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DEMAND VERSUS SUPPLY SIDE HOUSING ASSISTANCE:
HOW DO THEY AFFECT CLIENT WELLBEING?
A CASE STUDY OF LOW INCOME SOLE PARENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an Australian research project that compares sole parents in public housing (supply side assistance) and sole parents in receipt of rent assistance living in the private rental sector (demand side assistance). The study aims to develop an understanding of sole parents’ housing tenure and housing assistance choices, and the impact of these choices on levels of satisfaction with housing and non-housing outcomes such as employment, childcare and education. It also explores perceived levels of social capital of sole parents in receipt of both types of housing assistance in terms of factors such as quality of local and friendship networks and feelings of trust and confidence.

INTRODUCTION: AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This paper reports on a comparative research study of sole parents living in public housing and sole parents in receipt of rent assistance (RA) living in the private rental sector. The broad objective is to compare the impact of public housing and RA on the wellbeing of sole parents. As the study is a large one, based on surveys of almost 1,700 public and private tenants and with a number of layers or themes, this paper is very selective in terms of findings and methodology. A full paper on findings can be found at <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/pubs/finalreports/final_soleparents.pdf>, while a positioning paper outlining relevant literature and the policy context can be found at <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/pubs/positioning/pp_loneparents.pdf>.

The social housing sector in Australia is relatively small (around 5% of stock) and is predominantly state government provided housing (public housing). Eligibility is tightly targeted, with sole parents in public housing having to meet eligibility criteria which are essentially the same as those for receiving social security benefits; the working poor are largely ineligible. Once accepted, they go onto a wait or priority list and are allocated via a system which can vary from state to state, given that Australia has a federal system of government. Allocation to a specific property is within an area, which the tenant nominates at the time of application. Eligible public tenants pay income related rents, typically of the order of 20% to 25% of income, with the subsidy to ensure affordability funded by the state housing agencies, not by any rent assistance or housing benefit payable to tenants from any central income support agency as is more common in other countries.

By virtue of the small size of the public sector, most low income and poor households (many sole parents) live in the private rental sector which accounts for around 23% of the Australian stock. RA is paid to private renters who receive a social security benefit and are paying more than a certain amount for rent (other than public housing), lodging or fees for a caravan site or other accommodation that is the principal home. As of June 2001, the maximum RA payment was A$103.04 (EU63) per fortnight for a sole parent with one or two children, and A$116.48 (EU73) per fortnight for three or more children. This was only paid if the fortnightly rent was more than A$240.01 (EU151) for a sole parent with one or two children and A$257.93 (EU162) for three or more children. No RA was payable if rent was less than A$102.62 (EU62) per fortnight. Above this threshold it
was paid at a rate of 75 cents for each dollar of rent paid per fortnight up to the maximum payment. These conditions mean there is no variation for different housing market circumstances, thus responses to questions on affordability in the project’s surveys may have differed depending on the conditions in the seven housing markets surveyed. It is a payment only available to private renters and is not available to public tenants or home owners.

The discrete and non-integrated nature of the two housing assistance programs is an ideal base for being able to test some of the assertions about different forms of housing assistance as countries grapple with the most appropriate form of assistance in a context of social and economic restructuring. Will they converge to predominantly demand side housing assistance programs, such as rent assistance, or will the qualities of supply side policies of social housing be recognised to the degree that we retain a mix of subsidy forms?

The two forms of assistance in Australia have very different attributes and offer different levels of affordability, security, client choice, appropriateness, avoidance of discrimination, flexibility etc. These attributes were ones around which a set of questions for the self-administered survey were developed.

However, the study was not just concerned with housing outcomes, but also with whether housing assistance shaped social wellbeing, e.g. health, education and employment. Thus another set of questions were structured around these themes. Finally, a set of questions on social capital was designed to draw out the perceived quality of social relationships of the tenants and the communities in which they reside. They are questions with what Putnam (1995) has defined as 'proximal', rather than 'distal', indicators of social capital. Proximal indicators refer to the quality of local and friendship networks, of trust and confidence, and of reciprocity, i.e. participation in local support groups or agencies. Distal indicators are really outcomes of social capital (Stone 2001) and include health status, crime rates and teenage pregnancy. It was thought unnecessary and intrusive to ask questions about such measures; however, a set of questions were built around the former.

**WHY THE RESEARCH FOCUS ON SOLE PARENTS?**

There are a number of compelling reasons for this study. Firstly, recent research suggests that sole parent families in Australia, like those of many other western countries, are more likely to live in poverty than any other type of household, with more than one in five Australians living in sole parent families being in poverty in 2000 (Lloyd and Greenwell 2001: 7). When housing costs are taken into account, the situation worsens. One-third of sole parents were estimated to live in after-housing poverty in 1999, much higher than for any other household type (Harding and Szukalska 2000: 15). Sole parents are also disproportionately dependent on government pensions and allowances relative to other groups (Newman 2000: 6).

Secondly, sole parent households are one of the most important groups in receipt of housing assistance. In 1998-99, depending on the state or territory, between 23% (South Australia) and 43% (Northern Territory) of new households occupying public housing were sole parents (see Table 1). In the three states chosen for this study (Tasmania, Victoria and Queensland), sole parents account for 31%, 37% and 40% respectively of all new households entering public housing. Similarly, sole parents accounted for 22% of
all income units in receipt of Commonwealth RA in March 2000 (SCRCSSP 2001: Table 16A.21). Almost half of sole parents in receipt of parenting payment (single) rent in the private sector and receive RA, the highest rate for any group of income support recipients (SCRCSSP 2001: Table 16A.22). About nine in ten sole parents in public housing or in receipt of RA are female. Given these statistics, it is imperative that we know more about the housing needs of sole parents and the degree to which existing forms of assistance are effective in assisting this group.

Table 1: Sole Parents as a Percentage of All New Households Occupying Public Housing, 1998-99

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sole parents</th>
<th>NSW</th>
<th>Vic</th>
<th>Qld</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>Tas</th>
<th>ACT</th>
<th>NT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male headed</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female headed</td>
<td>2,605</td>
<td>2,904</td>
<td>3,183</td>
<td>1,003</td>
<td>677</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total sole parents</td>
<td>2,933</td>
<td>3,284</td>
<td>3,518</td>
<td>1,142</td>
<td>777</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total all new households</td>
<td>8,522</td>
<td>8,827</td>
<td>8,803</td>
<td>4,995</td>
<td>2,498</td>
<td>1,128</td>
<td>1,148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of sole parents</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No data is available for Western Australia, as sole parents are included with ‘group and other household types’.

Thirdly, while there is considerable anecdotal experience which enables us to understand broadly why sole parents require housing assistance, such as low incomes relative to rents, we know little about why some choose public housing and others choose to rent privately aided by RA, or about their longer-term housing and lifecycle aspirations. More importantly, we know next to nothing about the shelter and non-shelter impacts of the two different forms of assistance and their effects on wellbeing and behaviour. Do they attract sole parents in quite different circumstances? For example, are there differences in employment status and work opportunities, in income, in family circumstances, in educational participation, or in the health of the parent and children? Does one form of assistance help more than the other in reconstructing often shattered lives and in facilitating social and economic participation?

The research project was prompted by the hypotheses that the different forms of assistance may have very different affects on the wellbeing of tenants and that one form of assistance may be superior to the other in the outcomes it provided for sole parents. The study thus aimed to:

- Understand sole parents’ housing tenure and housing assistance choices;
- Identify sole parents’ perceptions as to the attributes of the different forms of tenure and related assistance;
- Identify the degree to which there are differences in shelter outcomes – and, where possible, non-shelter outcomes – for sole parents receiving different forms of assistance; and
• Identify for the two forms of assistance what factors explain differences in wellbeing or circumstances (if any).

METHODOLOGY

This study had two methodological components: analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) unit record census data on sole parents and – the more substantive part – a survey of 1,000 sole parents in public housing and 700 sole parents in receipt of RA. The former provided data on sole parents in public and private rental nationally and at the state level, while the latter provided the qualitative and quantitative information to give a human dimension to the raw statistics, particularly at a local level.

Census Data

The first stage of the research used the confidentialised unit record files (CURFs) of the 1991 and 1996 Censuses of Population and Housing. The housing sample file (HSF) – a 1% sample of occupied private dwellings – contains confidentialised details of associated family and personal records. It is, in effect, the data of an individual household as provided on census night. Its availability enables manipulation of the data set in ways not possible with the full census data. The HSF is provided in a single form on CD-rom and, as a sample, will be subject to sampling error. Given the size of the sole parent population (around 662,800 or 10.3% of total households), this was estimated to be of the order 2.5% at most. Analysis of HSF data was designed to identify differences and similarities between low income, sole parents in public rental and those in private rental, in terms of key areas such as housing costs, educational levels and participation, employment experience, household structure, ethnicity and rates of mobility. Comparing all sole parent private renters with public renters would have produced non-comparable data, given the higher incomes of many sole parents renting privately, nor would it have been useful in terms of information about potential RA recipients. Thus a ‘low income’ category was created for sole parent private renters, at which they would have been eligible for social security benefits and RA at the then (1996) prevailing rates.

Census data was used to identify differences in rates of mobility between sole parents in different tenures, between different household types within the sole parent category and within different income types. It was also used to identify differences in educational and workforce participation for the same categories. Interestingly, even when controlled for income, public housing tenants had much lower rates of workforce participation than private renters and particularly home owners. Possible explanations include:

• Public tenants may feel less financial pressure because of income related rents, and feel that they do not have to work and can spend more time with their children;

• There may be a welfare payment poverty trap, where a combination of social security tapers, taxation policy and income related rent increases creates effective marginal tax rates (EMTRs) that make it economically irrational to take up work;

• Many public housing estates are located where there has been a collapse or contraction in labour markets over the last decade and thus residents may be unable to access employment; and
Public tenant sole parents may live in areas where there is little available and affordable childcare, and the local community may be characterised by low levels of social capital (mutual support and trust), which limits ability to arrange informal childcare.

Significantly, workforce participation increased greatly (including for public tenants) for all sole parents once their children become non-dependent. This would suggest – contrary to some populist views that sole parents have a culture of poverty and work avoidance – that they are willing to work but not if it means a trade-off between employment and adequate childcare.

As space does not allow for more detailed consideration of census findings, this paper concentrates on the survey data.

**Survey Data and Findings**

Housing Departments in three states (Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria) randomly chose 500 names and addresses of sole parent households in public housing in each of the seven selected regions. This provided a sample frame of 3,500 households; using a mail-out method, we received 1,018 usable responses, that is, a response rate of just on 30%.

The same postcodes were the basis for the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services to provide addresses of sole parent income units receiving RA. A mail-out from a survey frame of 3,000 addresses yielded 670 responses at a response rate of 22%. Overall this meant 1,688 completed surveys and a 26% response rate.

The questionnaire was designed in consultation with a reference group made up of representatives of the participating agencies and with tenant feedback provided by the Victorian Sole Parents Association (for private renters) and the Richmond Public Housing Tenant Association. Two workshops were held with tenants around a draft questionnaire, which was suitably altered.

The questionnaire was designed to elicit sole parents’ responses around four areas:

- Housing decision making;
- Housing satisfaction in areas identified above, e.g. affordability, security, client choice;
- Social capital; and
- Workforce and educational opportunities.

Confidentialised unit record files from the 1991 and 1996 censuses supplemented the survey findings. These particularly focused on employment and education participation differences (if any) between public and private tenants. Only the survey results are reported in this paper, and then only limited findings, as work is still in progress.

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1 The definition of sole parent ‘income unit’ in receipt of RA is restricted to those with dependent children aged 16 and under or aged 18 and under if in full-time schooling (SCRCSSP 2001: 810). This means that the percentages in public housing and in receipt of RA are not directly comparable.
Profile of Sole Parents

RA recipients overall were younger than the public housing tenants, more highly educated, and had fewer children to support, with more than four in ten having only one child. They also had higher incomes and were more likely to receive child support, and at higher levels, from the non-custodial parent. Just under two-thirds of public housing tenants did not receive child support from the non-custodial parent. This difference in income is significant as it was found that there was little difference in available income after receipt of the housing cost subsidy between public and private tenants, despite the much higher subsidy of the public housing rebate. The major reasons were that the custodial payment for many sole parents on RA compensated for the lower level of housing assistance. There were no significant differences between the two groups in terms of indigenous status or marital status. Sole parents in public housing were more likely to have been born overseas (just under a quarter of respondents) than RA recipients.

Most sole parents had not undertaken any paid work in the week prior to the survey (78% of public tenants and 63% of RA recipients). Less than 10% of both groups were working full-time, with more RA recipients working part-time than public tenants. In both groups, there was a high dependence on income security payments.

The Search Process

Many public tenants and RA recipients reported that they did not search for housing in the other tenure sector when they made their last move. Almost half (48.5%) of public tenants did not look at private rental, despite having a high awareness (92%) of RA. Two-thirds of RA recipients (67.4%) did not attempt to get into public housing, although most (75%) were aware of their potential eligibility.

Both public tenants and RA recipients were asked about their perceptions of problems encountered when searching for accommodation in both public and private rental sectors. Figure 1 summarises the results. Firstly, in terms of searching for private rental housing, most public tenants (94%) and RA recipients (83%) saw its cost as either a major or minor problem, although public tenants (80%) were more likely to see this as a major problem compared to RA recipients (56%). Almost 90% of public tenants saw lack of private rental as a major or minor problem, compared to 70% of RA recipients. More than two-thirds of both groups saw the poor condition of private rental housing as a major or minor problem. Public tenants were more likely to see discrimination by landlords and/or agents as a major or minor problem (63.6%) than RA recipients (40%). Similarly, they were more likely to see search costs for private rental, and the need to misrepresent their circumstances to landlords and/or agents, as a problem.

Secondly, in terms of searching for public rental housing, RA recipients (75%) were much more likely than public tenants (40%) to see the lack of available housing as a major problem. Overall, almost 90% of RA recipients saw the lack of public housing as a minor or major problem, suggesting that many rent privately because they can see little chance of getting into public housing. RA recipients (30%) were more likely than public tenants (17%) to see the condition of public housing as a major problem, and were also

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2 In addition to means tested social security payments, many sole parents also receive a child support payment from the non-custodial parent. These are legally required under a federal act of parliament.
more likely to see search costs for public housing as a problem (37%) compared to public tenants (28%). Both groups were less likely to perceive discrimination by housing officials in public housing to be a problem, compared to perceived discrimination by both groups from landlords and/or agents in private housing, although RA recipients (29%) were more likely than public tenants (18%) to see this type of discrimination from housing officials as a problem. It is not known from the responses what perceived discrimination means in the context of public housing, as it could refer to eligibility and allocation systems or to the exercise of discretion by officials.

Figure 1
Major Problems Identified by Sole Parents in Looking for Private Rental Housing

![Figure 1](image)


In summary, overall problems with the search process were higher for private rental than public housing. Public tenants see high housing costs, lack of housing, housing in poor condition and discrimination by landlords and/or agents as the main problems in accessing private rental housing. RA recipients also perceive these as problems, but not to the same extent. They see the lack of available housing as by far the biggest hurdle to obtaining public housing, and then the poor condition of housing. Public tenants are concerned about these two factors as well, but not to the same extent.

Finally, if given the choice of a similar condition home at the same rent in the private or public sector, fewer than one in five public tenants (19%) said that they would rather rent privately and over half (55%) said that they would not. When faced with the same choice, just over one-third of RA recipients (35.4%) said that they would rather rent public housing and a similar percentage (34%) said that they would not.

HOUSING SATISFACTION AND HOUSING PROBLEMS
The questions on housing satisfaction are concerned with drawing out overall levels of satisfaction with the two tenure sectors and the specific factors that create or diminish this, whether they are the attributes of the dwelling, the location or the management of the stock. Overall, levels in both sectors were relatively high, with just under three-quarters of both public tenants and RA recipients expressing satisfaction with their current accommodation and just over three-quarters of both groups expressing satisfaction with the location of their housing. These results confirm high rates of satisfaction found in other surveys.

However, when sole parents were asked to rate their satisfaction on specific features of their accommodation, although most were satisfied, higher percentages of public tenants said that they were dissatisfied compared to RA recipients. In order of concern, problems were the security of the dwelling, adequacy in terms of space, kitchen facilities, bathroom facilities and security of neighbourhood. It is not known whether this reflects the ability of RA recipients to choose a property tailored to their needs and/or a stock of public housing that is ageing and may not meet current expectations. This finding may point to measures to improve choice and tailoring of accommodation to meet needs in public housing, as well as highlighting priorities for stock upgrading and estate renewal.

There were few differences between the two groups in terms of attitudes to the area in which they lived. Those in public housing were less likely to agree that people feel safe and secure. Whilst most in both groups agreed that people look after their properties, the rate of agreement was higher for RA recipients than for public tenants.

Affordability and Wellbeing

The data suggests that neither RA nor rent rebates in public housing can prevent many sole parents not having enough to live on after paying for their housing. More than 40% of both groups had insufficient money left after paying for rent to pay for other expenses, and a similar percentage had fallen behind in their rent in the last year. The main reasons given for falling behind with rent for both groups were general cost of living, high utility charges (gas, electricity and water) debt repayment and car repairs.

In general, sole parents in both groups had gone without and had experienced hardship. Few could afford a holiday in the last year (78% of public tenants and 71% of RA recipients), and most had gone without adequate food during the previous four weeks (79% of both groups) or had been unable to afford school excursion fees (72% of public tenants and 84% of RA recipients). Almost half (45%) of both public tenants and RA recipients were unable to adequately heat their homes. This raises fundamental policy questions about poverty amongst women and children and about the role of both income support and housing assistance programs in Australia.

A sizeable minority expressed views consistent with a poverty trap. Just over 40% of both groups were concerned that if they worked more hours they would lose their benefits. One-third of public housing tenants said they would not take a full-time job if it meant losing their public housing. This compared to only 14% of RA recipients who would not take a full-time job if it meant loss of RA. The differences in the degree of subsidy may be important here.

Social Capital
The social capital questions are those that draw out the perceived quality of social relationships of the tenants and the communities in which they are resident. They are concerned with the quality of local and friendship networks, of trust and confidence, and of reciprocity, that is, participation in local support groups or agencies.

Social capital as measured by participation in local clubs, doing voluntary work or going to local church or temple was low for both tenure groups (typically less than 10%), and neither group had received any significant levels of informal support from their local community in the last twelve months (see Figure 2). Unfortunately, in the absence of any national benchmarks of social capital, we could not conclude whether this problem was specific to this welfare group or a national social problem.

**Figure 2**

*Percentage of Sole Parents Receiving No Help at All Within the Previous Twelve Months from Anyone Outside the Household with a Number of Domestic Tasks*

![Bar chart showing percentage of sole parents receiving no help at all from someone outside the household over the previous 12 months.]


While social capital measures were remarkably the same for recipients of both forms of housing assistance, there were variations by area. For example, an outer suburb of Brisbane (Queensland) had much higher rates of social capital than inner Melbourne (Victoria), perhaps reflecting the effects of a community renewal project in the former and the fact that inner Melbourne is highly gentrified with low income households somewhat socially isolated as a result.

**CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY**

The study was funded by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) with the requirement that implications for housing and social policy be identified. Its overall conclusion is that both forms of housing assistance have their advantages and disadvantages, constraints and opportunities. The policy issues revolve around how to
minimise the problems and constraints and maximise the advantages and opportunities.

Specific conclusions of the research are:

- Many sole parents experience substantial personal and financial hardship after paying for their housing, confirming the results of other studies. Preoccupation with measuring affordability, in terms of rent as a percentage of income, diverts attention from whether sole parents are left with enough money to live on after paying for their housing. The evidence is clear: many sole parents, whether public tenants or in receipt of RA, do not have enough disposable income after paying for their housing to meet the costs of other necessities, according to established benchmarks. Since most sole parents in the survey are dependent on income support payments, this has enormous policy implications. Put simply, in many cases, income support payment levels are insufficient to meet essential costs.

- Just fewer than two-thirds of sole parents on low incomes were renters in 1996, with about one-third in home ownership. Policy on rental housing assistance is thus vital to the wellbeing of this low income group. Neither public housing nor RA, however, was able to lift many above the after-housing poverty line. Sole parents in receipt of RA have higher incomes than public tenants, partly because of the addition of RA, but this additional income is taken in higher rents. Public tenants’ lower incomes are balanced by lower housing costs. Overall, for most household sizes, RA recipients were more likely to be in poverty after paying for their housing than public tenants, whether they were in work or not.

- Sole parents who undertook any work had marginally lower after-housing poverty rates than those who were not in the workforce. Very few worked full-time, and most who worked did so on a very part-time basis. The additional income did little to improve their financial situation, due to the poverty trap entailed in income related rents for public tenants and reductions in income support payments more generally. Substantial numbers of sole parents were aware that if they undertook (more) paid work, they would lose other benefits. The main barrier to doing so was the commitment to caring for their children. Other factors such as childcare and job availability were less significant. Many sole parents planned to work when their children were older, and were relatively confident that they would be able to find a job when they were ready. Sole parents saw being out of the workforce as a necessary stage in their lifecycle whilst they had dependent children.

- A minority of sole parents dropped out of home ownership to become RA recipients renting in the private sector. This raises the question of whether RA could be used to prevent this from happening. There are obvious budget problems in designing housing assistance in such a way that people use it to buy a home. However, if the objective is to stop people dropping out, then a minimum pre-ownership period of, say, two years could be required.

- Few public renters would choose to rent privately. Any programs that are designed to encourage greater movement from the public to the private sector and which assume private rental is inherently more attractive will most likely not work. To encourage such movement would require approximation of the housing
conditions that households value in the public sector, particularly affordability and security of tenure.

- The high proportion (almost a half) of households experiencing rent arrears in both sectors suggests that these are to a large extent an intractable problem associated with having to live on too low an income. Over-enthusiastic pursuit of rent arrears in the public sector on the assumption that it is a behaviour problem of the tenants should be tempered by this reality. The survey findings show that arrears tend to be due to one-off bills blowing out a meagre budget, such as utility bills, Christmas or car repairs; this might suggest the need for more innovative ways in tackling arrears.

- There are specific areas where private rental clearly outperforms public housing. Perceptions about safety and security of the property and neighbourhood were a concern for some public tenants and a factor in private renters not choosing public housing. Given that the sole parents were resident in the same broad locations, these concerns appear to relate to specific dwellings and specific locations within these areas. While we did not explore the reasons for wanting to move, these concerns may be a factor in the number of public tenants wishing to move to other public housing. Addressing concerns about safety and security would appear to be the single most important policy need for sole parents in public housing.

- There are very high rates of mobility for sole parents who are RA recipients, and some evidence that mobility affects financial and personal wellbeing. Reducing mobility in the private rental sector is a problematic policy issue. There is always a concern that regulation of residential tenancies to improve security of tenure will deter investors. Part of the solution may be for governments to facilitate the development of an ‘affordable housing’ sub-sector which offers longer-term leases to tenants and secure and long-term returns to investors. RA could be tied to specific housing units as part of a financing package to make this viable.

- Sole parents use RA in about equal measure as general income support and for specific housing purposes. It is a hybrid between income support and housing assistance. There appear to be three options: retain the status quo; roll up RA into general income support payments so that it is not tied to specific housing costs or housing outcomes; or separate out RA funds from income support into a specific housing program with objectives in terms of housing costs and conditions, possibly administered by the states. The pros and cons of each of these options need to be worked through in detail.

- Many sole parents in public housing, who are planning to move, nominated that they wished to move into other public housing. This indicates a strong preference for this sector and an unmet demand for transfers within public housing. This has implications for state housing authorities when viewed with the main reasons for dissatisfaction by public tenants, namely, safety and security of the dwelling and neighbourhood and inadequate space.

- The form of housing assistance is not a significant factor in determining social capital. Sole parents in both sectors appeared to receive low levels of informal support for basic tasks such as child minding, maintenance and gardening, and
those with health problems did not receive more informal support than other sole parents. There also appeared to be low levels of connectedness with, and participation in, the local community. In the absence of benchmarks of levels of informal support and community connectedness, we do not know whether this is a feature of Australian society in general or whether it can be attributed to the demands of sole parenthood or the constraints of low income. The findings do raise issues about how to build community capacity to deliver informal support.

- RA recipients reported particularly low levels of social capital for inner Melbourne, while relatively high levels were reported on the Sunshine Coast (Queensland) for both the public and private sectors. What appears to be the common factor here is the mix of housing types, tenures and socioeconomic groups. The Sunshine Coast broadly accommodates all groups, while inner Melbourne is increasingly gentrified to the degree that it would appear to leave lower income groups feeling disenfranchised. This may be seen as an unintended side-effect of market processes and a rationale for building up the stock of affordable housing in such areas. It may also illustrate the point that merely providing shelter for low income households is not enough. If they are to be fully included members of society, they may need other infrastructure support.

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