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PRACTICE REVIEW

SOCIAL MIX AND DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES: POLICY, PRACTICE, AND THE EVIDENCE BASE.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the next decades, hundreds of millions of dollars of public and private funds will be spent on regenerating disadvantaged Australian public housing neighbourhoods. If regeneration is not conducted well, as the Americans and British have often found, the exercise may have to be repeated in another decade or so, meaning a substantial waste of precious resources.

Contemporary Australian urban regeneration policies, aimed at disadvantaged public housing neighbourhoods, are generally concerned with the issue of balancing social mix to create more socioeconomically diverse communities. The major strategy to achieve a more balanced social mix is through diversifying housing tenure, to lower concentrations of public housing and increase owner-occupied housing on estates.

Two recent research articles in Urban Policy and Research are concerned with the outcomes of social mix strategies in contemporary Australian regeneration policy (Arthurson Vol. 20, No 3, 2002; Wood Vol. 21, No 1, 2003). The major issues raised by these articles consist of the problematic nature of the objectives set for tenure diversification and the gaps and ambiguities in the knowledge base for the benefits or otherwise of social mix (Arthurson 2002; Wood 2003). Taken together, the research articles demonstrate that there is insufficient linking between the underlying assumptions made for social mix in contemporary regeneration policy and the empirical evidence-base.

These concerns, coupled with the uncertainty of how to move beyond the present impasse about social mix, form the basis for this practice review. First, some brief comments are made about
the issues raised by Arthurson (2002) and Wood (2003) about the incomplete and inconsistent empirical evidence base for social mix. Then, the important issue of placing social mix in its historical context, which is not considered by the two articles, is taken into account. Finally, the review considers how the debate about social mix might move forward through applying an evidence-based policy and practice approach to the literature on social mix.

THE EMPIRICAL BASIS FOR SOCIAL MIX

As Arthurson (2002) and Wood (2003) explain, support for social mix is based on the idea that in neighbourhoods of concentrated mono-tenure public housing, residents are segregated from the activities of mainstream society, characterised as they usually are by homogenous social groups. Common characteristics of residents include high levels of unemployment, low income, poor educational outcomes and higher instances of mental and physical health problems than in other neighbourhoods. The negative effects of residing in these types of low-income mono-tenure neighbourhoods are thought to include:

- Lack of access to social networks, which link residents to job opportunities;

- Limited role models to integrate residents into the ‘appropriate’ behaviours of wider society. This factor is linked to problems of crime, low education retention rates, poor health and high unemployment;

- Postcode prejudice and stigma associated with residing in areas that are perceived as negative and undesirable places; and

- Decreased access to a range of health, education and community services due to service ‘overload’ within particular areas.

The corollary of these assertions is that it is considered more beneficial for disadvantaged public tenants to reside in mixed tenure neighbourhoods, with greater social balance, where it is assumed that these sorts of effects are alleviated, than in neighbourhoods made up of concentrated public housing households. Arthurson (2002) and Wood (2003) summarise the
objectives set for social mix in estate regeneration as: broadening social networks; enhancing access to employment and other services; lowering area-based stigma; building social capital; and creating more inclusive communities. Overall, balancing social mix is associated with facilitating positive change for disadvantaged residents on public housing estates.

However, both articles find that the UK literature is inconclusive about the benefits or otherwise of social mix. As well, there is a lack of Australian literature, which explores the underlying assumptions made for social mix in regenerating disadvantaged public housing communities. Wood (2003) argues that in view of these findings, we need to carefully examine the objectives and outcomes of tenure mix strategies at a neighbourhood level. Likewise, Arthurson (2002) questions whether policy makers are over-emphasising the extent to which social mix assists community regeneration. She details some of the negative impacts of social mix strategies, which include disrupting existing communities, moving problems such as crime to other neighbourhoods and decreasing the supply of public housing.

The major conclusion to be reached from these articles is that Australian research on the benefits or otherwise of social mix, specifically in its application as a component of contemporary regeneration activities, is critical to the advancement of social and intergenerational equity, social justice, and the quality of life for residents of disadvantaged communities. Public housing tenants living on estates, disproportionately negatively affected by the processes of industry restructuring and economic globalisation, represent some of the most marginalised groups in society. Social mix strategies adopted in estate regeneration impinge on their quality of life and are about their future prosperity and well-being. If Australian regeneration policy persists in implementing social mix strategies, then it is important to identify the conditions under which social mix impacts positively on disadvantaged communities, or is at least harmless, or has unexpected negative consequences.
Wood (2003: 45) rightly argues that support for social mix, in the UK and Australia over the last
decade, reinforced the sale of public housing and transfer of stock to private developers and the
community housing tenure. However, what is absent from both articles is recognition that debate
on the merits or otherwise of balancing social mix is a long-standing theme in the international
literature on housing studies, and is by no means new to the Australian context. The concept of
social mix has informed Australian and British new town planning policy since the post second
world war years of the late 1940s. Peel (1995a,b) in exploring the construction of the suburb of
Elizabeth by the South Australian Housing Trust, in the late 1950s, argues that support for social
mix in Australia derived from the British model of new town planning. This model attributes the
problems of homogeneous communities to social class segregation where concentrations of like
residents with low-incomes and educational levels and reduced access to employment, reinforce
and exacerbate the problems of inequality. In the 1970s, the anticipated benefits for
disadvantaged residents of coexisting with homeowners and working residents, in more balanced
heterogenous communities, were thought to include better access to services, increased equality
of opportunity and more stable communities (Sarkissian 1976).

What is novel about the recent enthusiasm for social mix, in both Australia and the UK, is the
linking of the concept to estate regeneration and addressing social exclusion, rather than the
planning of new build estates as in the past. In UK regeneration policy, the Blair Labour
Government’s focus on tackling ‘social exclusion’ witnessed a recent resurgence of interest in
creating ‘mixed’ income communities on social housing estates (Kintrea & Atkinson 1998; Jupp
1999). Arthurson (2002) details how contemporary Australian regeneration policy, particularly
in Queensland and South Australia, similarly links a balanced ‘social mix’ to addressing social
exclusion on public housing estates and expectations of assisting to create ‘sustainable’, ‘self-
sufficient’ and ‘cohesive’ communities.
Hence, an important question, but one that is not broached by the two research articles, is how to interpret this recent revived enthusiasm for social mix and the forces behind the contemporary linking of social mix to social exclusion on public housing estates. There are changes to the composition of areas characterised by high concentrations of social housing due to tighter targeting and eligibility criteria, along with the unwanted effects of social and economic change. Public housing has become the housing of last resort, rather than choice as in the past. It would widen and deepen our understanding of the current policy agendas for social mix through examining its comparative historical context and purposes to which it is used.

IS THERE A ROLE FOR EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY AND PRACTICE?


The focus of evidence-based policy and practice on systematically reviewing the research evidence appears promising in addressing the critical question emerging from the two articles of whether a more balanced social mix actually leads to the anticipated positive outcomes for low-income tenants. This includes the claims of decreasing area-based stigma, increasing access to services, developing beneficial social networks and building social capital. Based on the findings of Arthurson (2002) and Wood (2003), it seems that many Australian policy makers currently assume that the answer to this question is ‘yes’. In reality, much of the contemporary policy debate on social mix, in Australia and elsewhere, is occurring without recourse to the research findings. Indeed, government agencies generally lack the resources to develop complex, methodically organised, and rigorous analyses of the research evidence to assess the effects of
strategies such as social mix policies. Goodchild and Cole (2001: 103) argue that despite the importance of the literature on social mix it is “scattered” and uncoordinated, consisting as it does of a mix of academic literature and numerous evaluation studies funded by housing authorities and other agencies. In addition, several major UK studies of social mix release their findings this year. These include a study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Doherty, Graham, Boyle & Hiscock, forthcoming 2003) that explores the implications of social mix using the 1991 population census of Great Britain (Personal communication, Rosemary Hiscock, January 2003). The UK Centre for Local Policy Studies in the UK is also undertaking major research into housing regeneration and social mix (personal communication, Stuart Speedon, December 2002). This is where an evidence-based policy and practice approach might be usefully applied.

Employing the principles of the model offers a unique way of drawing together, synthesising and systematically analysing the evidence-base on social mix from across its various components that may answer questions about its efficacy, identify gaps in current knowledge and point to new research and policy directions. Briefly, applying the evidence-based research technique to the literature would involve the following steps (Campbell Collaboration 2003):

• Gathering published and unpublished studies;

• Identifying the aims of implementing changes to social mix;

• Detailing how the problems that social mix seeks to address are specified;

• Specifying the mechanisms and tactics used to bring about changes in social mix;

• Analysing how these mechanism and tactics impact on residents;

• Describing the context for the studies, historical time, place, and social organisations within which the mechanisms are activated;

• Assessing whether the studies conducted in one context are replicable and would work similarly when implemented in another context, and;
• Commenting on the potential relevance of these findings to contemporary Australian housing and urban policy.

However, it is important to point out that, the evidence-based policy and practice approach is by no means as simple and unproblematic as portrayed here, or in reality a panacea. Marston and Watts (2002), for instance, while not opposed to the technique, caution that it is a way of policy elites controlling what constitutes knowledge and that in the human services context evidence-based policy and practice cannot be divorced from politics. O’Dwyer’s (2003) work for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute will help to clarify the debates. Her project examines the methodological, philosophical and practical issues raised by evidence-based policy and practice within the context of Australian housing policy. Nonetheless, in the interim, there seems value in testing the potential for the approach to assist in moving forward specific debates on the worth of social mix policies in estate regeneration.

CONCLUSIONS

As the articles by Arthurson (2002) and Wood (2003) demonstrate; tackling the question of whether implementing a more balanced social mix in estate regeneration actually leads to the anticipated beneficial outcomes for low-income tenants is increasingly urgent, for residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods and policy makers alike. If regeneration is not done well, the exercise may have to be repeated in another decade or so meaning a substantial waste of public and private resources. The tightening of eligibility criteria for public housing is resulting in even greater concentrations of disadvantaged and vulnerable households on public housing estates. In view of this situation, the emphasis on social mix policies will increase rather than diminish in the future.

This practice review, in building on the work of Arthurson (2002) and Wood (2003), proposes three major steps to progress contemporary Australian debates about social mix:
1. Conducting Australian research on the outcomes of social mix policies in estate regeneration. This step is critical to meet a gap in Australia’s research knowledge on this topic and to genuinely inform the policy process.

2. Future research needs to commence from an understanding of the historical basis of social mix strategies. Policies can be driven by different agendas and if the underlying beliefs and assumptions are not placed in their historical context, we may be doomed to repeat past errors.

3. Whilst recognising that the approach has limitations – the evidence-based policy and practice approach should be tested as a way of drawing together, synthesising and methodically analysing the policy and academic literature on social mix. Applying this method could assist in assessing whether the major claims made for social mix are realistic and simultaneously identify gaps in the current knowledge base.

In combination, completing these three steps would make available a valuable reference point about the efficacy of social mix for researchers and policy makers alike.

REFERENCES


