



Public Housing Options For Australia

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State Governments in Australia provide subsidised public housing for elderly, disabled, unemployed and other people on low incomes. The rent for this public housing is based on the income of the resident, basically being what they can afford. For instance, in the ACT, residents of public housing pay about 25% of their income as rent. Since there is never sufficient public housing to accommodate everyone who needs it, many people on low incomes are forced to rent privately. Some receive Government subsidies, but even they are financially disadvantaged by the high cost of private rentals.

In some countries cheaper public housing is provided by state subsidised private businesses. (4) This system appears to work very well, in that the businesses are also responsible for providing other amenities in the local area, such as parks and playgrounds, which add to the quality of life in the public housing complexes.

As has been pointed out, the standard of housing has a great influence on a person's lifestyle, education, employment and health, and is a vital part of Australia's welfare system. (2) Although the level of public housing is only around 4% (1), roughly the same as other countries such as New Zealand and Canada but much lower than most countries in the European Union, these people are amongst the most vulnerable people in Australian society because of their financial position. Also, it should be noted that in 2021, about a further 6% of Australians were on the waiting list for public housing. The Ahuri papers also suggests that there is no final answer to the what might be the correct level of public housing. (1)

Figures show (3) that the level of public housing has hardly increased in more than 20 years, even though the Australian population has increased markedly (by about 30%), particularly due to increased immigration. Since many of the new Australians come from poor or impoverished countries, which often means that they are themselves not wealthy, the demand on the current housing has increased to a much higher level. Since fewer Australians on low incomes are now living in their own homes, increasing their living costs, the lowest 20% households are now spending a higher proportion of their income on accommodation. This figure has risen by about 8% in the last 30 years.

The Productivity Commission point out a number of important facts about public housing and the people who live in it. (5) Different people in the same circumstances may receive different levels of financial assistance. There is a very high number of people who are eligible for support but are unable to get it. Many of those people are on waiting lists for assistance. The way in which public housing is managed does not allow much choice of location which may affect their social lives and employment opportunities of the residents. The Commission concludes that Australia's public housing system needs to be redesigned, that financial assistance needs to be better organised so it reaches those in need better, and that there be more help for people trying to maintain a reasonable living style while paying very high rents.

The above problems can most probably, and most profitably, solved by increased Government spending on more public housing and modernising and refurbishing old ones, and by improving the social services so they can better deliver their services to the people who need them, both in relation to public housing and any other matters.

However, there is a matter to do with public housing which is largely ignored, especially by Governments, and rarely sees expression in the media. That is the social atmosphere of the complexes and the life quality of the residents. As well as meeting the increased needs for public housing, improving the quality of life of the residents of public housing should be a high priority in any future Government's plans. Merely because they are living in public housing is no reason to expose the residents to the level of crime and bad behaviour often found in public housing, much of it drug related.



Stuart Flats, in Light Street, Griffith, ACT. They were owned by Housing ACT. The flats were demolished in October 2019.

There seems to be a move amongst Government to sell off public housing in areas of high land values and allow them to be replaced by luxury apartments. Governments claim that this provides the money to allow them to build a greater number of flats or units elsewhere. The demolition of the old premises is also said to be a way to deal with social problems and old buildings which have become too expensive to maintain. However good this might seem to the Government; it often has very bad repercussions for the residents who are moved from their old flat or unit to a newer one. The demolition of these complexes either simply relocates the whole problem somewhere a long way away and out of sight, or makes the ex-residents homeless and therefore of no apparent consequence, since they can then be ignored, as homeless

people always are by Governments. The reorganisation does not deal with the social problems associated with drug abuse and violence, it simply moves them somewhere else, and the problems will then continue in the new complexes.

In one complex in which I lived, there was a large shopping centre nearby. The area was served by numerous useful bus services. When the residents were moved out, on the Government selling off the complex, many of them ended up in the new outer suburbs of the city, where shopping centres and bus routes are few and far between. It soon became obvious that the move was creating social problems for many of these people. Evidence shows that relocating the criminally-inclined, particularly drug-users, does not stop their criminal activities. They take their criminal activities with them, which then become someone else's problem, or that of the other people who also move there, in the new location.

There can be no doubt that the public housing sector needs reworking. As well as making more public housing available to people who need it, along with other social services, Governments need to pay attention to the complaints of drug and crime related behaviour from the residents who have no choice but to live in the complexes. They also need to take vital steps to overcome these problems and to make it difficult for them to reappear. The resulting better quality of life in public housing will greatly benefit the residents, and will also help to remove the common, stereotypical view held by many people that all public housing residents are lazy layabouts and criminals.

References

- (1) Ahuri: <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/brief/what-right-level-social-housing-australia>
- (2) DSS Australia: <https://www.dss.gov.au/housing-support/programmes-services/housing>
- (3) Grattan: <https://grattan.edu.au/news/a-place-to-call-home-its-time-for-a-social-housing-future-fund/>
- (4) Netherlands Government: <https://www.government.nl/topics/housing/housing-associations>
- (5) Productivity Commission: <https://www.pc.gov.au/reforms/report/02-...>