



# Housing policy and the COVID-19 pandemic: the importance of housing research during this health emergency

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## Housing policy and the COVID-19 pandemic: the importance of housing research during this health emergency

The COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly emerging as a housing emergency. In this moment of crisis, let us state our position on COVID-19 and the journal at the outset:

Housing scholars, housing policy and our homes have a pivotal role in this health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic incorporates a suite of health, economic and political challenges; housing is emerging as one of them. Housing scholars have an ethical responsibility to intervene in this evolving housing emergency both as experts and researchers. In the short term we can support rapid policy making that is done well. In the longer term we can bring perspective to the changes that are taking place across our housing systems and that are required to deal with this crisis.

However, we acknowledge that new COVID-19 related personal and professional pressures are likely to significantly affect the capacity of many housing scholars to submit, revise and review articles or contribute to scholarship in other ways. Depending on housing, care and income circumstances different scholars will be affected in different ways. Our editorial response has been designed in an attempt to respond to this complex suite of issues.

We were appointed as Editors-in-Chief of the *International Journal of Housing Policy* in partnership with Richard Ronald in January 2019. Richard farewelled the editorship in December 2019, leaving big shoes to fill in January this year. Our plan in this first editorial was to update on our plans for the journal over our tenure. However, the world has changed rapidly in the last few months as we all adapt to the international movement of the new Coronavirus or, as it is more commonly known, COVID-19.

We watched with interest how other journals responded to COVID-19, and the discussions that ensued within the academy on social media. As editors of the *International Journal of Housing Policy* – a journal whose mission is to publish research that is socially relevant and that addresses the housing policy landscape across the world – we feel a particular and urgent need to consider these responsibilities.

### Housing, home and COVID-19

Housing is a key site through which COVID-19 is experienced (Garber, 2020). COVID-19 is likely to impact our experiences of home, our experiences in

home, our capacities to pay for our housing, and more. And many of the ways that COVID-19 will impact housing are connected to or regulated by policies that housing scholars have been researching for years.

Social distancing and social isolation are important public health measures that depend on people having access to safe and secure housing. Quarantining and self-isolating people in their homes (Hang 2020; Ren, 2020), however we define home, and social-distancing more broadly (Ricco, 2020a; 2020b), have been key COVID-19 control measures in many countries. Quarantining and self-isolating people in their homes can change the habitational dynamics, rhythms and politics of the home. Restricting people to their homes in this way presents a wide-ranging suite of issues and challenges. In some cases it puts lives in danger.

There is evidence from some cities of growing domestic violence as households face longer periods of lock-down and financial stress due to income loss (Taub, 2020; Towensend, 2020). This is no surprise. Domestic violence rates often peak at times of stress whether that be during heat waves, natural disaster, or financial crisis (Parkinson & Zara, 2013; Sanz-Barbero et al., 2018). This will make home unsafe for many (Wagers, 2020).

For people experiencing homelessness or for those who sleep rough, the idea that you can retreat to a private dwelling is, in many cases, simply not an option. This can lead to a whole host of connected issues, ranging from a greater risk of exposure to COVID-19, to a greater risk of coming into contact with the authorities when the public spaces of our cities are placed in lock-down.

Jean Luc Nancy (2020) suggested that COVID-19 reminds us ‘of our togetherness, interdependence and solidarity’ and therefore heightens our capacity for solidarity (Quarshie, 2020) and care (The Care Collective 2020) during and possibly beyond the pandemic. Equally, there are concerns about COVID-19’s impact on the global economy and the flow-on impacts on our solidarity and care networks (Davies, 2020; De Angelis, 2020). Some are only cautiously optimistic about our capacity for care and solidarity (Iveson, 2020), and many of us can already feel our solidarity and care networks straining under the pressure of COVID-19 at home.

The economic downturn connected with COVID-19 is predicted by many to be the greatest of the last century. There is already widespread income loss across a great many sectors including tourism, hospitality and the arts, with workers facing reduced income and retrenchment as these industries attempt to stay afloat. Many individuals are also working reduced hours as they care for themselves and their families. This is to cover periods of sickness. It is also to care for children when schools have been closed.

Some people experiencing income loss will be unable to meet their housing costs, whether rents or mortgages and will face risks of eviction. Others are facing eviction as landlords persist with plans to raise rent or sell their investment property despite the risks to tenants.

Housing policy is either changing rapidly or is persistently static around the world (Farha, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Moratoriums on rental and mortgage payments as well as moratoriums on private or social sector rental evictions have

been proposed or rolled out with various level of success in cities in North America (e.g., New York), Europe (e.g., London), Australia (e.g., Sydney), amongst other cities (Farha, 2020a).

Other cities that are in urgent need of policy reform have been alarmingly inactive (Farha, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). The various policies impacting the lives of homeless people in many cities around the world during COVID-19 have seen little reform (Farha, 2020b). And many cities in the Global South with large tracts of informal housing and tenure arrangements have not, or perhaps cannot, rapidly respond to formal policy change to address the impacts of COVID-19 (Farha, 2020c). Social distancing and quarantine are next to impossible in the dense, informal settlements that house over 1 billion of the world's population (Sanderson, 2020; UNSD, 2020).

While housing systems and policies in some nations remain unchanged, in others we are witnessing rapid policy and other changes that governments have long said were not possible. These rapid-fire and static housing policies implicitly acknowledge some of the long term structural deficits of housing systems around the world.

Housing choices made now will have wide-reaching impacts. These changes will require detailed scholarly attention in the short, medium and long term. Housing researchers have a vital role to play.

### **The role of *The International Journal of Housing Policy* during a housing emergency**

In big picture terms, journal editorial teams internationally have responded to COVID-19 in one of three ways. Some were quick to issue an editorial statement indicating that their journal would be moving into a 'go slow' mode of operation. These journals acknowledge the significant personal and professional pressures that COVID-19 has introduced and in response have slowed their peer review and editorial processes for a period. Some journals are in business-as-usual mode of operation, and are likely to make the necessary amendments and changes on a case-by-case basis at their journal. Others were quick to issue a call for papers that respond to COVID-19, with the aim of bringing a suite of disciplinary knowledge to understand this complex issue. In some cases, these journals are speeding up some journal peer review and editorial processes.

When journals have issued calls for papers that might respond to COVID-19 the response from the academic community, particularly on social media, has been polarised. There is an ongoing debate on social media about if and how journals should respond in the pages of their respective journals to COVID-19. This debate is framed, on the one hand, by a claim that it is too soon and too '*opportunistic*' to put out a call for papers now. On the other hand, others have argued that academics and journals have a '*responsibility*' to contribute to short-term critique and ongoing analysis of the pandemic.

COVID-19 brings different health, social and economic risks and opportunities to individuals and communities globally. There is no single experience

or response. In some places the impact of the virus will be minimal, in others catastrophic. As a journal with an international remit it is challenging to find a pathway across these experiences. We have discussed and debated these issues with the wider *International Journal of Housing Policy* editorial team.

This is a complex issue, but our broad position as editors is that: housing scholars, housing policy and our homes are pivotal to this pandemic; the COVID-19 pandemic is emerging as a housing emergency around the world; housing scholars and journals have an ethical responsibility to intervene in this emergency both as experts and researchers; but that new COVID-19 related personal and professional pressures are likely to significantly affect housing scholars' capacity to submit, revise and review articles. Different researchers will experience different pressures around income security, housing security, and care responsibilities, amongst other challenges, that will shape their capacity to do this work in varying ways.

### How we are supporting housing researchers and housing research?

Whether COVID-19 is creating new housing challenges or simply revealing or exacerbating the deep structural flaws in our existing housing systems is an open question that will require more nuanced conceptual and empirical attention as we move beyond the pandemic. Our role at the *International Journal of Housing Policy* is to support work such as this, and in the various ways it is likely to manifest – empirically, conceptually, and methodologically – across the housing field.

Housing researchers will need to trace these changes as they play out across the immediate and long term. What worked and what did not work? What were the effects of emergency housing policies and provisions? What were the consequences in places where changes were not made? And how might these studies augment how we understand and theorise housing? Housing scholars have a wealth of knowledge to draw on. We have a large collective knowledge about the housing experiences of lower income and vulnerable households, about the connections between housing and health, and about how economic downturn affects all households across income group and tenure.

We know from our own collective research efforts that the global financial crisis was used by some to further exploit, marginalise and/or disadvantage the already marginalised in our society (Fields, 2019). We have a responsibility to draw on our existing knowledge to prevent this from happening again; to turn our research into advice that can support rapid policy making, and help our housing systems to adapt to the short and longer term changes that are required to deal with this health crisis.

We will support housing scholars to allow this to happen with the following revised editorial functions:

- We have slowed all peer review process for standard articles at the journal; but

- We are still publishing 4 journal issues per year, as per our standard publication schedule;
- We encourage high quality articles, essays or policy reviews on COVID-19 related scholarship; and
- We can, if requested, bring our peer review process back up to full speed for publications that are time sensitive; this might include, for example, research on COVID-19 or for PhD or ECR research where the researchers are keen to progress this work through peer review

## Plans for our tenure

Since its inception in 2001 (as the European Journal of Housing Policy), the *International Journal of Housing Policy* has gone from strength to strength. During our tenure as Editors it is our intention to continue building this strong trajectory. Our mission as Editors is to publish empirically driven, theoretically informed and socially relevant housing research from around the world. We are introducing a series of new initiatives to further build the journal and its engagement with our international community of housing researchers.

First, we are introducing a new Housing Futures Essay series. Housing Futures Essays will advance debate about the role of housing policy, systems and practice in responding to significant global or regional challenges as well as ‘wicked problems’ in which housing is implicated. The first of these essays, *Radical Housing: on the politics of dwelling as difference* by Michele Lancione from the Urban Institute, The University of Sheffield, is published in this issue. Michele’s essay seeks to drive a new ethic in housing research. He argues the need for housing researchers ‘to get closer to housing precarity, to the places where it is lived and felt’ in order to drive new, radical housing futures. We will discuss Lancione’s essay in more detail in our editorial for journal Issue 3 of 2020. But, suffice to say, this essay is even more important as the pandemic takes hold around the world and provides surprisingly powerful reflections on how we might approach the COVID housing emergency.

Second, we have introduced a new digital approach for the journal. This includes the *Housing Journal Podcast*, a collaboration with the leading housing journals, *Housing Studies* and *Housing, Theory and Society* (listen here: <http://ijhp.online/pod/>). You will also see a growing social media presence from the journal on Twitter, with thanks to our new Digital Editor, Ryan van den Nouwelant. More on these initiatives and our plans for the journal in our next Editorial.

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