

Summary report

**Growing up in social  
housing in Britain:  
A profile of four  
generations from 1946  
to the present day**

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# Executive summary

This research draws on four British birth cohort studies to examine the role of social housing for four generations of families since the second world war. It describes how housing for families changed over time, and explores the relationship between social housing, family circumstances, and experiences for the children when they reached adulthood.

## Key findings

- Four generations ago, families in social housing included almost the full social range. Council and housing association homes offered high quality. However, from the 1960s, home ownership took over from social housing as the main type of housing for families. Over time, the more advantaged families moved out. Increasingly, encouraged by policy, social housing has acted as a 'safety net'. It has also lost out in term of relative desirability
- Society is also now more unequal than it was. The result is that the gap between the socio-economic circumstances of children in social housing and other tenures is wider than for any previous generation
- On average, those who lived in social housing as children were worse off as adults in terms of health, well-being, education and employment than their peers
- Most of this pattern, especially for people born in 1946, can be explained by differences in family background. However, for people born in 1958 and more so in 1970, living in social housing as a child was still associated with some worse adult outcomes, even after accounting for family background
- These patterns are stronger for women than men. They do not vary substantially by social class, region, housing quality or neighbourhood characteristics. They suggest that as the social housing sector has become smaller and more focused on the most disadvantaged, it has become less likely to deliver positive benefits in other aspects of people's lives
- Recent policy statements have proposed reducing the security of tenure of social tenants or requiring them to seek work. This report offers no support for reducing the attractiveness of social renting or the number of homes available. If anything, it suggests the reverse: we need to help social housing catch up with the desirability of home-ownership housing, and increase its social mix. Crucially, other areas of social policy, such as childcare and education, also need to more effectively tackle childhood tenure gaps as these cannot be effectively addressed through housing policy initiatives

## The study

This research builds on an earlier study by many of the same team, *The Public Value of Social Housing* (Feinstein et al, 2008)<sup>1</sup>. It aims to illuminate the relationship between housing in childhood and people's experiences in adulthood, and thus to inform current policy debate on the future of social housing and its role in tackling social exclusion and promoting greater equality and social mobility.

The report uses data from four British cohort studies, which have traced large samples of people born in 1946, 1958, 1970 and 2000 with regular and wide-ranging interviews throughout their lives. Using this data enables us to examine changes over individual lifetimes, including the relationship between childhood housing experiences and a wide range of later outcomes in the domains of health, well being, education, income and employment. It also enables us to compare the experiences of people in different generations, under different socio-economic conditions and policy regimes. We focus on the situation of families with children.

## Growing up in social housing

Evidence from the cohort studies confirms the important role social housing has played in post-war British childhoods. Families with children have always been over-represented in social housing compared to other households. However, both the proportion of families in social housing and their over-representation compared to other households have diminished over time, as home ownership increased. Only 21% of the children born in the 2000 cohort were in social housing at age five, compared to 37% born in 1946 at a similar age. Far fewer of today's children are experiencing social housing than previous generations.

After the war, most people who came into social housing came from the private rented sector. Social housing acted as a 'step up' in quality. Over time, growing shares came from home ownership, and here social housing was acting more as a 'safety net', perhaps after family breakdown or repossession. Over 70% of those born in 1958 and 1970 who moved out of social housing in childhood moved into home ownership, demonstrating how social housing was also acting as a 'stepping stone' to a tenure that was widely seen as more desirable than any form of renting.

<sup>1</sup> Feinstein, L., Lupton, R., Hammond, C., Mujtaba, T., Salter, E. and Sorhaindo, A., (2007), *The public value of social housing: a longitudinal analysis of the relationship between housing and life chances*, London: Smith Institute. Available from the Smith Institute website.

## Social housing and increasing concentrations of disadvantage

As the role of social housing changed for families, so its tenants became increasingly disadvantaged. When the 1946 cohort were aged four, 11% of the best-off fifth of families were in social housing, compared to 27% of the least well-off. By the time the 2000 cohort were aged five, the tenure gap had grown hugely: just two per cent of the best-off fifth were in social housing while 49% of the least well-off were.

The richness of the cohort studies reveals how social housing populations changed in many other ways, especially after 1970. For example, for children in home ownership, the proportion born to a single mother was unchanged between 1970 and 2000, while the proportion in social housing grew from six per cent to 28%. Mothers of those born in 1958 were more likely to work when their children were of pre-school age if they were social renters than if they were homeowners. For the 1970 cohort there was little difference by the kind of tenure that their parents lived in, and by the time the 2000 cohort were aged five, the home owner mothers were twice as likely to be working as the social tenant mothers. This reflects transition in mothers' economic activity over time: from working class

necessity to middle class norm, and is an example of how wide-ranging social changes affected children and the housing system.

Social housing also began to lose out to other tenures in terms of quality and desirability as measured by living in flats, overcrowding and lack of facilities. No more than 11% of children born in 1946 in social housing experienced living in flats (a less desirable housing type for families), overcrowding, lack of bathroom or hot water – while for those whose parents were home owners the figure was 20%. For those whose parents were private tenants, a massive 66% experienced at least one of these less desirable features. By the 1958 cohort, home ownership had overtaken social housing in the quality stakes, and by the 2000 cohort at least 20% of children in social housing experienced one of these less desirable features (mainly living in flats), and social housing was in third place behind owning and private renting.

Thus, over successive generations, children growing up in social housing experienced several cumulative processes of disadvantage:

- as individuals, they were more likely to come from disadvantaged families

- given the increasing disadvantage of social renting households generally, they were more likely to be surrounded by disadvantaged neighbours
- on the measures we have used, their homes were more likely to fall short in quality and desirability in absolute terms and relative to other tenures

There is now a much bigger tenure divide among today's children than any other post-war generation.

## **Social housing in childhood and adult outcomes**

For the three earlier cohorts, who have now moved into adulthood, we examined whether there was a relationship between their childhood tenure and adult outcomes in five areas: health and health-related behaviours, well being, education, employment, and income. Did being in social housing as a child have any long-term implications?

For each generation and every measure we used, those who had ever been in social housing in childhood fared worse as adults. For example, at age 34 in 2004, those born in 1970 who had ever been in social housing in childhood rated their health at an average score of 2.92 out of

four, while those who had never been in social housing in childhood rated their health at 3.13 out of four. Seventy-nine per cent of the 'ever' group were in paid employment, while 86% of the never group were.

However, this is partly due to the background characteristics of individuals who end up in different tenures. We attempted to isolate tenure by controlling for factors that might influence tenure position or outcomes. These included, for example, parents' education, occupation, income and interest in education, teachers' rating of child's progress, whether the child was bullied, how happy the child was, whether they wet the bed, their height and weight, and for the 1958 and 1970 cohorts, characteristics of their schools.

After applying these controls, we found that there were no long term associations between childhood social housing and most adult outcomes for the 1946 cohort. This shows that social housing has no inherent negative consequences.

However, more statistically significant associations do remain even after controls for the 1958 and 1970 cohorts in every domain, although not for every indicator, and not at every age. For example, about half of the gap between the group who

were 'ever in social housing in childhood' and those 'never in social housing in childhood' that had been found on measures of self-assessed health, cigarettes smoked and paid employment remained after controlling for background factors. Notably, we did not find any situations where the 'ever' group had more positive scores than their counterparts.

Thus there is no evidence of social housing appearing to counteract earlier disadvantage with positive, 'value added' effects on adult outcomes. Effect sizes are typically larger for the 1970 cohort than for the 1958 cohort, indicating a widening gap over time.

## Potential explanations

We proposed and tested a number of possible explanations for the link between childhood housing tenure and later adult outcomes.

We found that there were no substantial differences between regions, despite the different size of the social housing sector in different regions. Nor did we find that the quality of housing (based on overcrowding and amenities) made a difference to the strength of the associations. These results are surprising. They suggest that, even after the

inclusion of many controls, 'tenure' may still be capturing background characteristics of people in different tenures.

One theory is that social housing is associated with worse outcomes because of the characteristics of the neighbourhoods in which it is located. We could only explore this for the 1958 cohort at ages 16 and 23, using data for census enumeration districts. We found that neither the level of unemployment nor the level of social housing in a neighbourhood seemed to explain the relationship between childhood housing tenure and adult outcomes, once added after other controls. Note that we investigate neighbourhood characteristics in childhood. It is possible that neighbourhood characteristics experienced in adulthood might be more influential.

We did find gender differences. For all cohorts, there were more and stronger statistically significant associations between childhood social housing and experiences in adulthood for women than for men. One explanation for this may lie in the different pathways followed in young adulthood by men and women who have grown up in social housing. For the 1958 and 1970 cohorts, we examined the ages at which young people first moved into independent living, formed their first

partnership, and had their first child. We found tenure differences, even after controlling for level of parental advantage. Young people from social housing formed partnerships and became parents earlier than their similarly advantaged counterparts in other tenures, and this was particularly the case for women. These patterns became more marked over time. This suggests that there is an important role for interventions to support people's transitions into early adulthood, and a need for further research on how tenure may affect transitions.

We also found that negative associations with social housing were greater for people who moved into social housing in childhood than those who were in social housing but moved out. This indicates that the circumstances in which people enter social housing, not just the tenure itself, may be driving later outcomes.

## Policy implications

One important contribution of this research is that it shows how difficult it is to identify 'tenure effects', where tenure means the ownership of property and the conditions on which it is held. Even with rich data and extensive controls it is hard to isolate tenure from the characteristics of the people

in particular tenures, or from the wider bundles of characteristics with which particular tenures might be associated but which are not inherent to any particular tenure (factors like location, area characteristics, cost, quality, and status).

This means that we should not make a leap from findings like this, which seem to show an association between particular tenures and particular outcomes, to very specific policies, such as changing tenancy conditions. We simply cannot tell whether detailed changes like this would have an influence on other public policy outcomes. Such interventions would need properly controlled evaluation to determine their value.

The research also provides a stock-take of post-war social housing. While it may be seen as disappointing that there appear to have been no discernible long term benefits from the stability and low rents that social housing provided for families with children, our research also shows that social housing has been very successful when measured against some of its original objectives, including combating squalor and overcrowding. The findings show social housing not failing but in transition – originally establishing better housing conditions and providing the security and affordability not available elsewhere in the system, but moving from

this role to a 'safety net' role as other aspects of the housing system evolved.

So what should we expect housing policy to do now? Clearly a return to a post-war housing system is neither possible nor desirable, but our work does suggest that if we expect social housing not to compound disadvantage, and perhaps to help, we would have a better chance if the sector had broader appeal and greater relative advantages. This would require a cross-tenure approach in order to shift housing preferences, demand and need. A 'progressive vision' of social housing's role must be a wide one.

It is also crucial to recognise the role of wider social policies aimed at tackling poverty and disadvantage. Social housing policy alone can have limited effect. The shrinkage of the social housing sector and the increasing concentration of disadvantage within it has come about because of wider housing policies to support home ownership and as a result of broader social and economic changes, as well as through social housing policy. Social housing, like other parts of the welfare state, has to run harder to stand still in the face of growing social inequality, and has in practice become less able to promote positive life chances in these circumstances. The more that we target

social housing on the disadvantaged; the less can be expected of specific housing policies (for example changes in tenancy conditions). In some respects we might expect other social policies targeted towards those who need social housing to do far more, and housing policy to do less, to ensure that the disadvantage with which people enter the social housing sector does not continue or get worse.

## About the study

This study, *Growing Up in Social Housing in Britain: A Profile of Four Generations 1946 to the Present Day*, involved analysis of four birth cohort studies, including the development of statistical models to test the impact of tenure on social outcomes for health, well being, education and employment for children who grew up between the 1940s and 1980s .

The study also involved consultation with key stakeholders on emerging findings to refine the statistical models that were developed during the study. The research was carried out by academics at the Institute of Education, University of London and the London School of Economics many of whom had accompanied Leon Feinstein in the writing of this report's predecessor. This

publication builds substantially on the initial findings presented in Feinstein's 2008 Report, creating a greater focus and insight on such critical material.

The research was funded by the Tenant Services Authority, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Scottish Government.

The full report is available from the TSA and JRF websites:  
[www.tenantservicesauthority.org](http://www.tenantservicesauthority.org) and [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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