

# Housing and Social Cohesion: What Role for Housing Policy and Assistance?

**Kath Hulse and Wendy Stone**

Institute for Social Research and AHURI Research Centre  
Swinburne University of Technology  
Hawthorn, Victoria 3122  
Email: khulse@swin.edu.au

## Abstract

*This paper draws on research for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) which is exploring the links between housing, housing assistance and social cohesion, both conceptually and empirically. It reports on the first stage of the project which explored the concept of social cohesion and its relevance for housing policy and housing assistance. The paper finds that social cohesion has developed as a multi-dimensional policy concept incorporating the core dimensions of inequalities and differences; social connectedness; as well as a cultural dimension. It has also been argued that social cohesion encompasses the further dimensions of 'social order and control' and 'place attachment and identity'. Social cohesion can also be viewed at a number of social and spatial scales, including neighbourhood. Viewed in this way, social cohesion provides a different and potentially valuable perspective for housing policy makers and those developing and implementing housing assistance programs.*

## Keywords

Housing, housing assistance, social cohesion, neighbourhood

## 1. Introduction

Two teenage boys were killed in February 2005 when the car they were driving hit a tree during a police pursuit in the suburb of Macquarie Fields in south-west Sydney. Subsequent to the deaths, for the next four nights, young people threw a variety of missiles at the police in what the media termed 'riots'. These events centred on a public housing estate (Glenquarie) which was built in the 1970s. The area is economically and socially disadvantaged as measured by indicators such as the rate of unemployment, receipt of income support payments, children and young people living with one parent, and crime statistics.

Various explanations were offered in the media immediately after these events. They included police harassment of young people (residents), bad parenting (other residents), an enclosed community with high crime rates and a variety of other problems (government crime research bureau), poverty (Salvation Army), lack of attachment to fathers and other male role models for young people (welfare service), enclosed housing estate design and development not integrated with the rest of the community (academic),

and concentrations of the most disadvantaged people with no hope of moving on (local mayor) (*Age*, 5 March 2005, *Insight*, p. 7).

A police inquiry into the incidents was critical of the police response to the 'riots'. A critique of this approach suggested that the underlying cause was economic deprivation and poverty, with the trigger a zero tolerance policing policy insisted upon by 'rule makers' and imposed on local police without regard for the consequences (Kennedy and McQueen, 2005, p. 3). An inquiry by the Social Issues Committee of the New South Wales Legislative Council is still taking submissions. These types of events and concerns about lessening of social cohesion and threats to social order are not unique to Australia. Social disturbances in 2001 in the northern English cities of Bradford, Burnley and Oldham led to a House of Commons Committee Report on Social Cohesion (see, House of Commons, 2004).

Such events and the reactions to them suggest complex and sometimes fragile relationships between cultural diversity, poverty and social cohesion. This case raises questions about the role of housing and housing assistance in contributing to or mediating potential community conflict or cohesion, including in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. For example, what contribution, if any, did the estate design and housing type and form make to these events? Did aspects of public housing management play a role, for example, in allocating households to the estate? What effects, positive and negative, does tenure have on the community more broadly? What is the 'right' mix of public tenants? How can housing be regenerated to facilitate community? Assumptions about the answers to these questions lie at the heart of much present day housing policy and housing management practice, yet there is very little systematic evidence that addresses them.

The paper develops a conceptual framework for understanding these relationships and explores the relevance of the social cohesion concept for housing policy and housing assistance in Australia. It is based on a review and reflection of relevant literature during the first stage of a project which is funded by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI). Later stages of the research will seek to identify empirically some of these linkages through an analysis of five secondary data sets.

## **2. 'Moral panics', mediating institutions and the pursuit of 'community'**

The example of social unrest on a public housing estate cited above and the subsequent reactions reveal uncertainty as to causation and an anxiety that such events indicate a lessening of social cohesion and a threat to social order. Some of the reactions appear to be characteristic of what Cohen (1972, p. 9) in a famous study of mods and rockers in the late 1960s called a 'moral panic', that is, 'a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media'. For each moral panic there is a 'folk devil', a clearly identifiable group onto which deeper social fears and anxieties are projected. In this case, as in many others, the folk devils were young men living on the estate, and to a lesser extent their parents (usually their mothers) for failing to control them. It is important to note that the source of the moral panic is not necessarily the folk devil, but deeper anxieties that find their expression in the social construction of a deviant group that comes to symbolise the problem.

The idea of moral panics has been much discussed over the last thirty years and illustrates some of the complexities in considering social cohesion. Some commentators suggest that the process of labelling folk devils as deviant is too simple for what Beck (1992) and others have called a 'risk society'. Instead they point to changing sites of social anxiety which have raised fundamental questions of trust, expertise, authority and social order (see, Ungar, 2001, p. 288). Others have focused on the level of everyday practices, suggesting that these generalised anxieties are so intangible that people concentrate on immediate issues of personal or family security. Through routine and everyday practices, they strive to achieve a sense of order often subsumed in the concept of 'community' that offers the prospect of sameness and familiarity which contribute to feelings of personal safety and security (see, Bauman, 2001).

This work suggests that social cohesion, which will be discussed in more detail later in the paper, can be considered at different levels. Czasny (2002, pp. 3-4), for example, differentiates between the macro level of cohesion (based on the mix of market, government and cooperative regulating mechanisms for the solution of social problems associated with the distribution of goods and services) and the micro level (which focuses on the integration of individuals in a network of personal interactions within the framework of family, friendship, neighbourhood, membership, educational and work relationships). Following Weber, he argues that in complex societies all activity takes place simultaneously on two levels of meaning.

Much of the debate about social cohesion (and the related concepts of social capital, social inclusion/exclusion) hinge on the links, and tensions, between these levels. For example, individuals striving to achieve 'community' to enable routine social relations to take place in a predictable and ordered manner might act in a way which is protectionist, divisive and exclusionary – circumstances which are likely to be a fertile breeding ground for future moral panics (see, Hier, 2003). The values that enable micro level units like neighbourhood to cohere may be at odds with the values of the wider society, if community membership is defined partly by exclusion (see, Pahl, 1991, p. 351). In other words, the factors that might encourage social cohesion at the micro level might lead to a lessening of social cohesion at the macro level.

Historically, some of the tensions between the two levels were mediated through membership of intermediate social institutions such as trade unions, professional associations, political parties, churches, cooperative societies and sporting clubs, which provided a form of shared identity and social solidarity (see, Castells, 1997). Most of these have weakened considerably since the 1970s, although often the impact in terms of social cohesion has been relatively neglected. For example, the decline in trade union membership has been much discussed in economic terms but there has been little consideration of the impact of their declining social role in promoting solidarity amongst members and providing a range of services and facilities. Similarly, decline in membership of churches has been seen primarily in terms of individual religious affiliations, rather than their role in maintaining social solidarity amongst sometimes diverse members through a common value base, mutual support and provision of services and facilities. The relative unpopularity of these formal intermediate institutions in recent years has

meant that the debate about social cohesion has slipped down a level to that of ‘family’ and ‘community’ (see, Pahl, 1991, p. 348).

‘Community’ is often posited as the most important form of intermediate social institution between family and macro level social institutions, but it is a concept which is hard to define because it is used in multiple and overlapping ways. Community in most policy and many research contexts is based on locality/place, although it is sometimes used to refer to a non-spatial grouping based on common interests, such as ‘the arts community’ or ‘the disabled community’. It is also often used in a normative sense, either to recapture qualities from the past which are thought to have disappeared or need to be *renewed, rebuilt or redeveloped*, or to indicate that some communities are unsustainable and require assistance with *building, strengthening or developing*. It is in this context that community has an attraction for politicians and senior policy makers, including those concerned with housing. This is not new: a quarter of a century ago, it was called the ‘spray-on solution’ (see, Bryson and Mowbray, 2005, p. 91).

### **3. Reasserting the importance of the ‘social’ in politics and policies**

Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is reputed to have said: ‘There is no such thing as society: there are individual men and women, and there are families’. This statement asserts the primacy of families over all other types of social institutions. Increasing disenchantment with market failure as well as state failure has led to a search for meaningful meso-concepts that emphasise the embedding of economic and political variables in intermediary social structures such as neighbourhoods, associations, churches and community organisations (see, Mayer, 2003, pp. 113-114). Consequently, politicians, bureaucrats, academics and others have spent a great deal of time reasserting the importance of the ‘social’. In this process, some old concepts from academic literature have been revived and reworked. Those which have been influential overseas have been appropriated and refined in an Australian context, such as ‘social exclusion’ from Europe and ‘social capital’ from the United States. Other concepts have been given a contemporary reading, such as ‘community building’ and ‘community capacity’ rather than the earlier ‘community development’.

Most of these terms are used in at least two ways: firstly, in a policy context to indicate the aims of, and rationale for, certain public policy actions; and secondly, as analytical constructs to explain social, political and sometimes economic changes. The distinction between these usages is often not clear, a point made by Arthurson and Jacobs (2003) in their literature review exploring the relevance of the concept of social exclusion for Australian housing policy. Whilst policy makers may see these as policy terms, they often draw on academic literature. Similarly, academic researchers sometimes shift between using policy terminology and employing concepts which have explanatory value.

#### **3.1 Social capital: the importance of social networks**

The term ‘social capital’ has been used intermittently for almost a hundred years but it is only over the last decade or so that it has been widely used by policy makers and researchers

in Australia (see, Winter, 2000). The aim here is not to give full coverage to debates about social capital, as this has been done elsewhere (see, Johnson et al., 2003 and Mayer, 2003 for a review of the literature), but to investigate how the concept relates to our discussion of social cohesion and housing.

Definitions of social capital vary, with Li et al. (2003) declaring the concept ‘an infuriating one’. It is possible, however, to trace two related strands in the literature which concern both social processes and outcomes. Firstly, social capital refers to ‘networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation within or among groups’, as used by the ABS following an OECD definition (see, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004). In essence this is about the importance of factors such as mutual support, reciprocity, trust and obligation which facilitate cooperation between people, the process by which people work together. Secondly, social capital involves access by individuals to various types of resources which are embedded in social networks, including social, economic, cultural, physical, knowledge and spiritual resources (see, Bourdieu, 1986). This strand of thinking about social capital is more about outcomes – the extent to which people are able to augment their own personal resources (human capital) through access to resources found in social networks.

In the recent burgeoning of literature on the topic, writers have identified different types of social capital which can be summarised as: informal personal networks involving strong ties with immediate family and friends (bonding social capital), more distant and diverse networks involving weaker and less intensive ties (bridging social capital), and civic engagement (linking social capital) with more formal institutions such as local government and voluntary organisations (see, Putnam, 1995; Narayan, 1999; Woolcock, 2000; and Li et al., 2003). These are useful as a tool for thinking about levels of social capital, although they have to be demonstrated empirically.

There is a body of social research over a long period, going back to community studies in the 1960s and 1970s, which, although it uses different terminology to that of social capital, has demonstrated that people living in disadvantaged areas often have strong networks involving family, friends and immediate neighbours (see, Forrest and Kearns, 2001; Atkinson and Kintrea, 2000). Whilst this is not always the case, it is more likely to occur where residents are relatively homogenous in terms of factors such as economic and social status, ethnicity or cultural background, or life circumstances. Governments often assume, wrongly, that concentrations of people on low incomes and with other disadvantages are characterised by isolation and a lack of social networks. They then produce solutions based on ‘social mix’ to alter the composition of estates, such as redevelopment or tenure diversification, which may weaken existing social networks rather than sustain or enhance them (see, Arthurson, 2002).

There is an emerging view, although with rather less evidence, that people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods have fewer and weaker connections with others outside of their immediate network (bridging and linking social capital) and that it is the lack of these types of social capital that reinforces disadvantage. This might indicate ways of reducing disadvantage by encouraging and resourcing people to make these connections and facilitating networks which include people living in particularly disadvantaged areas.

The Wired High Rise project in Melbourne is an example of such an initiative, whereby low income residents of a high rise public housing estate were supplied with computers, internet and email access and training to enable access to electronic networks (see, Meredyth et al., 2004). There is a risk, however, that identifying a lack of 'weak ties' with diverse networks merely describes disadvantage due to marginalisation and is another way of 'blaming the victim' for their situation. Studies of more formal civic participation support this view, indicating that this type of linking capital is associated with people with higher economic and social status and higher levels of education (see, Li et al., 2003; Middleton et al., 2005).

In the example given at the beginning of this paper about civil disturbances on a public housing estate, the language refers to an 'enclosed' estate, implying separation of dwellings – and, by implication, people – from the surrounding area. It is possible that strong personal networks based on family or kinship are a form of defence and protection against marginalisation from other social networks. These may provide essential support to vulnerable people, on the one hand, or, on the other, develop into protective mechanisms such as vigilante groups which are usually seen as a threat to social order. It is also possible that strongly defensive personal networks of 'people under siege' indicate a lack of trust in others, either generally or more specifically in institutions, an area also explored by writers on social capital. Fukuyama (1999) argues that people now engage in more single-issue, parochial and defensive activities which can lead to a 'miniaturisation' of community, such that social interaction and collective involvement may derive from conflict and lack of trust. One can think of involvement in Save Our Suburbs and similar organisations as examples of this. In these examples, there will be tensions between strong social cohesion at a very micro level and fragmentation between groups at a broader level.

### ***3.2. Social inclusion/exclusion: economic disengagement and multi-dimensional disadvantage***

The limitation of work on social capital is that, whilst emphasising the importance of social networks, it may divert attention from the structural changes which have created areas of concentrated disadvantage in the first place, such as changes in the labour market and patterns of investment. The concept of 'social exclusion' addresses some of these structural issues. It originated in France to refer to people on the margins of society who were excluded from the social insurance system, and was widened to refer to concerns that high levels of unemployment and homelessness were leading to a 'dual society' which risked undermining social cohesion (see, Blanc, 1998).

The term was then adopted and broadened by the European Union (EU) in order to re-brand its controversial anti-poverty programs as a new approach to entrenched problems of poverty and social disadvantage, and is now often referred to as 'social inclusion'. Social inclusion continues to be a very important part of EU policy processes which emphasise an inclusive labour market as a means of promoting social cohesion. The EU sees 'being in employment as by far the most effective way of avoiding the risk of poverty and social exclusion' (see, Hunt, 2005, p. 113). Exclusion from the labour market has direct financial effects but also entails exclusion from the networks established

through work which may provide a sense of social solidarity and identity. All EU members have committed to produce national action plans to combat poverty and social exclusion. Regeneration of areas where people experience multiple deprivation is seen as important, but locality-based approaches are only one component of the overall strategy. The significance of the European concept is that it recognises that lack of capacity of local neighbourhoods is a result of economic and other changes, primarily economic disengagement, rather than a cause of poor economic and social outcomes.

In France, where the concept of social exclusion was first developed, there has been a critique that it obscures the processes by which people and groups become excluded or labelled as 'outsiders'. Blanc (1998, p. 781) refers in this context to the paradox of the 'ghetto' as a visible form of exclusion, on the one hand, but also a place where a community experiences social solidarity and safety on the other. In other words, people and groups that are economically and socially excluded can, in some circumstances, have strong levels of social solidarity and cohesion. In this sense, one could question whether, for example, targeting of social housing to those with acute and complex needs is, albeit unwittingly, part of the process of exclusion, such that vulnerable people are housed in the same place. In some circumstances, people may develop strong bonds with selected others as a form of protection in what may be seen as an insecure or unsafe environment. A compounding factor in this process of exclusion may be the actions of residents of more affluent areas in combining together to object to social and affordable housing in their neighbourhood. Such actions may improve social solidarity among these residents, but effectively exclude lower income households from areas with higher levels of amenity and facilities.

In Australia, the approach developed by the Blair government in the United Kingdom has had the most influence. The UK government has a much-quoted definition of social exclusion as 'a shorthand label for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown' (see, Social Exclusion Unit, 1998, p. 1). Social exclusion in this context refers to people and usually denotes multi-dimensional disadvantage. Thus it encompasses some 'wicked' social problems which governments find difficult to deal with, such as homelessness, teen pregnancies, school truancy, suicide and youth unemployment which appear to have multiple causation and which require 'joined up' solutions. In the United Kingdom there has been a strong focus on places with a concentration of disadvantaged people, mainly large public housing estates, through a national strategy on neighbourhood renewal. This strategy has influenced governments in Australia in the development of renewal strategies for public housing estates with increasing concentrations of people with multiple disadvantages.

Whilst there have been specific evaluations of these renewal projects, there has been as yet no systematic analysis of the processes which result in social and economic marginalisation of residents. However, we do have available the findings of a European Commission-funded project on socially excluded neighbourhoods in eight countries. This found that, although each of the twenty-eight neighbourhoods had its own distinctive

characteristics, three broad types of dynamics were important: the type of tenure and extent to which residents chose to live in the area, which affected commitment to the area and degree of empowerment; the cultural identity of the area, building on ethnic, age and length of residency divisions, which affected feelings of solidarity, social identity and consensus; and the size and nature of residential turnover, which affected levels of social engagement, sense of belonging and overall stability (see, Morrison, 2003, p. 132).

These findings have implications for housing policy and assistance in Australia. For example, do allocations policies in social housing disempower people and affect commitment to, and identification with, an area, thus risking increasing residential instability and turnover which contribute to disadvantaged neighbourhoods? Murie and Musterd (2004, p. 1453), in considering the role of neighbourhood in the dynamics of social exclusion, caution, however, that 'action at the neighbourhood level, although relevant, is not always the most appropriate level'. By which they mean that action in respect of the underlying causes of disadvantaged neighbourhoods is also necessary. This raises questions about the role of housing policy in respect of economic and regional development that have largely dropped from the policy agenda in Australia. It might also focus attention on the spatial implications of household subsidies to low income households to rent privately and the extent to which these reinforce or mitigate patterns of residential segregation and the nexus with labour markets.

Whilst most attention of policy makers has been focused on low income 'excluded' communities, it is important to note the growth of so-called 'gated communities' comprising higher income people who withdraw behind physical and electronic barriers to reduce the risk of unwanted social interactions with those 'outside'. As Atkinson and Flint (2004) have pointed out, these households may also use 'tunnel-like' trajectories to move between their housing and places of work and leisure, thereby further reducing the likelihood of uncontrolled social interaction with 'outsiders'. This type of self-withdrawal may limit opportunities for social engagement and social connections (including 'weak ties') that contribute to social cohesion. It is not, however, typically seen as a problem by governments.

Ultimately, although both social capital and social inclusion/exclusion are useful concepts in drawing attention to inequalities and social connectedness respectively, they provide only partial insights. In the next section we argue that social cohesion is a framing concept that is more than the sum of the aspects of social capital and social exclusion.

#### **4. Social cohesion as a policy concept**

The concept of social cohesion was originally associated with the work of French sociologist Emile Durkheim who was fascinated by the way in which social stability and order was maintained despite the enormous economic changes of the time in which he was writing (late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), particularly in specialisation and differentiation of tasks. He argued that modern societies achieved social cohesion through organic solidarity rather than any external imposition of order (see Pahl, 1991 for a discussion).

This idea of social cohesion based on organic solidarity has been much discussed



and developed over the years. It refers to interdependence between members of a society, shared loyalties and solidarity (see, Jenson, 1998). In this sense, social cohesion is a 'bottom up' rather than a 'top down' phenomenon (see, Witten et al., 2003). It is sustained via a myriad of relationships between people and groups, many of which are concerned with the mundane and routine connections of everyday life. These relationships are often described as the 'social fabric' that holds communities and societies together despite specialised roles, economic inequality and differences in social status.

Social cohesion is, however, about more than the social relations of locality and neighbourhood. These relations are embedded in different economic and social circumstances. High levels of local social connection may well be attributable to different factors, and produce different outcomes, in areas of high disadvantage compared to more affluent areas (see, Kearns and Forrest, 2000, p. 1011). For example, young people with no hope of a job and little to do might engage intensely with each other and form a strong protective unit against 'outsiders', particularly those in positions of authority, such as the police. Thus it is possible to have both high levels of social interaction among particular groups and high levels of conflict with outsiders. Conversely, high income households may live in gated neighbourhoods with high levels of security against 'outsiders'. They may, however, have low levels of social interaction and few meaningful social relationships within the neighbourhood.

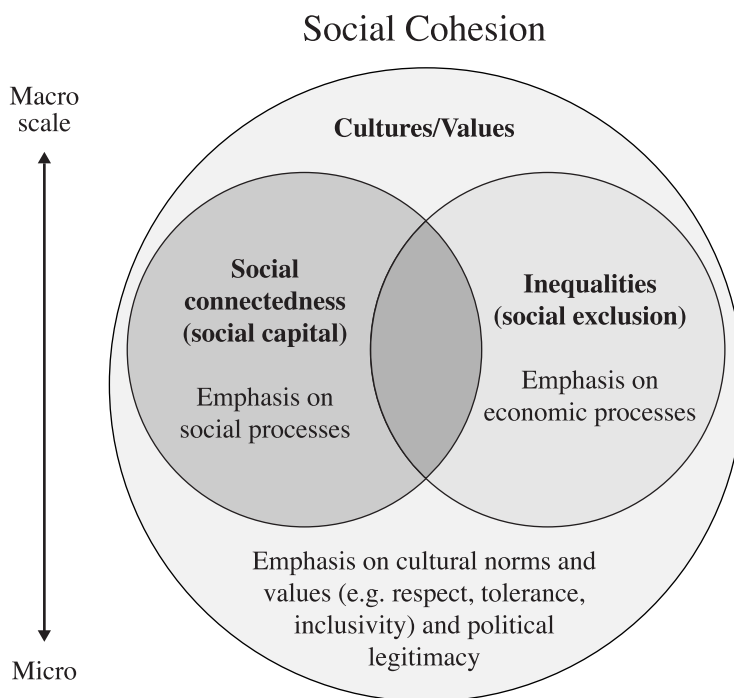
While there are differences between the ways the social cohesion concept is both conceptualised and operationalised in different policy documents and research, and across different national and cultural contexts, common to much contemporary policy and research work in this field is the notion that social cohesion is *multi-dimensional*. Our review of the policy literature found a degree of agreement around two dimensions of social cohesion: firstly, the reduction of disparities, inequalities, breaks and cleavages which have been seen as 'fault lines' in society; and secondly, a strengthening of social connections, ties and commitment to social groups (see, Berger-Schmitt and Noll, 2000, p. 15). In other words, it combines many of the ideas about both social exclusion and social capital.

A third dimension of social cohesion emphasising shared values, common purpose and shared identity was evident in some of the work, although sometimes subsumed under the dimension of social connectedness. Our review indicates that the norms underlying the 'ties that bind' people and groups of people together, such as values, sense of common purpose, shared identity and tolerance of diversity, can be recognised as an explicit cultural dimension of the social cohesion concept. The inclusion of this third dimension accords with some of the work undertaken in Canada in the late 1990s (see, O'Connor, 1998; and Woolley, 1998) which has influenced recent thinking. Kearns and Forrest (2000, pp. 996-1002), in work that has been influential in the United Kingdom, suggest two further dimensions of social cohesion that are of relevance to housing policy and assistance: 'social order and social control' achieved through 'getting by and getting on at the more mundane level of daily life', and 'a sense of belonging and attachment to place' which helps shape social identity.

Thus, there is a broad, general agreement from the policy literature that social

cohesion is multi-dimensional, although the number and categorisation of dimensions and the emphasis on particular dimensions does vary. For the purposes of our research, we view social cohesion schematically as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Dimensions of social cohesion, showing social, economic and cultural domains



Social cohesion can also be seen at different social/spatial levels: the level of family or households, the level of neighbourhood, city or regional level, and national level. In terms of housing policy and assistance, it would appear that neighbourhood is an important level for exploring social cohesion, as low income households are arguably more dependent on the social relations of neighbourhood than others. For example, many social housing tenants are not engaged in paid work, study or voluntary activity due to the targeting of assistance to those with the most disadvantages. There are also issues of gender here as approximately two-thirds of recipients of rental housing assistance (both public housing and rent assistance payments for private renters) are female, which may well increase the importance of local neighbourhood as the place where the majority of daily routines take place.

In summary, social cohesion is a policy concept which is hard to define precisely, to operationalise, and to measure progress towards its achievement. In part, this is because

interest often stems from a generalised fear that social cohesion is weakening rather than an attempt to identify what a socially cohesive society would look like in any detail and how public policy might contribute to this (see, Jenson, 1998; and Stone and Hughes, 2002). Despite these difficulties, social cohesion has increasingly been seen in policy and research terms, particularly in Canada and Europe, as having significant value for understanding both the micro and macro processes within a society within a single framework, as well as accounting for social and economic conditions. Understanding social cohesion in this way provides an opportunity for exploring housing policy and housing assistance in a different and more holistic way, one which provides a framework for connecting housing with economic and social processes.

## **5. Housing and social cohesion: exploring the role of housing policy and housing assistance**

In the Australian context, a review by Bridge et al. (2003) found a dearth of evidence on the links between housing assistance and social and economic outcomes, as well as a lack of conceptual understanding about how dimensions of housing assistance are linked to non-shelter outcomes such as social cohesion. In this section we explore some of the potential relationships between housing and social cohesion and possible implications for the role of housing policy and housing assistance, some of which will be investigated empirically in the second stage of our research. This is not intended to be an exhaustive review, but rather to indicate some fruitful areas for investigation.

We have already looked briefly at some of the linkages in terms of two of the dimensions of social cohesion, ‘reduction of disparities, inequalities, breaks and cleavages’ and ‘social connectedness’, in our discussion of social exclusion and social capital above. Here we will explore linkages in respect of other possible dimensions.

### ***5.1 Norms underlying a sense of common purpose, codes of behaviour and support for democratic institutions***

This dimension of social cohesion is perhaps the hardest one to conceptualise but refers to norms which govern accepted behaviours, including how to deal with differences and diversity through democratic processes and institutions. It is essentially about ‘political culture’.

One of the key tenets of housing policies in Australia and similar countries is that neighbourhood diversity positively affects this dimension of social cohesion. As we said earlier, there is a fear that residential segregation by income and ethnicity undermines social cohesion, even though there may be very strong levels of intra-neighbourhood social connections. Thus governments may use housing policy as a means of providing a sense of common purpose – for example, support for home ownership as the ‘Great Australian Dream’ – that cuts across income and ethnic division. In this context we can see a long history of government support for home ownership in Australia based on the assumption that this provides individual ‘ontological security’ (see, Saunders, 1990), social stability and economic growth, as well as encouraging responsible citizenship and political participation.

Governments typically see tenure as the primary means of ensuring diversity or homogeneity in neighbourhoods. For example, housing assistance can affect tenure mix, both directly through the provision of social housing and funding of community housing, and indirectly through the program design of rent assistance for private renters which ultimately determines segments of the market that are affordable. Governments can also introduce planning and other policies to require that new developments or redevelopments have a mix of residents, often using tenure as the tool to achieve this.

### ***5.2 Social order and social control***

Housing policy may also be considered in terms of ‘social order and social control’ as the following examples indicate. Governments may choose to counter the effects of housing markets in segregating households by socio-economic status by maintaining or increasing the supply of ‘affordable housing’ in high price areas or they may decide to use housing assistance of various types to reinforce market effects and concentrate households with multiple disadvantages in contained areas as a means of securing social order. They may promote widespread home ownership to give households a stake in their neighbourhood as a means of contributing to social order and/or encourage rental arrangements to facilitate a mobile and flexible workforce. Social housing providers may have policies that are specifically aimed at maintaining social order, such as anti-social behaviour strategies, ‘swapping’ housing units assigned to particular groups or specific uses, and allocations policies such as local allocations plans that aim at reducing the number of families with teenagers on an estate.

There is also an argument that the location and type of social housing has a strong element of social control. For example, the dwelling size (generally no more than four bedrooms) determines the ‘acceptable’ size and composition of households offered housing, which has the effect of splitting up some Indigenous and migrant/refugee extended families into ‘manageable’ units. Similarly, the location of social housing may have social control objectives, whether this is the concentration of low income households in particular geographic areas that can be the subject of particular scrutiny by the police and related agencies, or strategies of social or tenure mix in redevelopment projects with the aim of introducing ‘approved’ lifestyles associated with higher income people, particularly home owners. In the United States, where there has been a long-term emphasis in housing policy on people moving to ‘lower poverty’ neighbourhoods with the assistance of housing vouchers, a recent study found that the greater the size of the African-American population – the main recipient group – the more likely a city is to support the containment of this population in public housing. In cities where the percentage of African-Americans is lower, more use is made of housing vouchers which enable movement to ‘lower poverty’ areas because they are less threatening to suburban communities.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The study found that this held true even when holding levels of poverty constant and including other controls (see, McDonnell, 1997, p. 241). The findings suggest that in cities where there is a high percentage of poor African-American households, private developers and the real estate industry prefer to concentrate them in contained geographic areas. Housing vouchers, which provide the prospect of dispersal, are seen as a threat to real estate and rental housing market profitability elsewhere, even though some individual landlords profit financially.

Social housing management often explicitly regulates behaviours, for example, through prohibition of home working, restrictions on pet ownership, and controls over taking in boarders and lodgers. Similarly, the management of ‘anti-social behaviour’ is explicitly aimed at social control. In the United Kingdom, where a general system of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders has been in place since 1998, this was seen initially as providing another tool for local authority housing managers to control such behaviour on public housing estates (see, Prior et al., 2006). In the United States there is more explicit regulation of the behaviours of social housing tenants than in Australia, with clauses in tenancy agreements for public housing requiring that tenants agree to behave in certain ways or lose their housing, such as not using illegal substances or agreeing to participate in a ‘welfare to work’ program (see, Kleit and Rohe, 2005).

### ***5.3 Place attachment and identity***

Kearns and Forrest (2000, p. 1001) highlight a general presumption that a sense of belonging and identity based on attachment to place contributes to social cohesion ‘through their positive effects upon such things as common values and norms and a willingness to participate in social networks and build social capital’. This dimension of social cohesion potentially has significant implications for housing policy makers. It could be argued, for example, that policies based on tight targeting of social housing and allocation of households to properties within a broad area to meet immediate housing needs runs the danger of placing vulnerable households in unfamiliar environments. In these environments, people may feel little sense of belonging or attachment to place, which may weaken social relations in the area and contribute to a lack of social cohesion. Similarly, policies that promote turnover in social housing, such as limited tenure leases, to make best use of a scarce resource may also have the effect of decreasing residential stability and impact adversely on belonging, place attachment and identity in ways that help weaken social cohesion. Likewise, an emphasis on the private rental sector utilising rent assistance places low income households in the tenure with greatest turnover, which may impact on personal and social identity.

Conversely, housing policies and assistance that enable a strong attachment to place and a combining of personal and place identity also have their dangers. People may retreat into small and closed communities with strong internal bonds and solidarity but with limited links with other people and places. Such communities may make societal level cohesion more difficult to achieve and also lock their residents out of access to many types of resources which are not available within that community, thus compounding economic marginalisation and social disadvantage (see, Kearns and Forrest, 2000, pp. 1001-1002). Housing policy makers might consider whether current policies and programs exacerbate this effect, concentrating already disadvantaged households into enclosed and inward-looking communities, in which there is little connection with the broader society, or whether their policies enable households to link across small local communities and/or have the choice of moving to other areas.

## 6. Conclusion

In an Australian context, social cohesion is a 'new' but potentially useful policy concept which goes beyond the social capital and social exclusion debates that we have seen in recent years. It is useful as an umbrella or framing concept which enables us to view housing policy and assistance in broader and more complex ways. A social cohesion lens enables us to ask some 'big questions' such as the extent to which housing policy attenuates or mitigates the effects of economic marginalisation and social disadvantage. At the other end of the scale, it provides a useful perspective on neighbourhoods including the ways in which housing policies and housing assistance may contribute to or mediate the processes which create disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the ways in which social processes within and between neighbourhoods contribute to social cohesion.

This paper reports on research which is exploratory; we have outlined what some of the linkages between housing, housing assistance and social cohesion may be and, in so doing, have posed many questions. Although there is some research evidence on these linkages from the international literature, there is very little from Australia. The second part of the project will explore empirically the nature and strength of some of the linkages, using, for the first time, Australian data.

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