



NUMBER THREE

The evidence base for social mix

Why social mix?

According to its supporters, social mix is meant to solve the problem of concentrated disadvantage in the following ways:

- it will give disadvantaged people access to wider social networks, influence and opportunities, and in particular, to the word of mouth networks that help people to get jobs;
- it will facilitate greater interaction between people of different backgrounds, which will help lower community tensions and reduce the prevalence of crime and anti-social behaviour;
- it will provide disadvantaged people with middle-class role models, who will demonstrate and enforce mainstream behaviour and aspirations and cultural 'norms';
- it will create more 'stable', 'cohesive', 'sustainable' communities;
- it will draw investment into the area, with wealthier residents demanding and attracting shops, services and private investment;
- it will provide greater housing choice to public housing tenants and other disadvantaged people; and
- it will overcome the stigma that is attached to communities dominated by public housing.

But does it work? Some of the words researchers have used to describe the evidence base for social mix are: inconclusive, contradictory, inconsistent, incomplete, fragmented, ambiguous, exaggerated.

Interaction: Most of the gains claimed for social mix hinge upon residents from different social groups interacting with each other. This interaction would need to be of sufficient depth to lead to low-income earners emulating the behaviour of 'role model' neighbours, provide better access to job opportunities, and reduce the incidence of crime and anti-social behaviour. But most of the evidence is that this doesn't happen. Public housing tenants and homeowners, unemployed people and employed people, occupy different 'social worlds'. Home owners and employed people tend to work and socialise outside their neighbourhoods, while public housing tenants and people who are unemployed live their lives much closer to home. The research suggests that they do not meet each other frequently enough to form relationships.

Social networks and communities are important – but governments can't create them just by moving one group of people out and another group in.

Tension: Social mix doesn't always result in social harmony either. Researchers have found that living near each other can draw people's attention to the differences between them, rather than the similarities, and can lead to increased social tension. In particular, the new middle class and home owning residents are often very hostile towards public housing tenants, seeing them as 'scum' and 'riff-raff'.

Overall, research suggests that people generally prefer to live among people they feel are similar to them.

Investment: The evidence on whether social mix attracts resources and infrastructure is also mixed. In some areas where this has happened, it has been a deliberate element of the neighbourhood renewal strategy rather than a spontaneous economic by-product. And local employment growth may not always benefit those most in need if the job opportunities that are created are not appropriate or if people are not job-ready.

More worryingly, neighbourhood renewal can result in the loss of specialist services which have developed in response to the needs of the people in the community. The dispersal of the clients of these services into other areas leads to the services becoming unviable.



Stigma: Social mix is said to reduce the stigma attached to communities of concentrated public housing, as the changes occurring in the area flow on to a change in its reputation. But research has shown that stigma lingers despite renewal activity. And other research suggests that what actually may happen is not an elimination of stigma, but a change in the scale at which it operates. Part of the problem is that the stigma that surrounds public housing estates is not necessarily attached to a particular location, but to the tenure that dominates those locations: public housing. Areas of public housing within the new development can remain stigmatised even though the rest of the suburb is not.

Stigma does not just come from the outside. Some studies have found that, as a coping strategy, public housing tenants seek to differentiate themselves from those tenants they see as causing the problems in the community. For example, some public housing tenants describe themselves as 'good' tenants, responsible and committed, as distinguished from 'bad' tenants, who trash houses and don't care. This illustrates the 'dark side' of social capital and of communities: communities with strong internal bonds can also be places where those who are different face discrimination and exclusion.

Not in my backyard

Social mix is a popular government policy, but it is a cliché that almost no one wants it in their backyard. It was noted above that home owners are often hostile towards the public housing tenants within their midst. But what do public housing tenants think? Research suggests that for most people, social mix is less of an issue than other factors to do with their neighbourhood, like environmental quality, privacy, perceptions of safety, design, management and maintenance. Other research shows that tenants are, understandably, resentful of the rhetoric of role-modelling and renewal, seeing it as insulting and devaluing of their communities.

Given that the evidence is so poor, why are public housing authorities still pursuing neighbourhood renewal? There seem to be four main reasons:

- Social mix is a **'factoid'** – that it is in and of itself a good thing is such a prevalent idea that it is extremely difficult to buck the trend simply by citing academic research.
- Public housing is a **stigmatised tenure** – even among those who work in the system. When public housing is seen as a failure, it is easy to also see public housing tenants as failures.
- Tenure is a **convenient** and easily manipulated factor to change. And it is easier for governments to intervene on public housing estates than in other places because, as the dominant landlords, they have a great deal of control.
- Some people are **pragmatic**. The disadvantage and deprivation on public housing estates is significant and for some people, social mix offers the only way in a constrained funding environment to obtain resources for these communities. Waiting for structural change that might never come seems idealistic in comparison.

This information sheet is based upon the discussion paper 'There are people living here: exploring urban renewal and public housing estates' by Kathleen Flanagan, published by the Social Action and Research Centre at Anglicare Tasmania. The discussion paper contains much more detail on this and other issues to do with urban renewal and includes an extensive list of references. The full discussion paper can be downloaded from www.anglicare-tas.org.au.