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**Social networks in public and community housing:  
the impact on employment outcomes**

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**Abstract:**

This article seeks to examine some of the ways in which social networks may contribute to employment outcomes for community and public housing tenants. There is a body of literature that explores the relationship between social networks and employment outcomes, and a separate literature on the relationship between housing and social networks (which is largely concerned with homeowners). However, there has been little research that links all three aspects, especially in relation to social housing. This provides a starting point for this research, which involved interviews with housing organisation staff and focus groups with tenants in two case study areas in metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia. This article reports on the findings through examining the way in which housing tenure may affect social network formation, and considering the ways that these networks can impact on job attainment. It is concluded that, overall, those in community housing appeared to fare better, in terms of employment-conducive networks, than those in public housing. This finding is related not just to the management of the housing, but also to the broader issues of stigma, area-level deprivation and intergenerational unemployment.

## Introduction

Currently, in Australia, 5.8 per cent of households reside in social housing (0.5 per cent community housing & 5.3 per cent public housing) (Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/ State Service Provision 2001: 751). Over the past two decades, the progressively tighter targeting of social housing, along with broader social and economic changes, have resulted in residualisation of the tenure as a whole. Contemporary social housing (community housing and public housing) is characterised by socioeconomically disadvantaged tenants experiencing low-incomes, poverty and high unemployment rates.

Public housing is owned and managed by government housing authorities in each state. 22 per cent of public housing tenants in Australia are currently employed (Hulse et al, 2003). Whilst community housing generally also receives funding through government, it differs from public housing in that it has its foundations in an ethos of community development and self-help, and focuses on building tenants' skills through volunteer self-management in the administration, maintenance and purchase of housing. Australian community housing provides for those most in need of accommodation, with about three-quarters (75 per cent) of community housing tenants relying on statutory incomes such as sickness and disability benefits (South Australian Community Housing Authority (SACHA), 2003). In South Australia, less than 18 per cent of tenants (17.8 per cent) have wages or self-employment as their major source of income, and this has progressively reduced over the last 5 years from nearly 22 per cent (21.6 per cent) in 1999 (SACHA, 2003).

Along with public housing, housing cooperatives and associations are the two main types of community housing organisations that are the focus of this study.<sup>1</sup> *Housing Cooperatives*

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<sup>1</sup> Community Service Organisation and Local Government community housing are other forms of community housing provision. *Community Service Organisations* provide housing as part of their range of

are not-for-profit housing organisations that are tenant managed. Generally, they are developed for specific low-income groups (eg. for elderly or single women), or they may be located in a particular suburb or region. They are based on the principles of tenant participation and function on the volunteer contributions of their tenants. Tenants gain the skills to run the cooperative, including business, asset and financial management skills (CHFA 2001: 14). *Housing Associations* house tenants with more specific needs, such as women escaping domestic violence, the homeless and individuals with disabilities. The associations are generally managed by volunteers, who may be linked to service organisations, including churches and welfare agencies, or consist of friends and relatives of the tenants.

This article seeks to explore the ways in which social networks may contribute to employment outcomes for community and public housing tenants. While there is a body of literature that explores the relationship between social networks and employment outcomes, and a separate literature on the relationship between housing and social networks, there has been little research that links all three aspects. The article reports on empirical research, including interviews with housing organisation staff and focus groups with tenants in two case study areas in metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia. It examines the ways in which housing tenure may affect social network formation, and then considers the ways that these networks might impact on job attainment. The following sections explore the literature on social networks and employment, and social networks and housing, before considering the findings of the research project and then drawing together some conclusions about housing, employment and social networks in community and public housing.

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social services and some *Local Governments* provide community housing for their local communities (Community Housing Federation of Australia (CFHA) 2001: 2).

Social capital, social networks and employment:

A key theoretical framework with which to assess the impact of social networks on employment outcomes is that of social capital. Two main schools of thought influence current debates about social capital and they arise from the work of Robert Putnam and Pierre Bourdieu (Baum & Ziersch 2003). Putnam defines social capital as the “features of social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1995: 67). He conceives of social capital as a resource that evolves at the community-level and is a distinctly social feature that is reflected in the structure of social relationships. Putnam focuses on the capacity of communities to cooperate for mutual benefit and argues that state intervention can be detrimental to the development of social capital. Pierre Bourdieu, in contrast, focuses on the resources that accrue to individuals as a result of their membership of social networks. He defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources that are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu 1986: 248). Bourdieu argues that social capital can facilitate access to a range of other capitals including economic capital. This approach is structuralist, arguing that social capital will inevitably be differentially distributed and that this distribution reflects broader inequities in other forms of capital. Bourdieu’s position suggests a need for redistributive state intervention to address inequities in both social capital, and also the other resources which social capital may provide access to.

This paper draws on Bourdieu’s conception of social capital and focuses on the way in which an individual’s social networks may provide them with access to a range of resources that are relevant to employment outcomes. As noted, Bourdieu’s notion of social capital recognises the inextricable link between social capital and economic

capital and suggests that the resources available through a social network will depend on the socio-economic position of network participants. Implicit in this paper is also a recognition that the role of social networks in providing employment opportunities, for all tenants, is only one determinant of labour market outcomes. The impact of social networks on these outcomes may be minor when considering the impact of broader macro-structural processes, such as the casualisation of the workforce and economic restructuring which has seen the loss of jobs in the manufacturing industry.

### Social Networks and Employment

Social networks are commonly described as the social connections that exist between individuals. These connections may be formal or informal, and can encompass a broad range of ties between friends, family, neighbours, work colleagues and acquaintances. There is a body of international literature that suggests that social networks can be an important source of resources that promote positive employment outcomes<sup>2</sup>. The most commonly observed example is that social networks may provide important access to information about potential job vacancies (Granovetter 1973; Kasinitz & Rosenberg 1996; Portes & Sensenbrenner 1993; Rees, 1966; Schneider 1997). Social networks have also been found to affect the status of jobs obtained (Green, Tigges & Browne, 1995; Lin, 1999; Lin, Ensel & Vaughn, 1981a; Lin, Vaughn & Ensel, 1981b). However, social networks may also work negatively by excluding non-network members from employment opportunities. For example, Waldinger (1996) found that ethnic groups dominated particular occupational niches. Likewise, Kasinitz and Rosenberg (1996) studying the waterfront in Brooklyn, NY, found that local employers filled most jobs via social networks that excluded local residents, particularly African Americans, recruiting instead individuals from outside the area using their own social networks.

Social networks have also been found to be important in providing people with other resources relevant to sustained employment. For example, social networks may have an impact (both positive and negative) on employment outcomes through 'role modelling'. Particular networks, such as those characterised by a non-work ethic, may involve norms of behaviour that are not consistent with maintaining employment (Beekman, Lyons & Scott, 2001 in Hiscock, 2001; Stone, Gray & Hughes, 2003). Other features of social networks, such as the availability of emotional support or practical assistance including childcare, may also have an impact on employment outcomes (Schneider 1997; Wilson 1998).

Some social networks may be 'richer' in employment opportunities than others. There is a growing body of literature that distinguishes between three types of social networks. This typology consists of 'bonding', 'bridging' and 'linking' networks (Szreter, 2002; Briggs, 1998). 'Bonding' networks are typically dense, local, 'horizontal' ties that exist between people who are in similar circumstances, such as families, friends and neighbours and members of these networks generally perceive each other to be like-minded. Bonding networks most readily provide everyday access to material, practical and emotional forms of assistance and support. In contrast, 'bridging' networks are those in which more heterogeneous people are linked. Bridging networks are comprised of weak social ties that potentially offer diverse resources and opportunities by making resources and opportunities in one network available to a member of another (Granovetter, 1973). 'Linking' networks are personal and institutional networks and relationships between unequal agents, and are a variation of bridging networks (Szreter, 2002). Linking networks are 'vertical' connections and there is an explicit recognition of power differentials between agents in the social network.

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<sup>2</sup> There is a body of research that considers the broader concept of 'social capital', generally drawing



In an ideal situation, people's social networks comprise the range of bonding, bridging and linking ties. Research suggests bridging and linking ties may provide greater scope for employment opportunities than bonding ties (Briggs, 1998). This distinction is typically associated with patterns of interaction that are believed to contribute to 'getting by' (bonding) and 'getting ahead' (bridging and linking) respectively (Briggs, 1998).

### Social networks and housing tenure

There is some evidence that the nature of social networks may differ according to the type of housing tenure, and our interest is whether these differences may have an implication for the employment outcomes of tenants. Much of this research has focused on comparing home owners with other tenure types, and explores their neighbourhood connections. Some studies suggest that home owners tend to be more involved in their local community networks through activities such as joining local organisations (Beekman, Lyons & Scott, 2001 in Hiscock 2001; Ditkovsky & van Vliet, 1984), working to solve local problems (DiPasquale & Glaeser, 1999) and local social interactions. It is argued that homeownership creates incentives to improve one's local area, as the value of the home is tied to the quality of the community (Rohe & Basalo, 1997). It is also argued that homeownership provides a barrier to geographical mobility (Glaeser & Sacerdote 2000; Reingold, Van Ryzin & Ronda 2001) and mobility has been found to disrupt access to social support and exchange (Boisjoly, Duncan & Hofferth, 1995).

The implications of the above research for social housing are illustrated in Figure 1, which shows how different housing tenures vary in terms of tenant participation and control over their housing. This can be conceptualised in terms of a continuum of tenant participation and control over the administration of the housing. In general,

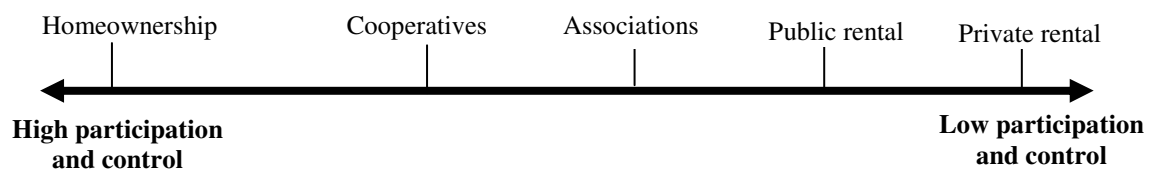
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on Putnam's conceptualisation, and its relationship to both housing and employment. However, the focus of this paper is on research that explicitly considers social networks.

compared to the administration of public housing and low-income tenants in the private rental sector, community housing practices, especially in cooperatives, promote, and indeed rely, on much greater tenant participation and control over the management of their housing. The formal roles undertaken by tenants within the cooperatives may include, for instance, treasurer, maintenance officer, tenancy officer, secretary, chairperson and rental officer. In terms of these responsibilities, community housing more directly resembles home ownership than public housing or low-income private rental; in the latter tenures these tasks are the province of the landlord or housing manager, rather than the tenant..

FIGURE 1:

Continuum of tenant participation/control over housing



Source: Arthurson, Ziersch & Carson (2005)

There is a limited body of literature that explores social networks in public housing. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that public housing tenants have more limited social networks than other tenure types. Hiscock (2001) found, for instance, that social housing tenants exchanged fewer favours with neighbours (an indication of local social networks), than home owners. Within public housing, differences in social networks have also been found, depending on whether the housing is clustered together or scattered amongst

home owners. In a comparison of scattered site and clustered public housing in the US, Kliet (2001) found that dispersed residents had broader social networks than clustered residents, and that these networks extended beyond the immediate neighbourhood, whereas clustered residents were more reliant on those who lived close by. In terms of community housing there is some (albeit limited) evidence that tenant controlled cooperative housing may provide individuals with strong social networks. For example, in a study of housing authority housing, tenant owned cooperatives, community groups and private landlords Saegert and Winkel (1998) found that residents of tenant owned cooperatives had higher levels of involvement in both tenant associations and informal social interaction with other residents.

#### Housing, social networks and employment

As illustrated, while there is a body of literature that explores the relationship between social networks and employment outcomes and a separate literature developing on the relationship between housing and social networks, there has been little research by housing researchers that links all three aspects. Kleit's (2002) study is an exception. She compared clustered and dispersed public housing tenants, finding that dispersed residents drew on more diverse job search networks, used more formal job search methods and tended to look for jobs of higher prestige. In contrast, clustered residents tended to use more limited social networks consisting of other public housing tenants and informal job search methods. In the USA, the Jobs-Plus Community Revitalisation Initiative for Public Housing ('Jobs-Plus'), incorporated key members of a public housing community as 'outreach workers' into their program in a number of sites, to mobilise the social networks of public housing tenants for improved employment outcomes (Kato, 2004). While the program found that outreach workers were successful in facilitating

access to services provided through the program, such as training courses and job counselling, it has not yet determined the impact on actual employment outcomes. Other research on public housing, social networks and employment outcomes has focused more on the effects of living in areas of deprivation. In some cases, this has related to the reputation of an area and a lack of willingness from employers to employ people from 'bad' areas (Kasinitz & Rosenberg 1996). Other studies have examined the social networks in deprived areas. Forrest and Kearns (1999) found active social networks, mutual aid, and strong bonds of trust and familiarity in disadvantaged areas with high levels of social housing. However, they also found very high unemployment. They argue that existing social networks tended to be with those who were also unemployed and, as such, were less likely to provide information about employment opportunities. That is, social networks were dominated by bonding ties with others who had few employment relevant resources to exchange. Research by Briggs (1998) also suggests that residents of areas of concentrated disadvantage do not have social networks that lead to employment. In this way, Wacquant and Wilson (1993) conclude that it is not simply about how many people you know, or the quality of the relationship you have with them. Rather, it is also about where your network members are situated within the social structure, that determines access to resources such as employment opportunities.

Whilst there is some research on public housing and employment networks we could find no research that has focused specifically on the relationship between social networks and employment in community or cooperative housing. There is, however, related literature that focuses on skill development through living in community housing.

#### Community housing and skills development

Social networks may also have an impact on employment outcomes through facilitating work-related skills. The skills emphasised include both directly work-related skills and

competencies and broader personal ‘soft skills’ or ‘work acculturation’ attributes and behaviours such as communication skills, entrepreneurship, conscientiousness, persistence, adaptability and willingness to engage in on-the-job learning.

There is some evidence that community housing may promote the development of skills through the social networks it facilitates. Saegert & Winkel’s (1997) study conducted interviews with around 6,000 households in different types of low-income housing, including private rental, tenant co-operative ownership and housing authority housing in New York City. They found that cooperative housing tenants provided encouragement and practical assistance to each other in supporting education and employment opportunities. In a related study involving housing authority housing, tenant owned cooperatives, community groups and private landlords, Saegert and Winkel (1998) once again found that those in tenant-owned cooperatives provided each other with encouragement and assistance to pursue opportunities in higher education and employment. Co-op residents regularly used the skills gained through administering their buildings to improve their education and employment situation. Birchall (1988) reported similar findings in evaluating six case studies of limited equity cooperatives in England.

Conversely, there is no literature available that considers the relationship between public housing tenancy, social networks and skills development. Hence, an aim of the current research was to bring together the three elements of social networks, housing and employment, focusing specifically on public and community housing and how social networks in these tenures may facilitate access to resources to help gain and maintain employment.

## Methodology:

The findings reported here are part of a wider study, which sought to examine how tenants and employees in the social housing sector experience the relationship between social networks fostered in the course of tenants' participation in community and public housing, and tenants employment participation.

The study focused on community and public housing in two case study areas, located in the south (Noarlunga) and north west (The Parks/Brompton) metropolitan regions of Adelaide. The areas were selected because both localities are characterised by high levels of unemployment, high concentrations of public housing and include a community housing presence.

In each of the case study investigations, individual interviews were conducted with key policy makers in public and community housing (both cooperative and association staff). Across the case studies, 14 interviews were conducted with community housing staff (including staff members from community housing peak bodies), and 15 with public housing staff. Issues for discussion included what respondents perceived to be the major barriers in achieving labour market outcomes for tenants, the role of social networks in employment outcomes and the sorts of skills that equip tenants for participation in the formal labour market.

In addition, focus groups were held with community housing and public housing tenants. Tenants were recruited through a range of means including an article in local newspapers, posters placed within the areas and letters sent to public housing tenants and community housing members, on the South Australian Housing Trust and South Australian Community Housing Association databases respectively. These letters were sent on university letterhead, rather than directly from the agencies. Four focus groups were conducted, two in each area with one conducted with community housing tenants, and

the other with public housing tenants. Overall, 20 cooperative and housing association tenants (14 coop and 6 association) and 18 public housing tenants participated in these focus groups. The topics discussed included the impact of housing tenure on social networks and employment, the relationship between social networks, skills development and employment outcomes.

Interviews and focus groups were tape-recorded and analysed thematically in order to identify patterns, similarities and differences (Rice & Ezzy, 1999).

This was an exploratory qualitative study that aimed to understand social processes through examining the perceptions of tenants and housing staff of the relationship between social networks and employment outcomes. It did not aim to quantify these relationships or propose direct generalisability of the findings to other settings. A discussion of the implications of the findings for future research can be found below.

#### Findings:

Research respondents identified social networks as relevant to employment outcomes in three specific ways. Social networks:

1. Assisted people into work where network members provided information about potential work opportunities, or where one network member acted as an informal referee or 'vouched' for another member;
2. Provided support and role modelling for employment behaviour; and
3. Facilitated skills development and confidence building.

The impact of housing tenancy on social networks appeared to differ between community and public housing.

#### Comparing social networks in community and public housing

Both the nature and extent of social networks formed through cooperative housing varied widely. A number of cooperative housing tenants said that networks formed through their housing were largely to meet organisational, rather than social, needs:

We don't form social groups based on coop membership, we're happy when we meet, but we stay as independent as possible... we don't live in each other's back pockets (cooperative tenant S)

In contrast, in other cooperatives the networks formed served both social and organisational functions. One cooperative tenant detailed how he takes part in projects with other members of the cooperative. Aside from their monthly cooperative meetings they have a shared garden where they get together twice a year to have a barbeque and tidy up:

We know each other quite well, we have parties, we invite everyone in the block to the party (cooperative tenant NW)

Networks were thought to be stronger where houses were grouped in close proximity, but this had both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages were that people got to know their neighbours and helped one another:

At meetings, you see friendships created, car-pooling, people have to work together, they sit and chat about personal stuff. Some see each other outside of coop stuff as well. Unless there's some conflict, people are generally friends, do things together, make tough decisions (peak body staff)



The disadvantages included people not getting along, the formation of cliques, and dilemmas about people informing on their neighbours if they are doing something wrong. Social networks were thought to work particularly well for single parents, who are often brought together by their children.

There was a shared perception amongst respondents that housing association tenants benefit from social networks gained through their housing. Some respondents characterised these social networks as informal in nature, often created in grouped housing situations where tenants share similar backgrounds or characteristics, and have a willingness to socialise. For example, one respondent cited an example of cluster housing where the tenants “look after each other’s animals, have groups roasts, those sort of things” (housing association staff S).

Other respondents referred to the work done by housing workers in associations to get to know tenants individually, and to involve them in social functions. Social networks were seen as particularly beneficial to women in emergency housing, based on their shared experiences and ability to understand and mutually support each other.

For public housing staff and tenants, security of tenure, especially through the presence of long-term tenants, was seen as promoting connection to neighbourhood and the development of supportive social networks. Similar to the situation in community housing, public housing tenants suggested that where public housing was closely grouped, social support networks formed more easily:

We have a system of where if someone’s blind doesn’t go up by a certain time, we’ll all go and knock on the door and say are you all right. You know, and all those sorts of things are coming about because we live so closely (public housing tenant S)

There is a support system that is so great but I'm not going to say that's out in the wider Housing Trust [public housing] area, it's because we're a little group, we are a community (public housing tenant S)

In one area, public housing tenants had formed their own tenant group, as they identified the need for support networks and help with children, but also wanted to combat the negative perception of their area:

We built a community of togetherness, we built up to looking after children in school holidays and after school, and then we developed a newspaper, and women's groups and men's groups (public housing tenant S)

However, whilst overcoming the shared stigma associated with their housing brought some tenants together, for others the stigma was a barrier to their networks with non-public housing residents. A number of tenants reported that living in public housing homes and areas had alienated their family and friends. Some tenants felt that where public housing was not concentrated, particular houses could not be identified as public housing, and therefore did not have the same stigmatising effect. In contrast, the networks formed by tenants in high density public housing areas were perceived to be more problematic, linking tenants into networks that were not conducive to employment. This point and issues of role modelling are expanded upon in the sections that follow.

A number of staff, particularly public housing staff, stressed the importance of tenants developing more bridging and linking social ties beyond their immediate neighbourhoods to improve the reach of their employment chances. They advocated efforts to get people out of their immediate environments into the wider community, rather than encouraging them to become "too friendly" with their immediate neighbours. This was promoted via

participation in community activities, and involvement in the public housing board or consumer involvement unit. It was noted, however, that not many tenants take up these opportunities. Another response has been to advocate more dispersed, rather than concentrated, public housing. Local community centres are seen as a useful networking avenue for tenants who are interested and motivated to interact with a diverse range of other people.

#### Information about Employment Possibilities

Tenants from both public and community housing referred to the important role of social networks in providing information about, and referral to, employment possibilities. Based on the findings of the literature that public tenants have more limited social networks than home owners and cooperative tenants, it was thought that community housing tenants might have better access to employment networks than public housing tenants.

In the community housing sector some of the tenants reported finding “bits and pieces” of work through word of mouth from others within the community housing sector. Other tenants gained employment in the community housing sector itself. One respondent considered that employment prospects for tenants were improved just by being part of the housing association/organisation:

[one] advantage is that we're a growing association, all these qualified people are transferring from coops to associations, and we might be able to employ them. Just by being part of a larger organisation, there is access to opportunities (housing association staff S)

These linking social networks that went beyond 'bonding' local ties were seen as important in the way that individuals could be connected into institutional networks that may provide additional employment opportunities

Some of the public housing tenants at The Parks who participated in the study detailed instances whereby they had obtained jobs both via word of mouth and through information provided from friends and acquaintances in the area. One tenant "got the tip from a friend", and then gained the job through contacting the engineering firm where he knew the job vacancy would be arising. In other examples, a tenant stated that "most of the jobs I know about are word of mouth", and another that "I might hear about jobs through friends" (public housing tenants NW). Yet another said:

I do one day per week at [a local Community Centre] and I wouldn't have got that job if it wasn't for [name] because [name] used to do it and he passed it on because he was too busy. I wouldn't have got it if I wasn't here (public housing tenant NW)

Likewise, a public housing tenant at Noarlunga pointed to the important role of social networks in securing information:

Because you're networking with other people in your position, and someone would say "look, you're looking for a job aren't you", "well yes I am", "hey there's one going at our place, do you want me to put in a good word for you". (public housing tenant S)

However, other public housing tenants at Noarlunga felt that many people did not know how to network for jobs and lacked knowledge about securing jobs. The tenants at The Parks who participated in the study may have more positive networks because a number of respondents are active in The Parks Information Technology Project. This project

provides linking social networks between a range of people and organisations, such as local job network agencies, tertiary education institutions and welfare agencies. In addition, for some respondents, the networks formed by tenants in high density public housing areas were perceived to more commonly link tenants to networks that were not conducive to employment since they were held to provide poor role modelling.

### Role Modelling

A few community housing respondents referred to the positive role modelling provided within their housing tenancies, although this did not emerge as a key theme. One respondent reported that:

Some who get education and jobs provide informal leadership, setting an example for others (cooperative staff S)

One association staff member noted an example of women association tenants who met at a local tertiary education facility, and offered each other peer support and encouragement to further their education.

In considering the impact of role modelling on employment in public housing, discussion with both housing staff and tenants tended to focus on the absence of role models. In particular, it was felt that many public housing tenants were situated among social networks and geographical locations where there were few positive employment role models, a situation made worse by the current system of social housing allocations.

A number of public housing staff noted that some public housing tenants had role models and social networks that exacerbate the problems of unemployment:

It's not much to do with the housing, it's more to do with the social aspects - It's generational their mum and dad has been unemployed, it's just part of their

lifestyle, because of their lack of education there's a lot of drug abuse in this area, that's more to the point (public housing staff NW)

In this way, intergenerational unemployment and associated negative role modelling was identified as a barrier to successful employment outcomes, particularly among second or third generation unemployed public housing tenants. A number of respondents noted that this was often associated with a lack of interest in and/or knowledge about applying and presenting for jobs. Problematic areas included filling out application forms, personal grooming habits and establishing disciplined routines necessary for maintaining a job. Many tenants in these situations are seen to lack the self-esteem, confidence and communication skills required to gain employment, qualities that are often linked with low levels of schooling and literacy and opportunities to gain work experience.

For young people I also think it's their parental role models, they don't see their parents or friends going to work everyday (public housing staff NW)

Some respondents argued that the fact that many tenants do not work and are at home all day means that networks formed tend to mutually reinforce established patterns of thinking and behaviour. In these cases, neighbours can become very close, and then relationships break down over such issues as borrowing money. This is not always the case, however, with one respondent reporting that:

There's a number of Housing Trust [public housing] people in my street but they're all working full-time (public housing tenant NW)

One housing association tenant also referred to the impact of moving from an area where s/he had social networks with strong work role models, to one where there were few, in an area characterised by high concentrations of public housing:

I've met people who are basically all not working, that wasn't the same because before I moved I actually had my own house, and everyone in my street were all working. I've gone from a working area to everyone being on the dole... It's all Housing Trust [public housing]; my house is an ex-Housing Trust, so basically the whole street is Housing Trust (housing association tenant S)

These discussions with public housing staff and tenants about role modelling also tapped into a broader debate about the 'social mix' of tenancies<sup>3</sup> and how this affected social relationships between tenants. While for some, as noted above, concentrations of public housing were seen as positive for social networks, overall there was a strong perception by both staff and tenants that a significant concentration of public housing was negative for the formation of employment-conducive social networks:

A heavy concentration of public housing it can act as a disincentive. I think it's a lot easier to stay at home and not work and participate (public housing staff NW)

Where you have got Housing Trust [public housing] homes that are privately owned the atmosphere is quite different. Problems are worse when public housing rental is concentrated in one street (public housing tenant NW)

These concerns were also echoed by housing association staff, as many association properties are located in areas with a high proportion of public housing properties, or the houses themselves are ex-public housing transferred to community housing tenure.

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<sup>3</sup> Social mix is commonly used to refer to both the socio-economic background of tenants and the mix of different housing tenure groups (eg. public housing & home owners) in an area, which is the way it is generally used here. It is also used to describe the different mix of particular populations in relation to other factors including age and ethnicity.

## Skills Development

A number of both staff and tenants pointed to the way that community housing facilitates the formation of social networks that, in turn, encourages growth of confidence and skills development. The role of social networks in association housing in developing skills was seen by some as informal or indirect in nature, increasing levels of self-esteem and confidence in being around people - important adjuncts to employability. In this way, participation in social networks was not perceived as necessarily developing directly work-related skills, but rather providing a social environment in which social skills and confidence could be built:

One young guy had no independent living skills or social network, now he's out every day due to the confidence gained through independent living, and forming social networks (housing association staff S)

Alternatively, in cooperatives, the development of skills through social networks was felt to be more direct in nature. For instance, a cooperative resident reported that people within the cooperative helped each other with writing resumes, and shared skills and experiences. Another tenant suggested that living in cooperatives developed relationship skills through the cooperative networks, in which they had to get along with a variety of different people.

In public housing, skill development was less relevant. However, staff also mentioned the role of social networks in broadening tenants' horizons and gaining important skills. Single women with children were one group seen to benefit in this way:

Women will link with community groups, pick up skills, the kids then go to school, then women will go on to education or work (public housing staff S).



Echoing the comments made in relation to social skills developed through association housing, one public housing tenant observed that by living close to others in cottage style housing “the skills you get there are being aware of other people” (public housing tenant S)

#### Discussion:

Within the current study, housing tenure had an important impact on the formation of social networks for tenants. For cooperative housing tenants, social networks are encouraged between residents by the very nature of the tenancy (for example, through housing cooperative meetings and committees). For respondents, these networks ranged from ties with other tenants that were for solely organisational rather than social purposes, to those whose housing links extended to close ties of mutual support, particularly where housing was closely grouped together. The networks of cooperative housing tenants seemed relatively broad and were directly used for employment purposes. Housing association tenants were likewise varied in the extent of social ties that extended from their tenure. The role association housing staff in assisting tenants develop both social networks and provide referral into employment possibilities was key in promoting linking ties for these tenants.

Security of tenure for public housing tenants was seen as providing tenants with opportunities to establish roots in a community, and build social networks. Once again, closely grouped dwellings appeared to promote the development of social networks. However, it was felt that some public housing tenants did not know how to make their networks ‘work for them’. There were also some indications that particularly those in highly concentrated public housing areas had greater bonding ties with others who were unemployed, and fewer bridging and linking ties likely to facilitate employment

opportunities. In view of this, the current stringent targeting of public housing to the most complex and high need tenants may be damaging to the formation of these types of wider-reaching social networks. A broader mix of public housing tenants, including working tenants, could facilitate the development of a greater diversity of social networks between them. Other initiatives to diversify the networks of public housing such as tenant participation in community consultations or involvement in housing committees, may also directly build more bridging or linking social capital.

Some public housing tenants identified stigma associated with their housing as negatively impacting on their ability to form social networks with others outside public housing. In an Australian study, Palmer et al (2004) found a similar negative impact of stigma on the social networks of public housing tenants. The stigma associated with housing tenure can also have an effect on employment through employer perceptions of public housing itself, or of areas with high levels of public housing (see Hiscock, 2001). It is likely that the tighter targeting of public housing is contributing to this stigma and a greater diversity of public housing tenants could not only, as noted above, promote broader social networks, but also help to address this growing stigma.

Examples were given from each of the tenures regarding the ways that some tenants acted as important role models for fellow tenants, encouraging and supporting educational attainment and sustained employment. However, role modelling was discussed largely in terms of the lack of role models, or the presence of inappropriate role models. The consensus was that many of those either living in public housing, or areas with strong concentration of public housing tended toward role models that were less positive in encouraging employment behaviour, with the negative impacts of intergenerational unemployment noted in particular. Other researchers have suggested that the discussion of role models for public housing tenants may be patronising, and

that this topic is best avoided (Rosenbaum, Stroh & Flynn, 1998; Hiscock, 2001). Interestingly, however, in our study, tenants themselves raised role modelling as an issue that they were keen to discuss.

Finally, the role of social networks and housing tenure in developing work-related skills differed across the tenures. The direct involvement of cooperative tenants in managing their housing seemed to promote the development of social networks and also skills development, including social skills and more directly work-related skills. Association housing tenants do not directly manage their housing, but through the involvement of staff and organisations and in clustered housing, learn social and life skills that are important precursors to work. Skills-development for public housing tenants was less relevant because their housing is managed externally by the housing authority.

#### *Implications of the findings for future research*

It is important to highlight that there has been little research into either differences in social networks across housing tenures (particularly within social housing) or the distinct ways that these networks may influence employment outcomes. The current research was exploratory, and used convenience sampling techniques and dealt with *perceptions* of differences across tenure, often by housing organisation staff. In this way, the research did not aim to provide directly generalisable findings. Further work needs to be undertaken to explore, and where possible to measure, both the social networks of a range of tenants across the different tenures, and the impact of these networks on labour market outcomes, in a range of settings. In particular, a comparison of public and community housing tenants with other options for low income housing such as the private rental market would be useful.

It is also possible that differences between public and community housing in social networks and employment outcomes may reflect demographic differences in the tenants themselves, rather than, or in addition to, tenure type. Whilst both tenants in cooperatives and associations and public housing generally experience problems of low-income, the data sets from the South Australian Community Housing Authority and the public housing authority, South Australian Housing Trust, were not commensurable. In the current study, this caused difficulties in identifying a baseline to judge differences across tenancies in variables such as education and employment. Better data collection by housing agencies is required in order to adequately assess these elements.

Previous research has tended to combine community and public housing together under the emblem of 'social housing'. This study suggests that, as there are significant differences between the management of these forms of housing, they are likely to have different policy implications. Future research should consider these two forms of housing separately.

### **Conclusion:**

Overall, tenants in community housing appeared to fare better in terms of the development of employment-conducive social networks than those in public housing. This relates to the management of the housing itself, but also to the compounding problems of stigma, area-level deprivation and intergenerational unemployment often associated with public housing.

Nonetheless, despite the potentially positive impact of social networks on employment outcomes, it is important to acknowledge that the impact of tenant controlled housing on problems of unemployment will only be minor when considering the macro-structural processes involved. From this perspective, it is essential to be wary of over-emphasising

self-help approaches, which may draw attention away from the economic and social processes that create and sustain disadvantage.

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