, taking account of te Tiriti o Waitangi means devolution must be considered in the context of existing Te Tiriti principles. State responsibilities in providing social housing cannot simply be passed on to hapū and iwi because:

*The duties of the government to enact as a fiduciary duty/caretaker duty in the form of good governance towards New Zealanders, including enacting policies and legislation that further promote equity in housing, health, education cannot be transferred to iwi without their consent. (Lawson-Te Aho et al., 2019, p. 6)*

Therefore, negotiation with iwi, hapū, whānau and hāpori Māori will be an important step. Reducing the government's role in the provision of social housing must be examined alongside government responsibilities and obligations to Māori including those discussed within the stage one WAI 2750 Housing Policy and Services Kaupapa Inquiry hearing. Limiting State provided social housing without assurances of adequate, ongoing resourcing may be at odds with housing provision duties highlighted as part of WAI 2750 (stage one).

## Social housing policy and stigmatisation in Aotearoa

Housing and social housing policies play a dominant role in creating and reproducing social housing stigma. A shortage of social housing, housing ideologies that prioritise homeownership and denigrate renting, and disinvestment all play a role in stigmatising social housing. Therefore, policy can also play a role in addressing and preventing stigmatisation.

Social housing policy approaches in Aotearoa have shifted along a political continuum marked by competing agendas, which can be broadly described as either socially or market oriented. In 19th century Aotearoa, the settler-colonial desire to accumulate wealth through land and housing trade was supported by policies of land ownership and housing commodification. However, these processes created severe housing deprivation, which was eventually addressed by large-scale social housing development programmes, such as those completed by the first Labour government (1935 – 1949) (Paul et al., 2020). Since then, successive governments have introduced policies that have significantly residualised the national social housing programme through: privatising public housing stock beginning in the 1950s, applying market rents to all state housing tenants in the 1990s, replacing the 'home for life' policy with reviewable social housing tenancies in 2014, and increasing eligibility criteria for accessing social housing, limiting it to those with the most severe housing need (Collins, 2014; Howden-Chapman, 2015).

In 2019, the sixth Labour government implemented a substantial shift in housing policy which sought to balance housing market and supply driven agendas with more socially focused concerns by implementing frameworks aimed at ensuring housing is planned, allocated, and managed in ways that support wellbeing (Kāinga Ora, 2019). However, another iteration of housing policy is currently emerging that is set to reverse this development. The most recent coalition government commissioned review of the social housing system in Aotearoa has signalled a return to policy settings that seek to further reduce the state's role in the provision of social housing

(English et al., 2024). This includes weakening Kāinga Ora's role as state housing provider in favour of devolution of social housing provision.

As part of this policy approach, the government has also abolished the Sustainable Tenancies Framework which will have a significant impact on how the social housing system functions and how support is provided to social housing tenants (Bishop, 2024). These policy changes are also being implemented at a time when individuals and whānau seeking housing support are presenting with increasingly complex needs that will require more resources dedicated to ensuring the right support is made available (Kāinga Ora, 2023).

By contrast, an alternative review of social housing completed by the Child Poverty Action Group and Public Housing Futures (2024) argues for sustained and increased state investment in social housing. Recommendations from the alternate review emphasise the benefits of increasing direct state provision and resourcing of social housing while simultaneously limiting reliance on the private housing sector to address increasing levels of housing insecurity. The alternate review also cautions that residualisation of social housing through sustained disinvestment activities reduces the capacity of social housing to fulfil a crucial role as a social good much like hospitals and schools. Other recommendations included in the alternative review support this observation, advocating for large scale housing and infrastructure programmes that provide well designed, secure, healthy and attainable housing options at a national scale.

## **Sustainable Tenancies Framework: Dismantling strengths-based mechanisms**

The Sustainable Tenancies programme started in 2017, offering tenancy support services to both private and public rental housing tenants who were at risk of eviction and grew to be incorporated into the Kāinga Ora policy framework. Beyond being a mechanism to prevent tenant eviction, the framework was also a Kāinga Ora organisational approach to tenant wellbeing and a set of contracts that allows community providers to wrap supports around individuals and whānau living within social housing (Ministry of Housing

and Urban Development, n.d.). These principles align with evidence about the types of social housing systems that support tenant wellbeing and community inclusion. The Sustainable Tenancies Framework has been part of a larger shift in attitude towards social housing tenants that has been connected to empowering language and strength-based policy settings. In policy terms, it is a mechanism for planning social housing in ways that emphasise factors known to result in better social housing tenancies. These factors include effective housing management practices, supports for tenant safety, and tenure that keeps households within communities where strong family and social networks have been cultivated (Centre for Research Evaluation and Social Assessment, 2015). However, the new coalition government has recently directed Kāinga Ora to abolish the Sustainable Tenancies Framework. This directive (Bishop, 2024) signals a shift from a strength-based approach that prioritises security of tenure to a punitive stance.

Housing policy that bases approaches to tenant and tenancy management on such deficit narratives contributes to and enables stigmatisation. On a larger scale, the language included in national policy, and used by politicians and the media, also helps to create and reinforce either more positive, affirming views about social housing or, conversely, stigma (Chartered Institute of Housing, 2020). Evidence suggests that achieving good social housing related outcomes relies on modifying social housing systems rather than being concerned with tenant behaviour as a primary point of intervention (Auditor General, 2017; Rolfe et al., 2020). Systemic responses present opportunities for change that take account of other factors that may contribute to challenges associated with social housing. Abolishing the Sustainable Tenancies Framework based on concerns about policy enabling antisocial behaviour should not diminish a focus on housing stability, including when faced with the growing complexity of tenant realities. Any reduced investment in frameworks that aim to support stable tenancies risks ignoring evidence that shows the benefits of creating a social housing system that supports wellbeing and community inclusion.

A sustainable tenancies approach may not fit easily with the temporary nature of social housing

tenancies that has become a foundation for social housing policy over the past decade (Howden-Chapman, 2015). However, the wellbeing objectives contained in national housing legislation and policy, if implemented based on available evidence, would include an element of aiming to provide secure and sustainable social housing tenancies. Specifically, wellbeing for social housing tenants is shown to be connected to an experience of belonging with neighbours which is further complemented by having good, supportive relationships with social housing providers (Mee, 2009).

## **Addressing social housing stigmatisation**

The review of evidence completed for this policy brief identified dominant policy approaches influencing social housing development, provision and management. These approaches are predominantly concerned with mechanisms aimed at controlling behaviour among social housing tenants and, more generally, within populations that experience higher levels of deprivation. In Aotearoa there is a long history of aiming to develop mixed communities to avoid concentration of deprivation and to achieve a "desirable social mix" (Davidson, 1994, p. 142). Currently, mixed tenure housing development policies are a prominent response to concerns about the types of social housing being built and purchased and how social housing concentration might influence wellbeing in Aotearoa (Chisholm, et al., 2022).

However, research examining neighbourhood social mix and outcomes for social housing tenants in Aotearoa shows that there is limited evidence that supports the benefits of either high or low concentrations of social housing. A 2015 report by the Centre for Research, Evaluation and Social Assessment stated that while there are concerns related to high density social housing, anxieties over the presence of social housing and negative neighbourhood effects are overstated which means aiming for lower concentrations of social housing may have little subsequent impact. Further the report offers insight into variables proven to lead to enhanced social housing outcomes that act as alternative points of focus that may offer more

concrete guidance when considering the future of social housing policy. These include tenants experiencing less exposure to crime, tenants having greater feelings of safety, faster police response times, effective support from housing managers, and improved local amenities and built environments. Evidence from social housing programmes in other countries, moreover, shows that positive outcomes tend to be driven by systemic changes rather than efforts to modify tenant behaviour (Saville-Smith et al., 2015). A more recent review of evidence from within Aotearoa indeed found that there may be a case for higher densities of social housing than a mixed tenure housing development ideology supports (Chisholm, et al., 2022). Last but not least, international and local research warns that mixed tenure developments risk gentrification, and therefore, displacement of exactly those populations it claims to benefit (Gordon et al., 2017; Terruhn, 2019). There is a case, therefore, for reconsidering mixed tenure as a policy focal point which would make way for examining evidence that points to other strategies for enhancing the social housing system. These include those discussed in this brief such as increased and sustained investment, expanding the social housing programme to support wider eligibility criteria and secure tenure, and providing effective management and support for social housing tenancies.

## **Conclusion**

Social housing stigmatisation represents an unfair and harmful outcome for individuals and whānau who are already at the sharp end of experiencing housing insecurity. Adding insult to injury, stigmatisation harms low-income and often racialised social housing tenants because it is associated with poor wellbeing and community exclusion. Based on international research evidence, we conclude that current policy solutions to addressing social housing stigma are not only insufficient but risk reifying housing insecurity and stigmatisation. Further, the view that mixed tenure and low concentrations of social housing leads to better outcomes is not supported by available evidence.

Social housing policies will also need to consider Māori housing aspirations and te Tiriti o Waitangi. Māori housing inequities heighten the risk of Māori experiencing housing related stigma which provides a level of justification for ensuring Māori perspectives on social housing are embedded in policy. However, Māori rights to adequate housing that implicate Crown obligations along with Māori aspirations for housing (of all types) provide a stronger justification for ensuring there is adequate support for Māori housing development goals and decision-making.

Research evidence on social housing stigmatisation suggests that housing policies that are geared towards providing adequate investment to support a strong and sustainable social housing programme, quality housing, secure tenure, and robust support systems for tenants will be the most effective tools for addressing and preventing stigma.

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## Recommendations:

- Utilise evidence on social housing design, planning, and management to develop and provide social housing that avoids stigmatisation. This includes preventing degradation of social housing through addressing underinvestment and its impacts on the material condition of social housing and ensuring adequate resourcing for mechanisms of support that helps tenants to live well in their homes,
- Ensure social housing is culturally adequate through supporting Māori decision making in the design of the social housing programme within Aotearoa NZ. This includes Māori being positioned as decision makers in how the social housing system is structured along with how houses are constructed.
- Continue investment in frameworks that aim to support individuals and whānau to achieve positive outcomes as part of their experience of living in social housing. This includes frameworks that aim to prevent individuals and whānau experiencing housing insecurity.

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