

Education and Public Housing

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Abstract

Government housing assistance is provided to achieve various outcomes, including greater affordability. The shelter outcomes of assistance packages have been well documented by Australian policy makers and researchers. However, beyond the shelter impacts, housing programs can affect other important aspects of recipients' lives. These outcomes are known as non-shelter impacts of housing.

Recent studies give clear indications that housing has an influence on people's health, education, safety and employment. Among these factors, the relationship between housing and health has been subject to greatest attention. Although the link between housing and education has been mentioned in some studies, to date there is only limited research on the impact of housing upon children's education in the Australian context. Much research has targeted broad factors affecting educational outcomes but it is only in recent years that the role of housing in this equation has been addressed directly.

In a recent longitudinal survey of new public housing tenants in Brisbane, about 50 percent of parents reported improved educational performance and motivation of their children after their housing situation had stabilised, and only 10 percent reported a decrease in performance or motivation. The impact of mobility is a significant issue in this regard.

The research supporting this paper consists of qualitative interviews given by public housing tenants in Brisbane who have school-aged children, and who have lived in their present housing for a few years. The purpose of the interviews was to help identify pathways between housing and educational outcomes. In conclusion the paper addresses policy implications of the research findings.

1. Introduction

Many factors affecting performance at school have been documented thoroughly in the research literature. The following have been suggested as key influences (see, Hess and

Holloway, 1984; Brody *et al.*, 1995; Reynolds, 1999; Wright, 1999; Temple and Reynolds, 1999; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Scott, 2004):

- Socio-economic status of parents;
- Educational status of parents;
- Income;
- Gender;
- Ethnicity;
- Quality of school; and
- Socio-economic status of the neighbourhood.

Using public housing as a case study, this paper examines a link between housing and educational performance for school-age children. Such a study fits within a branch of housing research dealing with *non-shelter outcomes*. Beyond its obvious role in providing shelter, housing can have impacts on health, employment, well-being and, in this instance, educational outcomes.¹

The paper begins by reviewing the available literature. It then describes a research project that was funded by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), in which parents from various public housing programs in Brisbane participated in a longitudinal study of the impacts of housing assistance.

2. Literature review

To better understand relationships between housing and children's education, one has to look beyond shelter aspects of housing. Phibbs and Young (2005, p.3) consider the distinctive nature of housing as a 'good':

Housing provides not only the benefits of shelter but also, through location, access to a further bundle of goods and services. Housing is a complex good. The fact that housing is provided in a fixed location means that it can also generate a number of positive or negative local impacts. Moreover, since housing is usually the single most expensive outlay for low to middle income families, housing costs can affect a household's ability to purchase other goods and services.

Young (2002) in an earlier piece of work had suggested a summary table showing the relationship between housing and education. It is largely reproduced in Table 1. The table attempts to identify the issue, a possible process and the outcome of this process for the parent/carer and/or the child.

¹ A participant in the interviews supporting this paper describes it this way: "It's not just the housing but in other areas. Not only financially but it spills over into other areas of our lives as well, such as the kids' education, my health – because I have had some health problems – it's helped in those areas as well... not only the housing aspect of it, but all these other areas too."

Table 1: A framework for understanding relationships between housing and educational outcomes for children

Aspects of housing →	Possible processes →	Possible outcomes
Security of tenure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular unplanned moves due to instability in private rental market 	Broken friendships for children Broken relationships for parents	Increased stress and depression, poorer health, inability to concentrate Increased household stress, less external supports
Dwelling amenity <i>Size internal</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indoor play space; • Shared/separate bedrooms; • Space for uninterrupted homework time; <i>Quality internal</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repair and amenity; • Safety; • Adequacy of services such as kitchen and bathroom; 	Increased family conflict/punitive parenting due to closer contacts in home Broken sleep due to age differences between siblings sharing bedrooms Failure to complete homework reliably Self esteem More rules to maintain safety in physically dangerous environment Poorer diet due to inadequate food storage and preparation spaces	Poorer health and increased days absence due to stress Less able to concentrate and increased days absence through illness Perceptions of teacher and child affected by homework not completed Child sees self as less able to succeed due to lower self-worth Increased conflict, increased stress, reduced health, reduced capacity to concentrate Increased illness and increased days absent
Neighbourhood <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education and employment status of neighbours and school peers; • Physical amenity of local community; • Quality of local resources, especially local schools; <i>Street</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traffic and other street noise; • Safety on local street; 	Peer influence – nature of role models Self esteem Attitudes, morale and expertise of teaching and support staff Ongoing auditory stimulation – contributing to language development delays Broken sleep Delayed development of independence due to reduced opportunity for outdoor play	Reduced motivation for school success Child sees self as less able to succeed due to lower self-worth Lower expectations of children (self-fulfilling prophesy) Less ability to remediate as needed Reduced school readiness Less able to concentrate, and poorer health Reduced school readiness
Housing cost	Reduced capacity to buy nutritious food Reduced capacity to buy toys, books, computers and to afford outings Increased worry regarding money	Poorer health and increased days absent Developmental delays and reduced school readiness Poorer health, increased family conflict, inability to concentrate

Source: Based on Young (2002)

Broadly, Table 1 describes a range of possible “interactions” between housing and education. In addition to tenure and the related issue of housing costs, two other housing issues interacting with educational outcomes are dwelling and neighbourhood. Dwelling issues include dwelling quality with regard to maintenance and design, and size.

2.1 Housing costs and tenure

Housing is available to a family or a household usually at the expense of some costs. These costs can take up a significant portion of the family’s income, especially if they belong to the low to middle income group (see, Young, 2002). Higher housing costs, therefore, result in less disposable income - the family will be left with less money in hand to spend on other resources. It may have implications for the expenditure on educational resources for the children. For example, work by Burke and Hulse (2002) reveals that 72% and 84% of single parents living in public housing and private rental housing with rental subsidy respectively were not able to pay school excursion fees for their children.

After interviewing fourteen public housing tenants in Brisbane, Young (2002) reports that the primary source of financial stress for them was the costs associated with private rental housing in which most of them were living before moving into their present accommodation. In their previous housing, these households faced difficulties in buying essential goods such as nutritious food. The inability to afford a variety of resources is likely to have a bearing on children’s education. Therefore, it is not surprising that some respondents in Young’s study identified the primary benefit of moving into public housing was the increase in disposable income resulting from the decrease in housing costs.

The literature also indicates that housing tenure can affect children’s education through the issue of housing stability - unstable housing is not conducive to academic progress (see, Blunden & Johnston, 2005). A variety of Australian evidence shows that private rental is a relatively unstable tenure. For example, Bell and Hugo indicate that as many as 62% of the households belonging to the private rental market changed their residence during 1995-96. People living in the rental market constituted about 25% of the population, but they contributed more than 50% to all the moves in this period (see, Bell & Hugo, 2000). However, all types of housing moves are not likely to have similar impacts on families. Change of residence can be broadly two types depending on whether the family decided to move on their own or they were compelled to do so under some circumstances (see, Tucker *et al.*, 1998).

Planned moves are easier for a family to handle than unintended moves (see, Young, 2002). The latter type of moves can raise the stress level in the family and there is a possibility that it will affect the children as well (see, Phibbs, 2002). Moves can make family members more demanding. A family usually loses social ties in the neighbourhood when they move out of the area and as a result the members can be forced to be more dependent on one another.

Change of school triggered by change of residence may create hurdles for children’s academic progress (see, Alexander *et al.*, 1996). After the change the children face a new

school environment comprising of new teachers, a new peer group and possibly a new curriculum (see, Young, 2002). In a similar vein, children face a new neighbourhood and new neighbours when they move to a new area. They are under pressure to adjust to the new school and neighbourhood environment and hence residential plus school moves will be in fact a 'double dose' for them. A number of empirical studies have found a negative association between school changes and academic performance (see, GAO, 1994; Haveman *et al.*, 1991; Stoneman *et al.*, 1999; Temple & Reynolds, 1999) However, care is required while interpreting these results as academic performance can be affected by a range of factors and it may be difficult to isolate the impact of school changes.

2.2 The dwelling

There has been considerable research, especially in developmental psychology, linking household resources with child outcomes such as cognitive development and school performance. However, few researchers have emphasised the role of the physical environment in children's educational development, or dealt with housing amenity issues such as overcrowding. Bartlett (1997) studies the home environment and parental practices from two perspectives and links them to children's cognitive development. First, she considers how home environments can influence the child-rearing behaviour of some parents. She notes that for some poor families without control over their housing environment, housing can be a source of environmental stress through bad location, inadequate space, and unsafe and poor neighbourhoods. Parents in this situation cannot provide appropriate resources for children's development, while higher levels of stress are not conducive to child-friendly home environments (see, Baharudin & Luster, 1998).

Although sometimes mediated through parental behaviour, the dwelling aspects found related to children's development include:

- access to outdoors;
- crowding;
- interior design; and
- quality.

Where there are insufficient indoor space and outdoor access, frustrated parents may engage in punitive practices (see, Parke, 1978; Peterman, 1981). High-rise units have been criticised for failing to provide proper access to outdoor facilities, and evidence shows a resulting adverse impact on child-parent interaction and children's cognitive progress (see, Hart, 1986; Vliet, 1983). When young children play outside, parents want the option of providing constant vigilance over activities (see, Bartlett, 1997).

There is no uniform definition of overcrowding, and concepts of overcrowded living conditions vary among cultures. Living conditions viewed as too dense by some groups can be considered quite reasonable by others (see, Altman & Chemers, 1980).

Bartlett (1997, p.178) summarises the effects of crowding on parents, children and child-rearing behaviour:

Crowding implies not only inadequate physical space for the number of people in a household, but also can mean more household traffic, higher noise levels, greater frequency of interpersonal encounters, and less opportunity for privacy or breaking contact. Such conditions within the household have been observed to affect the interaction between parents and children in two significant ways: They reduce parental responsiveness, and they increase the need for discipline and control.

Goux and Maurin (2005) support these views and add that likelihood of sickness in overcrowded conditions is greater, due to issues of cross-infection. Bartlett (1997) lists several co-relational investigations that show parents living in crowding conditions have less control over their children and almost no idea what their children are up to. Parents in this situation often resort to punitive practices. Applying French Labour Force Survey data, Goux and Maurin (2005) use an econometric model to conclude that the chance of repeating school grades increases with the number of children per room, even after taking into account a family's size and socio-economic situation.

Interior design and layout is a less well-researched area with regard to housing environment and children. Dwelling design can influence parenting behaviour and sometimes succeeds in ameliorating the impacts of overcrowding (see, Bartlett, 1997). Floor layout can solve the problem of privacy to some extent, and reduce unwanted interactions between family members. Bartlett (1997) cites one study where visual openness was found to be an important element in parenting style. Parents of young children resorted less frequently to rules and embargos when able to observe activities. While openness seems to favour parental supervision of young children, older children appear to have a greater need for private space in order to complete schoolwork undisturbed by siblings, and in a quieter environment (see, Wachs, 1979).

Quality of housing seems to influence children's educational outcomes chiefly through health. Wilner *et al.* (1962) noted health as an important mediating factor between housing and schooling relationships. Young (2002) states poor housing can limit academic performance through higher frequency of illness, which increases days absent from school. Poor housing can cause or exacerbate children's health problems such as asthma through dust, mould and cockroach infestation (see, Sandel *et al.*, 1999).

2.3 Neighbourhood aspects

A growing body of literature has studied neighbourhood characteristics with regard to child development. Much has attempted to relate children's academic outcomes to neighbourhood poverty or socioeconomic status in general. According to Huttenmoser (1995), the neighbourhood can influence parent-child relationships. Neighbourhood resources can provide an outlet for release of tension when the home atmosphere is stressful (see, Bartlett, 1997). They can assist parents to offer children a better home environment.

Alongside stress relief, the home surroundings can provide access to neighbours who may benefit both parents and children. Children can communicate with proximate peers and adults who may assist their development. Adults in their neighbourhood who become role models often guide children's aspirations.

The neighbourhood also influences children's cognitive development by providing access to schools. School quality can have significant bearing on children's academic performance (see, McCulloch & Joshi, 2001). Children living in unsafe and crime-prone neighbourhoods are vulnerable to problematic behaviours such as hyperactivity, violence and withdrawal, irrespective of the family environment (see, Peeples & Loeber, 1994). Recent research highlights the neighbourhood's role in building social capital. After conducting a literature review McCulloch & Joshi (2001, p. 580) observe:

Social capital, which is derived from density and quality of social ties, exists within families, as well as neighbourhoods and communities. Neighbourhoods, communities, and schools often serve as institutions that help transfer of social capital, as they constitute social structures which bind people together. Having strong neighbourhood connections can provide an environment that reinforces school achievement.

Several empirical studies have found moderate to strong associations between neighbourhood poverty and children's academic performance (see, Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Children living in high-income neighbourhoods have been found to be academically better performers than those living in middle-income neighbourhoods. However, many of these studies problematically isolate family impact from neighbourhood impact (see, Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2004). Moreover, as is the case for many dwelling studies, research associated with neighbourhoods has often utilised secondary datasets, and may suffer from problems of missing variables. It should be noted most of this research is from the USA where large variations exist between neighbourhoods, especially regarding quality of schools.

A great deal of US research on the impact of neighbourhoods has been undertaken in the context of relocation programs. Goetz (2003) provides an excellent review of these programs. One major relocation program is called the Moving to Opportunity Program (MTO). The MTO program, begun in the 1990s, is attempting to obtain more conclusive evidence of neighbourhood impacts by assigning families into one of three groups using a lottery format. In the experimental group, families are required to move into areas with poverty rates of 10 percent or less and they are provided with special counselling, whilst families in the comparison group are allowed to move into any neighbourhood using vouchers. The control group consists of families who remain in public housing. Varady and Walker (2003) report that MTO's positive effects on children are of "particular interest". Both Katz *et al.* (2001) and Ludwig *et al.* (2001) found that school wide reading and math scores or pass rates were significantly higher in the treatment group children's schools, compared with the scores or rates of the control groups children's schools. They also reported evidence of MTO having a positive effect on individual educational performance. However, Popkin *et al.* (2002) using a qualitative research approach noted that the educational benefits were less significant. They reported that some of the children had problems adjusting at their new schools (usually due to greater competition and higher standards).

The literature review supports the multi-factorial relationship between housing and educational outcomes described in Table 1. Housing has the potential to affect children's academic outcomes not only through dwelling quality, size and design but also through neighbourhood resources. However, much of the available literature is from the US which is difficult to apply in the Australian context for a number of reasons.

1. The variations in school quality is greater in the USA than in Australia;
2. The level of discrimination in some "better" USA neighbourhoods may cancel out more positive neighbourhood effects;
3. The variations in income and income support are likely to be greater in the USA than in Australia; and
4. The quality of public housing is likely to be superior in Australia than in many parts of the USA where little public housing has been built for twenty years.

In particular, operational details of the actual mechanisms affecting the relationship between housing and educational outcomes is reasonably uncertain in the Australian context. This research attempts to fill this research gap through a qualitative survey of public housing tenants. Their experience of the impact of changes in housing circumstances on educational outcomes for their children provides rich insights into how different aspects of housing can affect educational outcomes.

3. Background to the study

Phibbs and Young's (2005) research is the first Australian longitudinal study investigating four non-shelter outcomes of housing – employment, health, crime and education. Their research highlighted the positive impacts of improved housing on educational outcomes.² Using a longitudinal study design, their research tracked a range of Brisbane households who were interviewed just after entering public housing in 2001 (T_1) and six months later (T_2). One hundred and seventy eight households were interviewed at T_1 and one hundred and fifty one at T_2 .

Respondents were asked if their children were at the same school at T_2 as they were at T_1 . Ninety two percent of respondents indicated they were at the same school. This stable pattern is in contrast to frequent changes in schooling reported before respondents moved into public housing – at which time only 36% of children had attended the same school over the last two years, and 40% had attended 3 or more schools.

Educational performance was examined by asking respondents to comment on their children's performance over the last term of school. They were then asked to indicate whether this performance was better or worse than in the term before moving into public housing. Performance was estimated on two measures:

- Subject performance, i.e. children's performance in school subjects; and
- Motivation performance, i.e. their level of motivation.

⁴ This research is more fully documented in Phibbs and Young (2005).

Table 2 shows a comparison of educational performance before and after the move to public housing. Respondents indicated there had been significant improvements.

Table 2: Comparison of the educational performance of children before and after moving into Public Housing.

	Subject Performance (%)	Motivation Performance (%)
Better	53	45
Worse	7	10
About the same	40	45
Total	100	100

N=60

Source: Phibbs and Young (2005, p. 45)

Phibbs and Young's survey provides some empirical evidence that, in many cases, improved housing has a positive impact on educational outcomes for children. However, their study has several limitations. First, the number of children included in the survey was quite small – approximately 60 children from about 32 households. Second, the time interval between T_1 and T_2 was quite small at only 6 months. Some educational impacts may take longer to manifest; and some observed changes may have been due to a *honeymoon* effect. Thirdly, the survey did not explore in detail the operation of triggers to changed educational outcomes. A pre-coded question explored why educational outcomes may have changed for children; but education was only one of many non-shelter outcomes examined in the study.

The research detailed in this paper addresses the second and third limitations described above. The first limitation is being addressed in another research task being undertaken by the same authors.⁵

4. Method

The research supporting this paper aims to identify how changed housing conditions can bring positive or negative school outcomes, and explores mechanisms by which housing can affect educational performance. A qualitative research method was chosen using a set of in-depth interviews. It was considered that this approach would best answer the “how” questions identified by the literature review. A series of focus groups was considered but rejected for two reasons – the researchers considered that the personal nature of the subject would mean that parents would have difficulty providing answers in a group context, and it was also important to examine the family dwellings so some dwelling specific issues could be observed (e.g. issues of space).

⁵ This research will use a secondary database to compare changes in Year 7 and Year 5 Basic Skills Test results for children who have moved into public housing between these two tests. The main idea is to provide a statistically reliable measure of links between changed housing conditions and school performance.

Building upon the previous longitudinal study (as described in the literature review), the authors conducted interviews with the Brisbane public housing tenants in the study who have school-aged children. The findings below thus represent wave 3 or T_3 of the Brisbane longitudinal study. They focus explicitly on the issue of children's education.

From a list of 151 respondents who participated in T_2 , households with school-aged children at the time of moving into public housing were identified. This criterion yielded 32 households. It was decided to contact all of them with a target of interviewing at least 20 households. This number falls within the recommended range of 5 to 25 individuals who should be subjected to long interviews in this type of study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2004).

An attempt was made to contact participants over the phone in order to make an appointment for interviews. All of them had at least one contact number and some had an additional mobile phone number recorded on the list prepared at T_2 . These numbers were tried several times over two weeks. Twenty parents were contacted by phone, and all agreed to be interviewed. The remaining 12 households who could not be contacted by phone were sent letters at their last known public housing addresses. They were informed of the purpose of the research and asked to contact researchers on given numbers. Three households contacted the researchers and expressed a desire to be interviewed. In total, 23 households were interviewed.

There were large variations in the nature of households. The residential addresses of the interviewees were dispersed geographically across Brisbane. Only 4 pairs of households were located in the same suburb, while the other 15 households were all located in different suburbs. At the time of residing for at least six months in public housing (at T_2), each household had at least one school-aged child. The children's ages varied from 6 to 16 at that time, and the number of children varied from 1 to 4 per household. Households varied in structure: there were 15 single mothers living with at least one child, 2 single fathers living with at least one child, 5 couples with children, and 1 grandfather living with one child. The variation was thought to be ideal to capture all salient features of the housing-schooling relationship.

The method of data collection from these households was primarily semi-structured interviews by the authors with parents, lasting from about 30 minutes to over an hour. In two cases a couple was interviewed. As the participants had lived at least three years in public housing, they were first asked to comment on the positives and negatives of living in that housing. Second they were asked to comment on housing amenity, neighbourhood, housing costs, stability, health, employment status and their children's education, if these were not initially mentioned. The idea was to get 'top-of-head' responses from them about these issues with minimal prompts from the interviewer. The experience and knowledge of the interviewers were used to probe issues raised. Interviews were complemented by direct observations in some cases (e.g. concerning the level of traffic noise, or design features of the housing).⁶

Using these methods, it was possible to identify a number of mechanisms via

⁶ The use of direct observations has advantages in this sort of research, since the findings of a case study are likely to be more convincing and accurate if they are based on several sources of information (Yin, 1994).

which housing can impact on children's education. For the purpose of ensuring anonymity participants' names have been changed, while other facts have been kept intact. The main outcomes of interviews are discussed in the next section.

5. Pathways between housing conditions and school outcomes

The primary objective of this research was to identify pathways between housing and children's school outcomes. A detailed description of the analysis of the interview data is in Khan (forthcoming). What is included in this paper is a summary of the chief connections or pathways between the changes in housing of the respondents and educational outcomes of their children. Pathways are included when at least one parent provides a description that is plausible in terms of their situation and the literature described above. The chief pathways identified during interviews are discussed below.

5.1 Greater disposable income

Among all the positive aspects of moving into public housing, improvements in housing affordability were a major issue for many parents. In almost all cases participants were able to afford a well-maintained and larger house in a better neighbourhood, which would have been impossible had they remained dependent on the private rental market. Under public housing programs, participants were paying 25% of their income on rent. Most were unemployed when they first moved in, which effectively resulted in a rent reduction. The rate of reduction varied from 6% to 71% per household. For households on limited incomes, this resulted in a significant increase in disposable income. The money could be spent on a range of goods including educational resources like computers and Internet access.

Nancy emphasised that limited resources affected not only her ability to purchase educational goods, but also her ability to parent:

"The rent was such a larger proportion of the income it was harder to balance the budget so things like uniforms, text book and things like that... it was difficult to get those things... to give them the essentials so that they could concentrate on study... so that was a bit difficult in that they didn't have the resources for school.... With that being a stress for me, that sort of affected my parenting of the children as well."

In contrast, when she moved into public housing she made these comments about being able to purchase a computer for her kids:

"...that was a big thing because they are doing computers so early in school... they would come home and wouldn't be able to put those things into practice... we struggled for a while but I was able to purchase a computer... we have a maths package that has been a great help my youngest boy who was having difficulty with maths but now he feels very comfortable."

Kelly works full time as a childcare worker, and comments: “A great thing is the house rent is in line with my wages.” When asked whether the savings in rent made any difference to her children’s education, she replied, “definitely, because they can afford to go to camps now. The average camp costs \$200.” She also mentioned that she bought a new computer recently that would reduce her 14 year-old daughter’s visits to the library. She thinks her younger daughter (aged 11) now needs to have Internet access, which she will arrange after purchasing a modem. Kelly thinks the Internet is like a second language and that children can learn much through its use. An increase in disposable income means Kelly can buy these resources.

While some parents were able to buy additional educational resources due to reduced rent, for a few parents it was a bigger change as they were able to afford basic things for their children’s school which they could not do before. Samantha explained how the increase in disposable income helped her to buy basic educational resources in this way:

“More money in my pocket helped Susan’s schoolwork – excursions, even a project, even school books. I was not able to buy school books and teachers would ask ‘why don’t you have this book? Why don’t you have that book?’ I didn’t have money to buy them. I had to write to the teacher to get off my back, get off Susan’s back. But, now I can buy books a year before when they are on discount and I can afford that and she is ready for the next year. It is a huge difference. She can now go to excursions. Everything you do at school is going to cost.”

In summary, an increase in disposable income had benefits for the children with regard to their education, plus additional benefits flowing from reduced financial stress felt by their parents/carers.

5.2 Security of tenure

Stability and affordability are two aspects that emerged most often during discussions with study participants. Stability has specific implications for children’s school life. In general, parents opposed frequent changes of schools and favoured staying in one school for as long as possible. Due to the often-unstable nature of private rental housing (in which most of the respondents were living before they entered public housing), some households had to make frequent moves. This sometimes resulted in several school changes for their children.

For example, one single parent with 5 children recalled that her two eldest children had moved 12 times during their school years. For children, a change of school plus residence means a loss of friends at school and in the neighbourhood, and a requirement to cope with a new school environment – with new friends, teachers and often curriculum. In the case of one couple with three children, one of the main reasons they had applied for public housing was a result of pressure from their children who were just entering high school. The children did not want to deal with changing schools and suburbs during high school years.

The move into public housing generally led to big changes in terms of stability. Participants felt much more settled and schooling was less of a hassle for them. Children knew they could continue in the same school. When asked to reflect on the positive and negative aspects of living in public housing, a single mother with 5 children described the situation in these ways:

“I’ve found it very good – just the stability part of it – this is the most stable I have been – the most I’ve been in one place – it’s been so stable... it’s the most I have been in one place. That’s been a big improvement in our lifestyle and the kids’ education.”

Kirsten, a single parent with two children, mentioned that changing schools a few months after the beginning of the school year is a particular problem for a child, since students have formed their groups of friends and it is difficult for new students to join any group. As a result those children may feel isolated, which does not help their educational outcomes at the new school. This had happened to Kirsten’s children as a result of unplanned moves within the private rental market.

Samantha, a single parent with two children (Susan in upper primary and Aden 2 years), had moved many times when she herself was at school. She knew the consequences of changing schools and neighbourhoods during school life and did not want the same things to happen to her children. Contrary to what she had planned however, Samantha had to move quite a few times with her daughter. At one stage her daughter told her to stop moving as she was losing her friends as a result of their moves. Now they are living in stable accommodation, Samantha says her daughter Susan can feel the difference. She finds that Susan’s friends can now remember their phone number and address, and describes her situation this way:

“I like that I have a secure house for the kids... Aden has not lived anywhere else. That is nice; when I was a kid we moved and moved and moved. Susan growing up has moved, moved, and moved. Now I am here and haven’t moved for a long time. This is the longest I have lived in one spot in my entire life. Finally I have settled.”

A reduction in stress associated with the stability provided by public housing was seen as a major positive outcome. All participants identified one key benefit of their new housing situation as their ability to remain in public housing as long as they wanted, provided they kept up to date with rent. This is in stark contrast to living in the private rental market. There they were under the constant mental pressure of not knowing whether they could remain in their housing beyond the term of their current lease. This resulted in a great deal of stress for many of them, which was alleviated once they moved into public housing.

The stresses of living in the private rental market are described by Nancy by contrasting her experience in the private rental market with her current housing:⁷

⁷ Notice how the issue of control is important, echoing the point made by Bartlett and discussed in the literature review.

“It feels like my housing... I don’t feel like an axe is going to come down and I have no control over it... I feel I have more power within myself and more control and I don’t feel at the mercy of someone else ... I have more control.”

Samantha highlighted an issue arising from this sort of stress:

“I just know that the security where you live in is like taking 60% chunk out of your stress. If I am less stressed then obviously my daughter is less stressed.”

Almost all respondents suggested public housing reduces stress levels by providing stability for both them and their children. Nancy highlighted how a reduction in stress had resulted in better education outcomes for one of her children:

“He has really improved... gone from Bs and Cs up to As and Bs... I attribute that to not having to worry, not having to move, not having to shift... and I don’t have to worry about that, I am stress free so I can give them the time and attention that they need and as a result they are doing better at school.”

She also described how reductions in stress helped her health:

“I mentioned that before, my health is related to the stress as well... it gets worse when I’m stressed. It’s something that I am aware of... it’s something I need to manage.... Since I have moved in the housing has been managed and my health has improved... so then I can concentrate on the other things such as being a more effective parent.”

5.3 Dwelling amenity

5.3.1 Dwelling quality and health issues

Asthma is quite a common health issue amongst children of the respondents, and can result in an increase in the number of days absent from school. Asthma is usually worse in dwellings that have dust and mould, conditions often associated with damp houses and/or houses with old carpets. The respondents indicated that many private rental properties in Brisbane have old carpets. Public housing in Brisbane meanwhile is usually provided without carpet, which often results in a sharp reduction in the incidence of household dust.

Tina is an immigrant with two children. She lived in private rental accommodation before shifting to public housing. She now lives in a spacious detached dwelling, whereas her previous accommodation was a unit. Tina feels her own sinus problem and her daughter’s asthma problem have improved a great deal since moving into their current housing. In her words:

“Before, I was living in a unit and it had carpet. [Besides my daughter] it was giving me problems, even for myself – I was having allergies and trouble with my sinuses. I was allergic to dust... It was an old carpet and the owner didn’t want to change it. He said if you want to change it, then change it by yourself. How am I going to change it? It is not my house... All of our health has improved [since moving into this housing].”

Tina’s poor health associated with her previous housing had direct implications for her children’s schooling. When Tina became sick, she could not drive the kids to school and they missed class. In addition her daughter was often sick with asthma. For health reasons, the children missed about 4 days per term in that period. Following the move to public housing this dropped to about 1 day per term.

Elizabeth, a single parent, is certain her children’s health has improved as a result of moving into her present housing. She lives with her 4 children. Her previous housing was affected by mould and dust. Her children had asthma and respiratory problems, and damp house conditions made the problem worse. Her present dwelling is airy without mould or dust problems. As a result her kids’ health has improved considerably and they have not been seriously sick since moving into their new housing. In the last few years the number of visits to the doctor for her family members has reduced considerably. She estimates that for her sickest child, missed school days have reduced from about 13 days per term to approximately one day per term.

Michelle, a single parent with one child, explained that her child previously missed at least 10 days a term in school due to asthma. Michelle considered this had hindered her academic progress. When they changed house, her daughter’s ability to maintain better attendance patterns improved a great deal.

5.3.2 Size and other dwelling issues

For many participant families, changes in housing from private rental to public rental also resulted in changes within the home environment. Unaffordable rent in the private rental market meant households often had to trade off dwelling size for lower rent. In that situation, children in families with more than one child often had to share bedrooms. Their education sometimes suffered as a result, as they were unable to study undisturbed and in some cases engaged in sibling ‘fighting’. In a few households children had no proper place to do homework. The situation for these families changed dramatically when they were allotted public housing, as they were able to live in larger, more appropriate accommodation while simultaneously paying cheaper rent. This meant the children could have bedrooms of their own and engage themselves undisturbed in studies.

Tina, who had a boy and a girl with an age gap of 5 years, commented:

“This house is better because my kids have their own bedroom now... They are very happy – they were always fighting before...she wants to study. He didn’t leave her alone... he wanted to play in the room... they ended up fighting. But now they have their own rooms, so she can do her homework in her room...”

Kelly is a childcare worker with two daughters Cassie and Ricky, aged 15 and 11 respectively. She raised an important issue pertaining to security. As she is occupied with her job throughout the day, it is not possible for her to supervise her children after school. In their new dwelling, Ricky does her homework at home before Kelly returns from work. This did not happen in their previous dwelling because Kelly considered it unsafe for Ricky to be alone in the house. Kelly now lives in a house with good security in a safer neighbourhood, and thinks this has helped Ricky's education.

Samantha described her previous house as a health risk, but was unable to find alternative private rental housing she could afford. She considered that more space for her daughter had led to better outcomes:

“Susan has probably improved in school. Bigger space has helped in her studies, she has her own room and own desk .She can do work in her own room. The other place was so tiny it was difficult to do projects.”

Several additional issues were raised concerning negative outcomes for children's studies. Alex lives in a middle suburb of Brisbane and his dwelling is located on a busy road. Alex complained that his son found it harder to study with so much traffic noise. Maria, a single parent with two children, used to own a home that she designed herself. She does not like the design of her present house. It is not possible for her to see her kids playing outside when she is working in the kitchen. She feels it is more stressful for parents supervising children in house like her current dwelling.

5.4 The neighbourhood

5.4.1 A better school

During the interviews parents considered school quality to be a central issue. The two main points they raised were the quality of teachers and the attitudes of other students to schoolwork.

5.4.2 Friendship networks

In some cases, children were able to make new friends or find old friends in new neighbourhoods. In other cases this has not happened. Children belonging to the former category were able to enjoy time out of school time with their friends. Parents reported that happier kids were more likely to be interested in their studies.

Maria reported that her daughter Anne had more friends at her previous private rental housing. Anne has moved away from her friends and Maria thinks it has been bad for her morale and performance at school.

Parents/carers considered that children's motivation towards their studies improved if they had a more motivated peer group in their new neighbourhood. Sally is a single mother of two children living in the northern part of Brisbane, not too distant from the city and in a locality with good resources and public transport access. Her three children are Shaun (aged 12), Megan (aged 6) and Martin (aged 4). Sally thinks quality of the school is important for better progress in studies. Shaun changed schools after shifting to

their present address, and his performance improved – especially motivation performance. Sally thinks the new school has better teachers, a good principal and a motivated peer group. Shaun previously lived a long way from his friends, and his peer group did not have much interest in school or learning. In his new dwelling Shaun lives in close proximity to his school friends. In Sally’s own words:

“Shaun’s improvement in motivation [towards studies] has a lot to do with his teachers and friends [in the neighbourhood]...they do homework together. One of his friends has computer and internet and Shaun is able to use the facilities there. They help one another.”

In some cases, parents cited reduction in their social networks as one negative outcome of their new housing. In certain cases this resulted in feelings of isolation for the parents, who were concerned this also negatively affected their children.

6. Conclusions and policy implications

6.1 Conclusions

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the research findings presented in this paper:

1. There is evidence that the aspects of housing identified by Young (2002) in Table 1 each has impacted upon educational outcomes for children of the parents/carers in this study. In regards to individual elements of Young’s table, the only issues that did not emerge were those concerning diet and illness, and housing and self-esteem of children.
2. Positive impacts of the change in housing circumstances identified at T₂ during the initial Brisbane longitudinal study have been sustained into T₃. Whilst some negative impacts were mentioned, mostly relating to the loss of the social networks, it must be acknowledged that those with very negative experiences may have left public housing and hence were not participants in this follow-up research.
3. It would appear that the scale of these impacts depends on the number of dimensions ‘in play’ for each household. Whilst all respondents reported a reduction in stress resulting from increased security in their new housing, the extent of impacts upon educational outcomes varied from household to household.

This last point requires further discussion. In situations where previous housing was often generating significant problems for the household (because of size, condition, location and/or cost), and the new housing was appropriately designed and in a good location, the improvements in educational outcomes appeared to be the largest. Where the new housing is considered less appropriate (e.g. located near a busy road in a household with young children), the improvements in educational outcomes are reduced. Specifically, the largest reported gains in educational outcomes occurred when:

- households had very limited financial resources before they moved into public housing and hence ended up in an inappropriate dwelling;
- parents/carers/children had poor health in the previous dwelling and those health issues were housing related (e.g. related to dust or damp, or stress from very frequent moves); and
- where the child had experienced some learning difficulties in the previous dwelling.

One strong theme that emerged concerned the impacts of housing upon the ability of parents to cope and parent effectively. Some participants raised the issue of being ‘overloaded’ and unable to take on any more stress. In earlier research, Phibbs and Young (2005) identified a theory of cognitive overload. The results of the current interviews certainly seem to support a view that cognitive overload is a reality for a number of parents. One participant suggested that secure housing reduced her stress by 60%; while in a statement similar to Bartlett’s position as discussed in the literature review, another commented that she could focus on becoming a more effective parent now that her housing was settled.

Although not a major theme of this research, there was a clear indication that good housing arrangements allowed people to focus on employment issues. Many respondents were working and/or undertaking training. This could be a fruitful area for further research.

6.2 Policy issues

In their paper to the 2003 National Housing Conference, Phibbs and Young (2003) identified four policy suggestions on the basis of their research. These were:

1. Changing public housing allocation policies with a view to improving educational outcomes for children, especially children with learning difficulties. Just as persons with a disability might be given priority, educational issues could be introduced into the criteria to gain access to priority housing (e.g. by using a concept of a “learner-at-risk”);
2. Developing housing assistance products that focus on increasing residential stability, such as products aimed at lengthening residential leases, to reduce the number of times children in highly mobile private rental households need to change schools;
3. Providing rental subsidies targeted at maintaining primary school students at one school (particularly children requiring school based remediation). Parents who were unable to find appropriate accommodation near their school could apply for these subsidies through their State Housing Authority; and
4. Government education departments developing programs aimed at reducing the impact of frequent moves on educational performance, through such mechanisms as better case management of children with learning difficulties when they change schools, and better monitoring of children who are frequent school movers.

The research findings from this paper suggest each of these policy options are worthy of further investigation by relevant agencies. In addition this research has identified two further issues:

1. Social isolation of public housing tenants presents real problems for some households. A community development approach where service agencies provide programs aimed at reducing isolation would be worth investigating;
2. Some public housing tenants have considerable skills and knowledge about how to successfully navigate the public housing and welfare systems. A structured program that tries to use these skills to give assistance to new public housing tenants could be beneficial for both providers and recipients of this advice.

This paper has attempted to identify and describe the main pathways between housing and educational outcomes for children. The findings confirm the results of earlier research, and identify situations where the greatest positive improvements in educational outcomes occur in relation to housing. Ongoing research into links between the provision of housing assistance and the results of Basic Skills Tests will add an important element to this research on non-shelter outcomes: it will enable researchers to determine the extent to which findings from this paper can be generalised in an Australian context.

7. References

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