

The Ghetto of the Bush: Local stigma toward public housing in regional Australia

Authors: Elise Rosser and Lileko Lishomwa

Scholarly investigation into public housing in Australia is a broad field that requires further investigation from multiple disciplines. We seek to address this by using a social science perspective in considering the experiences of regional residents in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales. Social science in this instance refers to a blend of historical and sociological viewpoints, where the cultural histories of a community are considered. This is done by interpreting social attitudes and local perceptions of public housing residents through the process of news making in a regional community. While there is research examining broad stigmatisation of public housing in the news media in Australia, and to a lesser extent the perceptions of tenants themselves, most of the research is urban-centric and takes a broad view of perceptions of public housing. This paper aims to examine perceptions of public housing in late modern regional Australia, focusing on the role of local news media and the community that makes up its readership. A key theme in media representations of public housing is stigmatisation of those who dwell within, which includes drug dealing and taking, violence, the welfare cycle, youth pregnancy and anti-social behaviour. Localised perceptions are revealed through reporting in *The Daily Advertiser*, Wagga Wagga's local newspaper. This paper argues that these social attitudes of local community perspectives show a hidden history of stigma. In the wake of a tragic event in Ashmont, the death of a child, the community and media response in Wagga Wagga revealed a hidden history of the suburb that was heavily reliant upon the existence of public housing and the disadvantage experienced by many residents.

Keywords: Child homicide; media; Australia; public housing; stigma

The stigmatisation of public housing residents in Australia has been the subject of some scholarship over the last decade (Jacobs and Flanagan, 2013; Arthurson 2004; Palmer et al, 2005) as well as, to a lesser extent, the challenging of that stigma (Palmer et al 2004; Mee, 2007). Much of the research on public housing in Australia is urban-centric, as necessities of urban planning raise the question of public housing in urgent and visible ways. This paper aims to take a different approach to the investigation of public housing and stigma by focusing on local perspectives and attitudes toward public housing in regional Australia. Evidence of these perceptions is difficult to glean, as there is limited visibility of public housing tenants in regional Australia. There is, however, often a detailed and anecdotally well-known 'hidden history' of public housing spaces and tenants in smaller communities. As Kearns et al (2013) write, 'All places have identities, but some places also have reputations' (p. 579). In the context of tragic events, such as high-profile murders, these hidden histories and meanings become visible and visualised within the local news media. The authors see this as 'stigma in action'. That is, residents of public housing experience feelings of stigma, which are played out through commentary in the local media. The suburb of Ashmont in the town of Wagga Wagga will provide a case study for this paper to illustrate the manner in which a regional suburb, such as Ashmont, is stigmatised and how that stigma is articulated within the sphere of the news media.

Context of Public Housing in Australia

In Australia, public housing was originally designed to be a form of supplementary housing (Kemeny, 1995, p. 104; Palmer et al., 2004, p. 412); a short term solution for housing shortages with state intervention in the housing market intended to remove inequalities and social injustice for citizens (Cooper, 1985, p. 7). Government intervention with plans to equalise and improve opportunities for minorities and the disadvantaged has not been achieved. The

expense of on-going maintenance in public housing stocks may contribute to the government's neoliberalist agenda to sell these houses into the private housing market (Groenhart and Burke, 2014, p.129). Furthermore, as government funding and housing stock is decreasing, demand is increasing; particularly for single parent families and the elderly (Arthurson, 2004 p. 256). Neoliberalist thinking calls for market regulated approaches (Higgins, Dibden, & Cocklin, 2012, p. 377), where government policies are consistent with deregulating and privatising previous state owned structures. In the case of housing we can appreciate the reduced number of social houses available for people of lower socio-economic status. Neoliberalist agendas entered public housing policy to help alleviate economic conditions of state housing agencies (Francis-Brophy & Donoghue, 2013). Since the early 1970s governments have known that residents in public housing are often not the needy poor (Stimson, 1982, p. 129), and as such have restructured the criteria of eligibility (Francis-Brophy & Donoghue, 2013). Policy now states access to public housing will be assessed and given to those of greatest need, which means there are now concentrations of physically and psychiatrically challenged persons (Morris, 2013, p. 83). This move has done little to minimise popular social perceptions of 'typical' public housing residents.

In Australia, despite popular opinion, more of the national budget is spent on housing schemes that benefit private tenants and home buyers (Badcock & Beer, 200; Kilmartin et al., 1985, p. 112). In 2011 first home buyers were eligible for \$7000 payments as financial assistance for new purchases; they were also able to receive an additional \$14,000 as part of a first home buyer boost package (Australian Bureau of Statistics). Indigenous Australians had their own package with which to encourage home ownership, and were eligible for a loan scheme that has seen over 14,700 families enter the private home owning market (Australian Bureau of Statistics). Financial schemes such as these continue to drive Australians into housing tenure and the implementation of housing policy has seen Australians appear to have relative wealth when it comes to home ownership. In 2010 Australia had 333,383 public houses (Australian Bureau of Statistics), or less than five percent of all houses (Jacobs & Flanagan, 2013, p. 320), whose typical residents were on welfare payments. Although a common feature of current public housing tenants, during the 1950s-1970s residents were the working class employed at nearby factories and manufacturing plants (Warr, 2005). However nowadays, as a result of economic restructuring, these public houses are most often found in geographically isolated areas with limited access to services (Patulny & Morris, 2012, p. 3367).

In Australia, smaller populations choose to reside in rural and regional towns and cities. In Wagga Wagga, the largest inland regional town in NSW, there are approximately 60,000 residents. So what does this mean for public housing? Not only are populations living in regional centres marginalised at the outset, because they choose not to live in metropolitan areas such as Sydney or Melbourne, those with lower socio-economic status could be more disadvantaged than urban populations in similar economic circumstances. In NSW, housing supply is governed by the state housing department. As of June 2014, in Wagga the current waiting times for public housing are approximately 2-5 years for any house consisting of 1-3 bedrooms, this compares to 4+ bedrooms where the waiting list is over 10 years (NSW FACS Housing). For welfare recipients classed as 'in need', in the local context they will continue to be marginalised for at least the next 2-5 years. As the supply of public housing diminishes, the demand increases.

As public housing has moved from families and low-income workers to predominately welfare housing, issues of unemployment, often long term, have come to the fore (Palmer et al. 2004, p. 412) and public housing is no longer perceived to provide an adequate solution. As Kathy Arthurson put it in the 1990s, public housing areas "...are now considered by many to be run down and problematic." (Arthurson, 1998, p.35). Almost two decades later, this perception of public housing continues to dominate and scholarship is only beginning to address the complex and wide-ranging issues associated with public housing and its solutions. A report from the University of Tasmania noted that public housing is now seen to accentuate poverty and social disadvantage (Atkinson and Jacobs, 2008, p.3) rather than alleviate it. In addition to this, and perhaps of more immediate concern, is the stigmatisation faced by residents of public housing, or even those located within close proximity. It tends to be the unemployed, usually long-term, who are the tenants of public housing. Since the 1980s many of the job trends, for both urban and regional, have moved from industrial based and are now centred around service; added to this is the decline in public service jobs, both of which have led to regional disparities for employment opportunities (Damesick, 1987,

p.35). This situation contributes to on-going inequalities facing those in public housing. For those in public housing in regional areas it is increasingly difficult to secure employment and participate in the private rental market. Public housing and disadvantaged neighbourhoods have stigma and reputations of being rough and undesirable.

Public housing and stigma

The theme of stigma links to the topic of public housing as we are concerned with social perceptions. Stigma means 'to denote a mark of shame or discredit' (Allan, 2011, p. 79). Certain suburbs and those who live within them, either in public housing or the private rental market, appear to possess particular shameful norms and behaviours that local knowledge attributes to residing in said suburb. Stigma is understood here to be 'a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype' (Goffman, 1963, p. 14) which is a '...social interactive process with wholly negative effects' (Kearns et al., 2013, p. 582). The attributes which we refer to are the lower socio-economic residents in public housing, welfare recipients and the unemployed. The stereotype, later discussed, is perpetuated by residents with these attributes, and is well known and judged by those living in nearby neighbourhoods. Other public housing literature has also aligned discussion with stigma and framed it as a complex process (Jacobs and Flanagan, 2013; Arthurson 2004; Palmer et al, 2005; Devereux, Haynes, & Power, 2011). The complexity of stigma in a regional setting contradicts the rural idyll ('rural idyll' refers to the projection of ideals of safety, wholesomeness and 'laid back' onto country areas by urban dwellers) as perceived by city residents, it becomes difficult to digest the country as having negative social features as found in ghettos. One Australian study of small towns and the impact of stigma label the areas with public housing as 'the Bronx', a metaphor which characterises the tenants as living in a slum (Birdsall-Jones, 2013). Governments could have helped appease this by constructing public housing across towns and cities rather than concentrate them in particular areas that now are home to disenfranchised individuals.

In the Australian context policy has played a large role in promoting stigma of neighbourhoods that have concentrations of public housing. Part of the problem concerns the limited government funding injected into public housing management and the updating of structures (Jacobs & Flanagan, 2013). National spending since the late 2000s has been on increasing the supply of public housing, and we saw \$400 million provided to state governments which resulted in 1,890 new homes (Australian Bureau of Statistics). This has done little to counter the growing demand. Additionally, choosing to house disadvantaged people together increases the fuel for stigmatization. In this manner, Australian policy is (to an extent) to blame, by housing lower socio-economic residents geographically near one another. Popular stereotyping of public housing residents has kept development out of 'richer' areas of town (Jacobs & Flanagan, 2013, p. 322). Therefore, it has promoted homogenous social networks to develop. Policy makers would have preferred public housing tenants to engage with private home owners within the same neighbourhood and this interaction would encourage economic and social networking (Patulny & Morris, 2012, p. 3367). Networking would ideally lead public housing residents to find employment. Both policymakers and state housing employees share the responsibility of continuing not to address the underlying needs of public housing residents (Jacobs & Flanagan, 2013, p. 324), who in turn are contributing to the negative impacts of stigma. Governments have played a large role in keeping the needy in a stagnant position, by locating houses in fringe areas, which has contributed to their locally known stigmatisation.

Some of the causes for stigma come from 'the limited networks and social isolation' (Lupton, 2003, p. 120). Individuals living within these areas experienced neighbourhood stigma that ranges from sometimes being unable to secure jobs or gain credit for hire purchase. These are markers for social exclusion based on public housing. Other markers or behaviours for social exclusion include drug abuse, teen pregnancy, child abuse and neglect and crime (Lupton, 2003, p. 215). When crime occurs in public housing areas, complexes or buildings, those who reside there are financially impacted and stigmatised. Insurance premiums increase as more crime is reported, and residents in neighbouring suburbs label public housing residents, both of which lead to psychological damage (Reeves, 1996, p. 221). Stigmatisation of public housing areas has also caused educational and employment barriers (Jacobs & Flanagan, 2013, p. 322). Residents in public housing have been known to suffer from 'postcode stigma', which limits their opportunities for finding work and reinforces their exclusion from the job market (Lupton, 2003). Employers have been known not to hire persons from areas with public housing and this contributes to their stigmatised identity

(Devereux et al., 2011). The inability to move beyond current limitations of the networks prevalent among public housing areas was immortalised in the two seasons of an Australian television show *Housos* (2011), which was a satirical portrayal of public housing residents' everyday lives. *Housos* demonstrates that the signifiers of public housing and its tenants are socially understood well enough to be an effective use of satire for the Australian public. In this manner, both local and national understandings of public housing are reflected.

Local knowledge of disadvantaged suburbs is enmeshed within regional society. Residents are stigmatised because of their welfare dependency for income and the congestion of public housing present. Research has identified that Australian media is known for negatively portraying public housing (Palmer et al., 2005, p. 394). We examined local news media, particularly articles in Wagga Wagga's newspaper, *The Daily Advertiser*, that pertain to people who call Ashmont home and discovered they are represented as a stigmatised cohort of Wagga Wagga society.

Discovering Stigma: Regional media representations of Ashmont

Located on the outskirts of the regional centre of Wagga Wagga, the suburb of Ashmont is geographically located away from the rest of the town and separated by a small industrial area. The suburb is most easily accessed through the industrial area, via the highway out of town or through the neighbouring suburb of Glenfield. Although Ashmont is separate from the main areas of Wagga Wagga in this sense, geographically it is not actually far from the centre of town. This physical separation became an important representation for the difference between Ashmont and the rest of Wagga Wagga, providing a clear border between what writer Craig Sherborne described as a 'pretty town' and 'the ghetto of the bush' (Sherborn, 2002). Anecdotally, Ashmont is known as a poor suburb of Wagga Wagga in terms of economic disadvantage and is considered by some sections of the community a bad place to live.

Local newspapers play a vital role in revealing local opinion and providing a platform for local commentators who would have otherwise not been heard. Hess and Waller's research into small newspapers and heinous crimes suggests that local papers have a relationship with their readers that metropolitan papers do not, and can have some influence on attitudes (Hess and Waller, 2012). We conducted a survey of articles mentioning Ashmont in Wagga Wagga's local paper, *The Daily Advertiser* and the narratives and arguments played out around and about the suburb. While many of the mentions of Ashmont were largely negative and to do with crime, violence, teen pregnancy and its intersection with public housing, the largest amount of media was generated after the tragic death of a seven month old baby in one of the public homes in the suburb. This provides a compelling case study for emerging narratives of stigma for public housing tenants in Ashmont.

Seven month old Jordan died in his home in the regional centre of Wagga Wagga on the 25th February 2000. Jordan was the child of two Wagga Wagga residents, and had two older siblings on his mother's side from previous relationships. The home he shared with his mother, her partner and siblings was a public house situated in the suburb of Ashmont. On the evening of Jordan's death a party had been hosted at his home with (according to newspaper articles) less than ten people in attendance. When the paramedics arrived they attempted to resuscitate Jordan, before pronouncing him dead at the scene. Jordan's death became a murder investigation soon after he was discovered. Jordan's death was front page news of the local paper *The Daily Advertiser* the morning after he died. This first news report set the tone of the narrative that played out around Jordan's death, "Death of Baby Boy a Mystery." (*The Daily Advertiser*, February 26 2000, p. 1)

For almost two years Jordan's death remained a mystery. As the investigation into Jordan's death continued over the months it began to seem as it would become similar to the case of Jaidyn Leskie; an unsolved child murder in Moe, Victoria that also led to the national stigmatisation of the local community (Campbell, 2002) and was marred with irresolution and a lack of witnesses or evidence. *The Daily Advertiser* made this comparison explicit with the headline "Jordan is our Jaidyn" (March 2000, pg 1.) Jordan's case came to an end in October 2001 when the de-facto partner of his mother was charged with Jordan's murder. Originally brought up on a charge of murder, Jordan's killer changed his plea from 'not guilty' to 'guilty-manslaughter' and was convicted of the lesser crime.

A feature in the local and occasionally national news, Jordan's death tapped into cultural anxieties about welfare communities and single parenting. One of the main features of this period of the investigation was the frequent calls for information and witnesses, originating from the police and the local community. This reflected the prevailing attitude that members of the community of Ashmont were withholding information; an attitude that was the main feature of the national reporting. Research suggests that tenants of suburbs with public housing are often stigmatised as dangerous, deviant etc. (Palmer et al., 2005, p. 394). This can be noticed in some of the news reports on Ashmont. The residents of Ashmont were largely criticised for their alleged refusal to aid the investigation, with reporters and police alike naming the "cone of silence" in Ashmont after baby Jordan's death (Daily Advertiser, July 17, 2000, p. 1) and their fear of speaking to the police. This aligns with the notion that the social networks forged and developed among public housing residents remain homogenous (Patulney & Morris). In light of baby Jordan's murder the public perceived that the people of Ashmont actively chose not to cooperate with ongoing investigations. It was the suburb as a whole that was tainted (Birdsall-Jones, 2013, p. 323) and experienced social exclusion and stigma, for being seen to not want resolution with the case.

By classing Ashmont as a separate place to Wagga Wagga, and the rest of Australia, commentators and journalists were able to discuss it as a foreign place. "It's a place where people grow a protective layer against outsiders: eyes stare in challenge at a stranger's passing car, and mouths shut if a stranger asks too many questions" (Sherborne, 2002, p. 3). Ashmont residents were so firmly seen as outsiders in geographical, social and economic terms, that the place became an area where violent crime can be expected to occur without jeopardising the comfort of middle Australia. "This is the land of the idle poor, of break and enters and vandalism, of hanging around, being bored. This is the bleak, listless world into which Jordan Dean Leon Anderson-Smith was born." (Sherborne, 2002, p. 5). Issues of teen pregnancy and single parenting were also evoked by media coverage that focused on Ashmont and baby Jordan, "Ashmont is also a place of teenage mothers. The kids who have kids, and where sometimes dad doesn't stick around." (Hardaker, 2000). Another article directly referring to Ashmont and the death of baby Jordan reads, "In the ghettos of the bush the children have children. At sixteen or seventeen they have their first; twenty years old is old." (Sherborne, 2002, p. 3). Here writer Craig Sherborne conjures an image of an inner-city slum, situated amidst native flora and fauna. The image is a striking one, observing the contradiction of violent crime and ideals of 'country' Australia.

The Daily Advertiser's June 2000 editorial also reinforces a prevalent sentiment at the time in Wagga; a segment of their community was choosing parochialism over the good of the wider community and the death of a child:

While community anger continues to boil, making demands of police to bring the evil killer to justice, a section of Riverina society- albeit a miniscule section- is thumbing its nose at decency and refusing to talk, almost as if there is a condoning of the terrible death the child suffered. (Editorial, The Daily Advertiser, July 20, 2000, p. 4)

This stereotype of residents who dwell in public housing suburbs is locally recognised to occur in Ashmont, and geographical isolation further perpetuates the stigma they experience. There are discrepancies with how Ashmont was described in national news coverage, indicating that some reports were made with an incomplete understanding of the area, most likely relying upon descriptions from local residents. For instance, Candace Sutton described Ashmont as "...ramshackle but quiet" (2000, p. 10), while Kate Ashley-Griffiths contends that Ashmont is "...a welfare-dependant Wagga suburb derided by some townfolk as 'Trashmont.'" (2000, p. 4). A Daily Advertiser headline response to criticism in the national media read, "Australian's reading about baby's murder told: Ashmont 'Home of the Bogan.'" (October 16, 2000). A core issue here is that public disapproval can impact the creation of public housing and the willingness of tenants to live there, whilst perpetuating the stigma associated with the Ashmont stereotype. A letter to the editor appeared in The Daily Advertiser to challenge the label of 'ghetto' and 'bogan' which addressed the representations of Ashmont in a heated defence of the suburb:

How dare this newspaper [The Sunday Telegraph's Sunday Magazine] print such a biased and denigrating story about Ashmont. How dare he (the reporter) assume we are "at the bottom of the social heap"... The truth of the matter is that the majority of us do not know what happened to Baby Jordan... What right does this person who wrote this compare our place of living to a ghetto? (Lloyd, 2000, p. 4)

Coming from a member of the public in the form of a letter to the editor, these comments were the first heated and emotive defences of Ashmont. 'Denigrating' points out a central issue, that the majority of residents did not know Jordan's family and were in no position to gain information on the crime let alone withhold integral information from the police, especially considering Ashmont's population was around 4000 at the time of Jordan's death. The Daily Advertiser also played host to resident's defending the suburb "This Place is No Slum: Ashmont residents vent their anger at meeting" (Daily Advertiser, November 23, 2000, p. 1). This allowed the residents of Ashmont a public platform to defend themselves and their suburb against the negative press. Wagga Wagga's The Daily Advertiser can reflect and disseminate local attitudes and provide a space for locals to express their opinions through the letters to the editor. This was the primary manner in which residents of Wagga Wagga and Ashmont could 'fight back' against the representation of their town in the national newspapers and provide local perspectives on Ashmont.

The existence of stigma in Ashmont actually became a focus of discussion in The Daily Advertiser article "Ashmont's north to be renamed?" It was reported that six north Ashmont residents were in the process of forming a committee to decide upon a new name for northern Ashmont and present it to the council. The article also notes that this is not the first time a proposal to change the name of north Ashmont, with the name 'Best Heights' rejected in 1992:

North Ashmont residents are behind a campaign to rename an area of the Ashmont suburb in a bid to escape the apparent stigma attached to living there. Real estate agent and north Ashmont resident Paul Gooden is leading the push to have the area north of Ashmont Avenue renamed. "Ashmont is a great place to live but I'm in real estate and I have people come in and say they want a house anywhere but Ashmont," Mr Gooden said. (Daily Advertiser, Wednesday October 25, p. 1).

The comment by Gooden is anecdotally suggestive of the reputation of Ashmont in Wagga, as is the notion of residents wishing to 'escape the stigma'. Conversely, government housing and the house that baby Jordan was killed in would belong to 'South' Ashmont.

The question of Ashmont's status was detracted from again when another murder made front page headlines in early September of 2000. On the ninth of September the front page of The Daily Advertiser proclaimed: 'Murder Charge: De facto husband accused' (Grimson, 2000, p.1), where an Ashmont resident was charged with stabbing his de facto wife to death. Follow up articles amplified the complexity and strange nature of the crime when it was revealed that the victim had been due to face court for stabbing the killer in a previous altercation on May 8 2000 (Wagstaff, 2000, p. 1). Promoting the idea of a murder trend in Wagga, the September 9 article also contained an inset on the front page titled 'Seven Killings in two years', detailing prominent murders in Wagga from 1998-2000. This list also included three murders committed by 'Wagga Wagga Serial Killer' Matthew James Harris in 1998, who was sentenced in 2000, and the death of Jordan Anderson Smith and Michael Jones, a homeless man who was burnt to death in a garbage bin on April 30, 2000. Considering that three of the murders were committed by the same person it skews the data somewhat; seven murders in two years for a town the size of Wagga Wagga gives the impression of a high murder rate.

Public attitudes toward Ashmont can also be gleaned by an Ashmont themed joke orchestrated by unknown members of the community in September 2000, prior to the opening of the Sydney summer Olympics. An anonymous leaflet entitled the 'Ashmont Olympics' was circulated through Wagga which changed Olympic sports to

ones allegedly more appropriate for Ashmont residents. The pamphlet quipped that the Olympic flame would be ignited by a petrol bomb ‘...thrown by a local of our fine suburb wearing the traditional flannelette shirt, trakky daks and ug boots [sic]’ (The Daily Advertiser, September 19, 2000, p. 3). The 100 metre sprint would be altered so ‘competitors will start outside the Ashmont Inn and will have to hole a VCR and microwave, one in each arm, and at the sound of the starters gun, a police dog will be released from a cage 10 metres behind the athletes.’ (Daily Advertiser, September 19, 2000, p. 3) The Daily Advertiser referred readers to the pamphlet and reported that, ‘The leaflet also says the men’s walking event will be cancelled as organisers cannot guarantee the safety of anyone walking the streets of Ashmont.’ (Daily Advertiser, September 19, 2000, p. 3) A leaflet like ‘Ashmont Olympics’ allows for a look into unwritten histories, and demonstrates what at least a section of the community felt about the suburb.

The meaning is clear; Ashmont is a place of ‘bogans’, thieves and violence, presumably a well speculated opinion in Wagga Wagga for the joke to have meaning for the vast majority of residents. These are the characteristics of residents of Ashmont, which demonstrates the locally recognisable stereotype through the articulated signs and symbols found within the local news media. No record other than The Daily Advertiser’s short article on this pamphlet appears to exist. While this is unfortunate for evidence purposes, it is emblematic of the difficulties of discovering the hidden histories of people and places in a non-official capacity even in a contemporary context. If this was released during the Facebook era, it would likely be discoverable. The period of the 1990’s and 2000’s falls between traditional sources and social media, with the search for evidence heavily reliant upon newspapers and opinion letters. Usage of pamphlets and leaflets in the manner of the ‘Ashmont Olympics’ has all but disappeared in contemporary Australia. This type of ephemera can be a strong indicator of public attitude and unwritten histories.

In this manner place became important in the discussions on Jordan’s death, as Ashmont was depicted as distinctly different from the town of Wagga Wagga. Ashmont’s status as a ‘country’ area was a feature in this discussion. This spatial distinction created further evidence for Wagga Wagga locals to stigmatise Ashmont residents. At a national level the crime was used by some writers to be indicative of the social ills facing welfare and community housing, and the problems of domestic violence, child neglect and abuse. However, these social themes, which link Ashmont to the rest of Australia and link the death of baby Jordan to a whole spectrum of other minor and major offenses, were not systematically explored. The crime was individualised, in the sense that the issue problematised was the hunt for the killer, and the location of Ashmont was exoticised through representations which depicted it as a site of failure and marginalisation. The story, like many crime stories featured in the media, was also a narrative of suspense and disclosure, tailored to sustain an audience interest. This structure is typical of featured crime stories, which often replicate the pattern of description, investigation and denouement of murder mystery fiction.

Exploring Stigma

The regional example of Ashmont is illustrative of ‘stigma in action’. Here we are referring to the lived experience of residents who, in their everyday lives, are members of a suburb that is subject to stigma within the localised geographical space. Governments are encouraging housing tenure through policy; however this does not change the locally known narrative of suburbs like Ashmont where residents face lower housing prices, higher crime rates and stigma that reinforces social inequality. In every town and city there is the potential for Ashmont equivalents, whose residents within those spaces are subject to an ongoing cycle of ‘stigma in action’ and inequality. Greg Marston produced a critical discourse of public housing policy in Queensland, noting that the existence of a binary divide between good and bad tenants has its roots in historical morality discourse, “Essentially, this theme is a reconstitution of deserving and undeserving poor, moral categories that formed the basis of Australian welfare provision during the 19th and early part of the 20th century.” (Marston, 2000, p. 365). In the reading of Ashmont offered above, the notion of public housing tenants as ‘undeserving poor’ comes through most strongly. It points to a general perception, disseminated through local news media, that the inherent qualities of Ashmont and its residents were outside those of moral, middle Australia and hence undesirable. This is the basis of the inequalities faced by the residents of public housing.

How to break the public housing stigma goes beyond the scope of this paper, however we do suggest media

representations of Ashmont type suburbs continue to breed inequality apparent on a localised stage. The social realities apparent in the hidden history of stigmatized local resident's links to the broader concept of inequality experienced by welfare recipients who, in media portrayals, often times are the face of crime, disadvantage and undesirability. Two of the murder cases in Ashmont feature defacto partners, which in the eyes of some members of the conservative public who prefer traditional family households, can be used to stigmatise others. In regional Australia we see disparities present in Ashmont, compared to other suburbs in Wagga Wagga, which further exacerbates the inequality experienced by public housing residents.

These news stories develop the perception that Ashmont was a place for which its government housing area was its defining feature. This is not the case. While a significant portion of Wagga Wagga's public housing is located in Ashmont, other adjacent suburbs such as Tolland, Mount Austin and Koorinal also have areas of public housing. Also, the presence of well-known features of Ashmont such as the Carmelite Convent was left out of the majority of media stories, except in a single case to represent the difference between the 'good' and 'bad' sides of the suburb. Negative press of Ashmont has featured in Wagga Wagga before Jordan's death and, alongside anecdotal evidence in the Wagga Wagga community, this has led to the impression that the suburb is wholly a place of violence and welfare dependence; not safe to live in. One of the noticeable consequences of this is that housing prices in the area are slightly cheaper than most other sections of Wagga Wagga, perpetuating both the stereotypes of the suburb and the low-economic status of the residents who can buy cheaply; this is aided by government policy that favours home ownership.

Conclusion

We are interested in the stigma surrounding public housing residents in rural and regional Australia, and how the media has played a significant role in reinforcing locally known stereotypes. The relevance of this issue stems from a broader context of social perceptions of housing tenure. In this paper the focus is on public housing and the stigma attached to residents whose home is geographically located in a 'poor' neighbourhood. This means we have been able to examine the role of local media that has uncovered hidden histories. Local newspaper was chosen as the data source as public perception is captured in both the journalist's voice and letters to the editor.

Public housing residents are subject to stigma despite public housing comprising less than 5% of housing stock in Australia. Government policy favours Australians entering the private housing market, and more public spending is directed into private ownership initiatives. Current public housing literature tends to focus on Australian urban centres. However, the regional example of Wagga Wagga shows stigmatization of residents in suburbs with public housing is not bound by the city limits. The concept of 'stigma in action' has been developed here, which builds on the existing literature on public housing. The example of Ashmont, a suburb with some residents with lower socio-economic status residing in public housing, has demonstrated the various ways in which local portrayals of 'the ghetto of the bush' further characterise the known stereotype of those in public housing. Also shown is that stereotyping spreads across the whole suburb regardless of housing tenure. The characteristics of Ashmont residents are similar to that of any suburb that had concentrations of public housing and they include, lower housing prices, unemployment and crime. Therefore by acknowledging the existence of a hidden history in Wagga Wagga that has drawn attention to disadvantaged locals, we can further appreciate the perpetuating cycle of stigma these residents face. Contemporarily, demand for public housing mainly comes from single parent families and the elderly (Arthurson, 2004 p. 256). In the image of Ashmont discussed above, there is no room conceptually for the disadvantaged elderly or single parents on welfare or low income jobs. Instead, an incomplete image of public housing as a ghetto of violent, drug addled youth dominates local perceptions. These descriptions are devoid of nuance and do not allow for understanding of the complex relationship between public housing, welfare and stigma.

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About the Authors

Elise Rosser is a PhD candidate in the humanities department at Charles Sturt University. Her current research explores histories of crime and violence, rural and regional Australia and child homicide in contemporary Australia.

Lileko Lishomwa is a PhD candidate studying rural sociology concentrating on farmers' biosecurity practices at

Charles Sturt University. Her current research explores regional sheep farmers' knowledge and application of biosecurity on-farm. Her broader sociological interests involve utilising qualitative research methods to understand social perception, everyday life in the rural space, risk and trust.