

Chapter 9

Conclusion

9. Conclusion

9.1. Contribution to the field and meeting of objectives

The starting point of the research was a real and ongoing problem for the South Australian Housing Trust and many of its tenants. Caused by the convergence of multiple factors, The South Australian Housing Trust had been forced to begin relocating large numbers of tenants from The Parks to make way for the Parks Urban Regeneration Project. The regeneration project, while addressing many of the economic and political pressures upon the Trust, was potentially at odds with the social obligations that the Government of South Australia, through the Trust, had. Within this setting, the research has explored the problem of public housing tenant relocation from a policy, demographic, and sociological perspective. The research described in this thesis has been aimed at developing an approach to public tenant relocation, one that leads to improved outcomes for individual tenants and their households. Central to the approach developed in this research are three priorities: that tenants have increased perception of control over outcomes in the relocation process, that tenants are able to include knowledge of their own housing needs and residential desires, and that the approach promote access to good quality information that is readily understandable. A prototype SDSS was constructed as an experimental tool to meet these aims. It combined the theoretical knowledge gained from the existing literature as well as survey findings from the study population. This SDSS was designed to involve tenants in their own relocation decision, assisting them to make better, more informed relocation decisions. The prototype system was evaluated by a group of key stakeholders in The Parks relocation process, and found to have significant potential value to both tenants and administrators within the process.

While the research described in this thesis has application and direct usefulness for tenants involved in The Parks relocation process and future relocation programs undertaken Australian public housing providers, the findings also provide a contribution to the understanding of public tenant residential mobility in Australia.

The timing of this contribution is especially important because, as discussed in Chapters One and Two, while there is currently little Australian research into the mobility patterns and preferences of Australian public housing tenants, the mobility of this tenure group is likely to increase sharply in the near future.

In order to meet the primary research objective of investigating the process of public housing relocation and suggesting means of improving relocation outcomes for individual tenants, this research has met six aims. The findings regarding each are discussed below.

The research sought firstly to develop an understanding of Australian public tenant relocation within the context of urban mobility theory. This initial aim enabled the research to be based upon, and within, a strong knowledge of previous mobility research and a thorough understanding of the social and political environment that The Parks tenant relocations were taking place within. Examination of Australian and international literature showed that though the external constraints upon mobility for public housing tenants were likely to be different from other housing groups, the internal influences guiding mobility and relocation were similar. Public tenants experience increased constraint in their housing choices because of lack of ownership and financial limitations, in addition, public tenants often have other disadvantages that limit their housing choices, such as age or family structure. Because of a policy focus on public housing as a welfare vehicle, public tenants in Australia are increasingly likely to have more external limitations on their housing choice and requirements, for example they are more likely to have a disability, be aged, have a low income, or be a recently arrived migrant. Even though external influences on mobility and housing choices can vary greatly between tenure types, the internal influences tend to be very similar across all tenure types. Regardless of their tenure, households experience similar internal influences, wanting residential elements such as sufficient space, safety, security of tenure, amenity, access to family and friends, and access to services. The Residential Bundle concept was developed in this thesis to describe the rational process that households use to make relocation decisions and maximise their residential satisfaction.

The second aim in this research was to explore the concept of residential satisfaction and investigate its usefulness as a measure of positive housing outcomes from relocation. Even though Australian public tenants, as Australian citizens, were shown in Chapter Two to have a clear right to some basic level of housing, the definition of this basic level has changed significantly over the last half century. While defining housing needs is important for policy formulation, this research was focused on the individual housing requirements of tenants, and therefore an outcomes-based approach to housing provision was chosen. The outcomes-based approach was concerned with the formation and promotion of individual residential satisfaction, as the expression of their wellbeing through housing. Residential satisfaction was shown to be an extremely useful measure of individual housing outcomes. Not only does it reflect the specific housing requirements and preferences of individual households, it incorporates the calculation of trade-offs that all households make, such as if close proximity to work makes up for a small yard.

The third aim in this research was to analyse recent residential mobility patterns among tenants and non-tenants in the Adelaide metropolitan area. Investigating the residential movement, both forced and free, of the population contained within The Parks was important because it highlighted the similarities as well as the differences between the residential mobility of tenants and the wider population. Confirming the findings of Chapter Three, the public tenants of metropolitan Adelaide were shown to have very similar, though much more highly constrained, mobility behaviour. This inferred that it was the effect of economic and demographic characteristics, more than the choices of, public tenants that influenced their mobility predisposition.

The fourth aim sought to investigate the relocation choices of a sample of public housing tenants from The Parks. Within this investigation, the findings of previous mobility research were tested and compared with the actual relocation and mobility choices of tenants living in The Parks. The sample of public tenants had very similar relocation desires and preferences to those predicted in the international and especially Australian literature. A group of twelve important relocation elements were highlighted by the sample population. These twelve elements influenced the design of

the prototype SDSS, and should be incorporated into any future full-scale SDSS development.

The fifth aim sought to apply the findings to the actual problem of the improving relocation for individual public housing tenants from The Parks. The means of addressing the problem was required to be focused upon individual tenants and their households, with the goal of improving or maintaining their personal residential satisfaction during relocation. A prototype SDSS was constructed to meet this aim. The SDSS was a means of addressing the problem of tenant relocation, and including the tenant and their expert knowledge in the relocation decision. The inclusion of individual tenant knowledge and preferences in the relocation process was established as important for improving the quality of individual relocation outcomes. In addition to assisting relocation problem solving, increasing the level of perceived control possessed by tenants in the relocation process, and including valuable subjective tenant knowledge in the decision process, the SDSS represents an important exploration of the democratisation of technology. This is especially important for public housing tenants who are well established to be one of the most disempowered groups in our society. At this time of increasing technological dependence, providing more equal access to technology and its tools is crucial to attaining social justice. The SDSS, using a very simplified user interface, allowed non-traditional computer users the access to interrogate complex datasets that they would otherwise not have had access to. Research into providing this access, especially to traditionally disadvantaged populations, is increasingly important for halting the well established 'digital divide' between information haves and have-nots (Sawicki and Craig, 1996, p. 3).

The final aim in this research was to evaluate the usefulness of the SDSS approach to public tenant relocation. The evaluation process revealed an overall positive response to the SDSS concept. Key stakeholders especially liked the ease of use of the program, the simplified decision process, and the increased amount and quality of information that it provided. In addition, the ability to include tenant's expert knowledge and the simplified, non-threatening interface were valued. An important but unexpected finding from the evaluation process was the belief by some

key stakeholders that a tool such as the SDSS would beneficially increase the level of transparency in the relocation process. An analogy can be drawn between the SDSS and the Triage system developed to guide the assignment of important but limited services in the medical emergency departments of hospitals. The triage system is a logical system of distribution based purely on need where the decision system is blinded to all factors other than need for medical attention. This analogy is especially useful because of the similarity between the right to housing and the right to health.

9.2. Implications for Policy and Further Research

The problem that this research has explored is a real and increasingly important one for Australian public housing providers and tenants. While the research described in this thesis has provided significant insight, and developed a novel and promising approach to assist in addressing the problem, it has also pointed to additional questions and directions for future research.

The findings of this research highlight the social justice responsibility that the Australian government has to the residents of its welfare housing. This responsibility extends to a range of shelter and non-shelter outcomes of housing provision, such as housing that has access to basic services, and housing infrastructure that is physically adapted to meet special needs. Public tenants cannot be viewed as one homogeneous group, their shelter and non-shelter requirements vary greatly. To better meet the diverse needs of tenants, this research suggests to policy makers, the need to move away from Australian housing policy based principally on establishing and meeting minimum needs, towards more tenant-focussed approaches, directed at promoting minimum residential satisfaction outcomes for tenants. Such a policy move must be partnered with further investigation of the formation of wellbeing and residential satisfaction for public housing tenants. This research should focus centrally on qualitative research aimed at a better understand the residential and locational choices of public renters, and what services and infrastructure are most likely to promote their residential satisfaction. Very little information currently exists about the locational

choices and residential satisfaction of public tenants, and future research would provide an important basis for future policy and planning.

This research has investigated the mobility behaviour of public housing tenants using mobility data from the Australian census. While the census collects valuable mobility data, this dataset has many limitations, especially for small groups (as discussed in Chapter Five). A more purpose-built dataset, not so restricted by the need for generalised confidentiality and collected specifically for public housing tenants would enable the mobility of public tenant households to be better understood. This dataset would allow a much better understanding of where and why tenants move, providing an extremely important base for future investigation of the nature of tenant mobility. One promising potential source of this data is public housing providers. The SAHT collects and maintains very similar information, but the structure of collection means that this data cannot currently be used to track tenant movements over time. A small change in the SAHT's data collection procedure, so that historical address information was stored alongside tenant information, would allow this to occur. The detailed picture of public tenant mobility that this SAHT dataset would allow would provide an important basis for future research and allow public housing policy to be better informed by the needs of Australian public housing tenants.

Further to the call for future research into, and the creation of more knowledge about, the locational choices of Australian public tenants, this research has highlighted the need for further investigation of the usefulness and character of bottom-up approaches to public housing provision, and for research focussed on the effects of increased participation and control for tenants in the housing allocation process. United States-based studies focussed upon this have been examined, but there is a strong need to apply this research to the Australian case. The adoption of a more bottom-up approach to public housing provision is likely to improve tenant residential satisfaction by better matching tenants with the existing infrastructure, and increasing their wellbeing through an increased perception of control over housing.

There has also been a strong focus in this research on the importance of increased public participation in technology, and the investigation of potential methods

for increasing this participation using spatial technology, and any call for further research should focus on the continued development of the relocation SDSS prototype. The prototype and the concept have been shown to be a promising approach to an increasingly important problem. Future development of the SDSS would necessarily be able to incorporate the findings of the evaluation described in Chapter Eight, and make use of real rather than largely demonstration datasets. As well as refining the SDSS concept and prototype, future iterations of the SDSS could be extended to include a means for feeding back information collected during tenant relocation decisions into future planning, policy, and funding decisions made by the Trust.