

The Socioeconomic Benefits of Social Housing: A Catalyst for Progress

The importance of social and affordable housing has returned to the public policy debate in Queensland and Australia more generally.

Last week, the Federal Government committed to the nation's biggest investment in social and affordable housing in over a decade. The \$10 billion Housing Australia Future Fund will deliver funding to build 30,000 affordable homes within 5 years, two-thirds of which will be social homes and the rest affordable rentals for frontline workers. This is in addition to the Queensland Government's 2023-24 budget, which allocates \$1.1 billion for the delivery and supply of 3,265 new social housing commencements across Queensland through the *Housing and Homelessness Action Plan 2021-2025*.

You'll find very few Queenslanders who disagree with the statement that every individual and family within the state should have a roof over their head. This is not to argue against basing our economic system upon a meritocracy – working harder and generating more money for the public budget through your own economic activity should undoubtedly result in you being rewarded financially. There should, however, be protection for individuals and families who slip through the proverbial cracks.

Factors increasing the likelihood of housing insecurity are, more often than not, out of the control of the person of people experiencing it. Major drivers of homelessness and housing insecurity include health and psychological illness, family breakdown, childhood trauma, interest rate rises and cyclical macroeconomic contraction that results in routine increases in under-and-unemployment rates. Social housing infrastructure acts as a safety net – a net that catches Queenslanders who have fallen through the cracks. The protection of housing insecure persons, of course, takes up most of the space in the social housing infrastructure dialogue – and rightly so.

There are, however, immense socioeconomic benefits to local communities and Queensland as a whole, that are brought about by social housing infrastructure, that are less spoken about – if at all.

Economic Stimulus and Individual Economic Contribution

By providing stable housing options, the need for housing-insecure families and individuals to regularly relocate due to unaffordable rents is reduced dramatically. The stability and greater access to social services empower the affected persons to participate to a greater extent in the labour force, and the reduction in financial stress increases their productivity in the workplace, according to a report by the Australian Housing and Urban Resource Institute (2017). This is particularly evident in when social housing tenants are provided with a long-term or 12+ month lease (Dockery et al., 2008). There is also evidence suggesting that, when delivered by local and state governments and community organisations, housing is typically paired with local services that enable tenants to increase their educational attainment level and workforce skills.

This has the potential to attract a greater range of businesses to the area while also generating higher local tax revenues that can be reinvested (Department of Education, 2014). The small increase in the disposable income of social-housing recipients allows them to become more economically active by purchasing local goods and services. Furthering this, as social housing programs are mostly built in disadvantaged and low-income areas, the multiplier effect on the local economy is significant; a higher number of individuals having the capacity to purchase with regularity acts as an economic stimulus (Maclennan et al., 2019).

Even prior to the recipients moving in, the construction of the social housing blocks in Queensland is likely to prioritise using local resources and labour, according to current State Government Policies. The effects of this are two-fold: first, it creates construction jobs in the region. Second, it has important supply chain impacts — the construction and maintenance of the housing require materials that must be manufactured and distributed using businesses in Queensland. Delivery of large social housing programs has, historically, been a huge employer from the UK to Australia, and the record investment in social and affordable housing by the state government suggests that it will be no different in Queensland (Boyle et al., 2022 and Queensland Government, 2023)

Crime and Antisocial Behaviour Reduction

Social housing can also play a significant role in reducing crime and antisocial behaviour rates and creating safer communities. The first way in which social housing reduces criminal and antisocial behaviour rates is fairly intuitive: homeless populations are some of the most vulnerable to crime and are also more likely to engage in criminal and antisocial behaviour in public spaces. Homeless individuals are 13 times more likely to experience violence and 47 times more likely to have been the victim of theft (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2008). Towards the end of 2022, the CEO of the Australian Community Support Organisation, Vaughan Winter, used this logic to argue that housing the vulnerable protects the likely victims of crime, discourages them from committing it, and therefore improves the safety of our public spaces.

The social isolation on the streets experienced by the homeless and the desperately overcrowded living spaces of the housing insecure are replaced with stability and community. The High-Density Housing Program - a collaborative program by various ACT government departments and ReLink Australia - found that when community cohesion and integration were encouraged by communal activities, events and services within public housing blocks, the number of property offences, assaults and disturbance incidents reduces to varying extents (Morgan et al., 2018). This suggests that community building should be a foremost component of public housing programs. Community aside, social housing increases the accessibility of support services to the vulnerable.

With an official address, a secure roof over their head and a higher disposable income, housing-insecure persons are able to access counselling, substance abuse treatment and mental health support services (Brackertz et al., 2020). Social housing programs are closely tied to other social services and agencies, which aim to intervene and address underlying addiction and mental health problems that are associated with higher local crime rates - Queensland's Housing Plan makes

direct reference to these services (Queensland Government, 2017). Greater accessibility to these services also allows for earlier intervention, which increases the speed and likelihood of recovery. Access to employment centres and the stable income that comes with employment also eliminates economic desperation. Failing this, social housing blocks built using the principles of crime prevention through environmental design (i.e., proper lighting, clear sightlines and well-maintained common areas) make criminal activity less likely (Queensland Police Service, 2021).

Improved Public Health

Most importantly though, social housing is associated with major improvements in local public health outcomes. Social housing reduces rates of chronic stress associated with housing insecurity (Robinson and Adams, 2008). The human body balances chronic stress-inducing stimuli by activating brain pathways that are key drivers of mental health disorders, cardiovascular dysfunctions, cancer and autoimmune syndromes (Mariotti, 2015). It goes without saying that reducing the occurrence of chronic stress-associated disease will alleviate the pressure on the healthcare system, and allow medical professionals to put more time into other patients; which will better general public health outcomes (Swope, 2015). It also allows vulnerable persons who typically don't have the funds or time to seek medical intervention to do so. Identifying cancers and other diseases early is critical to the subject's overall survival chances.

Social housing also reduces overcrowding. Homeless and housing-insecure persons are disproportionately exposed to overcrowded conditions. The 10,000 homeless individuals, some of which are families, typically aggregate in small shelters, King George Square, Musgrave Park and other areas during the night. Even financially restricted families regularly double up with other families to rent and have a person-to-bedroom ratio ranging from two-to-one to four-to-one (Dockery et al., 2022). Higher contact rates, limited ventilation and overshared facilities drive significantly higher rates of infectious disease - as the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated so devastatingly (Booth and Carroll, 2005 and Queensland Health, 2019) Public housing projects adhere to health and safety standards that reduce these risks.

The socioeconomic benefits of larger public housing infrastructure investments are monumental. Moral endeavours aside, it is a wise policy decision and something that members of the infrastructure community in Queensland should certainly consider throwing their support behind.