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Challenging the Stigma of Public Housing: Preliminary Findings from a Qualitative Study in South Australia

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Abstract

Many poor suburbs in Australia with higher than average numbers of public housing tenants do not simply suffer material disadvantage but also suffer from poor reputations that are reinforced through stigmatising assumptions that portray their residents negatively. Preliminary findings from qualitative research undertaken in Adelaide, South Australia paint a somewhat different picture of some residents in public housing which counters such stereotypes and assumptions and suggests that the picture is not as bleak as the stigmatised accounts suggest. This article examines the ways in which residents in stigmatised suburbs and housing actively resist and challenge the negative image ascribed to them and concludes by considering the public policy implications that come from the research.

Keywords: stigma, suburbs, public housing

Introduction

In Australia—as elsewhere—many impoverished suburbs do not simply suffer material disadvantage but also suffer from poor reputations. Viewed as 'problem places' that are home to 'problem people' (Dean & Hastings, 2000), such reputations can reinforce many of the difficulties of these suburbs that often have a higher than average concentration of public housing. The media, in particular, but by no means exclusively, contributes to the stigmatisation of certain suburbs, and those who live in them, by promoting images and reputations of suburbs overrun by drugs, crime, mental health issues, youth disorder and the perennial favourite—'single mothers'. Such stereotypes paint a picture of a bleak, transient existence, where residents have no commitment to property, their fellow residents or their community. These negative images have an impact on residents' health and wellbeing by adding to the ways in which they are socially and economically excluded.

Preliminary findings from qualitative research undertaken in Adelaide, South Australia depicts a somewhat different picture of some residents in public housing that counters such stereotypes and assumptions. The findings reported in the following pages describe residents in stigmatised suburbs and

housing who are actively involved with and committed to their community, proud of the suburbs they live in and despairing of those media portrayals and popular assumptions that continue to stigmatise their suburbs. This article begins by tracing some of the historical changes that have happened within public housing in South Australia, before examining more broadly the factors implicated in the stigmatisation of the public housing sector in Australia and elsewhere. The article then examines the ways in which residents in stigmatised suburbs and housing experience this stigma, how they resist and challenge the negative images ascribed to them, and concludes by considering the public policy implications that emerge from the research.

Public Housing in South Australia

In Australia, the post-Second World War period saw the implementation of a major public sector building program to address the shortage of decent affordable and good quality housing. In order to meet economies of scale, the housing was mainly constructed in estates often located on the fringe areas of cities where large land holdings could be purchased relatively cheaply. Historically, the South Australian Housing Trust differed from other housing authorities, in that its role went beyond the provision of rental housing for low-income earners. It utilised public housing as a way to attract industry and employment to the state through providing low-cost rental housing for workers and their families located close to industry. Hence, much of the public housing stock, built in the 1940s and 1950s, was in the form of large housing estates built for workers in the manufacturing industry.

Over the past two decades, however, the sector has moved from public housing for families and working tenants to welfare housing. Economic change has been coupled with changes in family structures and progressively tighter restrictions governing access to public housing. This has resulted in tenants who increasingly experience problems of unemployment, low income and poverty and, in some instances, increasing incidences of crime and violence. In 2002-2003 over 35 per cent of new allocations to public housing in South Australia were made to tenants who identified as having one or more special needs, for instance, homelessness, mental health and domestic violence (South Australian Housing Trust, 2003). For many, public housing is now seen as housing of the last resort, rather than choice, as was the case in the past. It is this association with welfare housing and special needs that has contributed to the stigmatising of those suburbs where there is a higher than average concentration of public housing tenants.

The Stigma of Public Housing and 'Problem Suburbs'

The notion of stigma finds its roots in the writings of Erving Goffman (1963). He conceptualises stigma as a process of devaluation in which certain individuals—those with physical deformities, mental health and drug issues, as well as those ostracised for other reasons such as sexual promiscuity or criminality—are disqualified from full social acceptance on the basis of their

physical appearance, moral character and lifestyle choices. Critically for this article, Goffman focuses on the problems generated by stigma for individuals and groups as well as on the *coping* mechanisms they employ. As is argued in the following pages, those stigmatised on the basis of suburb or housing tenure employ a number of coping strategies through which they actively resist and challenge the negative images ascribed to them.

A further way of conceptualising stigma is through the model outlined by Link and Phelan (2001) in relation to HIV. Link and Phelan (2001) describe stigma as occurring when four interrelated components converge in the context of social, economic and political power. The components are: (i) distinguishing and labelling differences; (ii) associating human differences with negative attributes; (iii) separating 'us' from 'them'; and (iv) status loss and discrimination. Such a framework has much analytical utility. In the case of the stigma attached to housing and suburbs, we see people and suburbs distinguished and labelled as 'different'; we see this difference then associated with negative attributes; we see a separation of 'us' from 'them' and we see a status loss and discrimination as a result of suburb and housing. In other words, in forming particular social categories, stigmatisation is fundamentally linked to social, economic and political power that results in exclusion.

The stigmatisation of public housing operates to form particular social categories that discriminate and demarcate. In a Flemish study, De Decker and Pannecouke (2004) reviewed public policy papers and reports, press releases and media articles released since 1988. The researchers conclude that, "when people say they do not want social housing in their neighbourhood, they mean they do not want their tenants" living there. Even in Norway, one of the wealthiest countries in Europe, there is stigma attached to the large public housing estates. Brattbakk and Hansen (2004) conclude that this stigma is reflected in the unpopularity of high-rises, the low socio-economic scores of residents of the estates, and the modest costs of the housing sold for private ownership.

In Australia, Bryson and Winter note that "many studies of Australian public housing have documented the way members of the wider society stigmatise the residents of areas such as Newton [a suburb with a high concentration of public housing]" (1999, p. 142). In this way, the perception of high concentrations of public housing within an area can lead to stigmatisation of the area as a whole. Likewise, Powell (1993) writes about Sydney's western suburbs, and the effects of being a 'Westie'. She illustrates how the western suburbs are portrayed in the popular media (and the minds of many who live elsewhere) as a place full of feral and wild young people and inadequate parents who have little interest in educating and disciplining their children. Powell argues that such portrayals produce a particular kind of 'moral panic' about the whole area which has a raft of consequences, including the practice of 'postcode discrimination' by employers, insurance companies and banks. In a similar vein, Peel (2003) documents how the suburbs of Broadmeadows in Melbourne, Mount Druitt in Sydney and Inala in Brisbane are seen as being

concentrated pockets of social disadvantage whose residents routinely suffer from stigmatisation and discrimination on the basis of where they live.

In Adelaide, South Australia, the existence of suburbs with persistent problem reputations has been recognised for a number of years. Some of the suburbs occupying the outer north and outer southern suburban fringes of Adelaide are now statistically speaking among the most disadvantaged in Australia (Baum *et al.*, 1999, p. 48). Characterised by high levels of unemployment, low levels of household income, high dependency on Centrelink benefits, low levels of home ownership and high levels of public housing, these suburbs are synonymous with sustained and significant social and economic disadvantage. Some northern suburbs have the reputation of being a suburban badlands replete with chronic unemployment, 'single mums', crime, vandalism and delinquency, while to the south, one suburb in particular—Matchville¹—has a long-standing reputation of being a 'problem suburb for problem people'. Viewed as attracting 'ferals', Matchville is routinely portrayed as a lawless Wild West whose residents have little regard for person or property. Such stigmatisation was clearly shown in the 1989 description in the South Australian tabloid media of Matchville being the 'Bronx of the South', a clear reference to the long troubled suburb of New York (Baum *et al.*, 1990). Importantly, the reputations that are attached to these 'problem' suburbs are crucially bound to the public housing tenants. For many, problem suburbs are labelled as such because they have a higher than average concentration of public housing tenants. As we discuss further in this article, there is a frequent slippage between the stigma of suburbs and the stigma of public housing within that suburb.

The physical characteristics of the housing also add to the negative perception of public housing and the suburbs in which it is located.² The older public housing was often mass-produced and homogenous in design and is generally characterised by row after row of similar housing, which makes it readily identifiable from surrounding suburbs. From the point of view of many commentators, the combination of the physical characteristics of the housing and the social demographics of tenants stigmatise the social housing estates, which are often depicted as the repositories for social exclusion (Cappie-Wood, 1998).

Of critical concern for this article, the research literature finds that residents' perceptions of their housing and location are often *different* to those living outside of the neighbourhood. In Australia, the national satisfaction surveys of public housing tenants show that tenants report high levels of satisfaction with the amenity of their housing and its location (Productivity Commission, 2004, 16.37). Similar high levels of tenant satisfaction with public housing were found in Flanders by Pannecoucke *et al.* (2001; cited in De Decker & Pannecoucke, 2004). Numerous surveys have also found that despite outsiders' judgements of areas as dismal and despairing with inadequate housing, residents in contrast may be proud of the neighbourhood and describe it as warm and friendly (Medoff & Sklar, 1994, p. 42).

These competing perceptions are also evident in the, albeit limited, Australian literature, which considers the stigma attached to public housing. Arthurson (2001) in a case study of six Australian public housing estates points out that the negative physical and social images of the estates largely (though not exclusively) emanate from outside of these areas. Indeed, the stigmatisation of the Waterloo estate in NSW as negative by outsiders was identified by residents as a major problem and for some a disagreeable aspect of living in the area. It meant residents felt compelled to justify to outsiders why they liked living in Waterloo (MacBeath & Wijesurenda, 1999).

In this way, while negative images are often the product of external influences, residents of such estates are nonetheless often very aware of these images, and living in stigmatised areas or housing can have a real impact on their everyday lives and wellbeing. Macintyre and Ellaway (2000) have found that the reputation of an area may influence the self-esteem and morale of the residents in that area. As an 'opportunity structure' the reputation of an area "may promote or damage health through the possibilities they provide for people to live healthy lives" (2000, p. 343). Taken on its own the stigma may not seem like a massive burden on health and wellbeing but as part of a broader pattern of disadvantage and difference it emerges as significant in terms of being a way in which social exclusion is reinforced.

Methods

This article is based on exploratory qualitative research in two suburbs in the southern region of Adelaide, South Australia, conducted between September and November 2003. Using the 2001 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census, three suburbs were selected according to their concentration of public housing. Two of these suburbs are described here.³

Matchville has a population of 3872. One per cent of this population are Indigenous, 21 per cent were born overseas and 6 per cent speak a language other than English.⁴ The median age of residents is 32 and the median household income is \$500-\$599 per week. The unemployment rate is 17 per cent. Of the 1525 dwellings in the area 52 per cent are fully owned or being purchased and 31 per cent are rented from the Housing Trust. The median weekly rent is \$50-\$99 and median monthly housing loan repayments are \$400-\$599. Twenty-one per cent of those aged over 15 have non-school education, with 3 per cent having a Bachelor degree or higher. Of the 1043 families in the area, 40 per cent are couple families, 28 per cent are couples without children, 31 per cent are one parent families and 11 per cent are other family types. Thirty-five per cent of those aged over 5 lived at a different address 5 years ago and 18 per cent of those aged over 1 lived at a different address 1 year ago.

In many ways, Midvale shares a similar demographic profile. It has a population of 4934. One per cent are Indigenous, 24 per cent were born overseas and 6 per cent speak a language other than English. The median age is 38 and median household income is \$400-\$499 per week. The unemployment rate is 17.3 per cent. Of the 2091 dwellings in the area 54 per

cent are fully owned or being purchased and 28 per cent are rented from the Housing Trust. The median weekly rent is \$50-\$99, and median monthly housing loan repayments are \$400-\$599. Twenty-one per cent of those aged over 15 have non-school education, with 3 per cent having a Bachelor degree or higher. Of the 1337 families in the area, 38 per cent are couple families, 36 per cent are couples without children, 25 per cent are one parent families and 1 per cent are other family types. Thirty-five per cent of those aged over 5 lived at a different address 5 years ago and 15 per cent of those aged over 1 lived at a different address 1 year ago.

In both of these suburbs, a sample of renters in public housing and 'homeowners' (both those who owned their home outright or still had a mortgage) was purposively selected for participation in focus groups and in-depth interviews. Respondents were recruited for voluntary participation via flyers distributed to primary schools and community health services, as well as those placed on notice-boards in libraries, supermarkets, veterinary, medical and dental surgeries, real estate agents and other public places in each area. An advertisement was also placed in the local community newspaper covering the study areas. Each suburb was also letter box dropped with 200 flyers calling for volunteers. The South Australian Housing Trust and Homestart also mailed information about the project to their tenants and residents to help with recruitment. Three focus groups and four in-depth interviews were conducted, with a total of 17 participants, 6 renters and 11 homeowners.⁵

The interviews and focus groups were supported by a self-completion survey and an observational study of the study areas (though these parts of the study are not reported here). The interview and focus group data were analysed using thematic analysis with the assistance of the NUD*IST software package. Validity of the analysis was ensured by triangulation of the different sources of data by at least two members of the project team, and by at least two members of the research team being involved in coding each set of data.

Stigmatising the 'Problem' Suburbs

Our qualitative data indicate that the suburbs of Midvale and Matchville were stigmatised through the reproduction of a whole raft of stereotypes and assumptions that were communicated through the media, real estate agents and friends and family who lived outside of the area.

To provide just a few examples, the problem reputation of Matchville was well recognised by local real estate agents who did little to 'sell up' the suburb. Margaret,⁶ a homeowner in Matchville, reported that: "we tried to sell our house a couple of years ago ... the real estate agent said to us 'improve yourself and get out of Matchville'". Barbara, from the neighbouring suburb of Midvale claimed that:

we've had real estate people come into the house and they've actually told us "your house is beautiful but if you lived the other side of [main road] and your

street address was [adjacent suburb], I could sell this house for \$10,000 more" ... it's just interesting that real estate people 'bag' where you live.

Equally, family and friends who live outside of the area were quick to express dismay or disapproval when their friend or relative moved into a problem suburb. Carol, a homeowner from Midvale, spoke of the visual shock that followed when she identified her place of residence: "the moment you say you live at Midvale—the facial expression is like 'oh you poor thing!'" Similar responses are reported from Amy, a homeowner in Matchville:

people, not so much perhaps now but in years gone by, people would look at you, and they still do, if you say you're from Matchville, they give you this sort of look as if to say to you "you can't have very much, you're not much chop".

Residents in both of these suburbs were acutely conscious of their suburb's image. As Amy puts it: "I don't like people's assumption that we're all feral. The minute you mention Matchville they look at you like 'oh ok'. You feel this stigma that is attached." Liz, a renter from the neighbouring suburb of Midvale, concurs: "I don't like the stigma that the general public put on Midvale. They think of all the bad elements, not the good parts of it." As a result of such stigmatisation, many residents claim to live elsewhere rather than admit to living in Matchville or Midvale. Barbara, a homeowner, admits that:

I've got to be totally honest ... I wouldn't like people to think I come from Midvale. And I think that might be a little bit of hangover from the old days, even though in my brain I know we're a different area.

In a separate interview, Sarah, a middle-aged mother of two in public housing admits that "I tell people I live at [another suburb] rather than Midvale."

In some cases however, negative perceptions about areas were perpetuated from within the area itself, with some residents reinforcing the same assumptions about deviant types and behaviour that were perceived to be held by non-residents. To quote one long term resident in public housing in Matchville: "it's a dump—there's all druggies every where you go. It's not Matchville itself, it's the people who live in Matchville. They're all druggies, they're all nuts." In a similar vein, Amy likened living in Matchville to the 1960s song by The Animals—"We've Got to Get Out of this Place". For this resident, the lyrics "in this dirty old part of the city, where the sun refuses to shine ..." seemed to best describe the sense of hopelessness that blights insider and outsider perceptions of Matchville.

Not surprisingly, a poor local image persists in these suburbs. Even a change of name didn't improve the image of Midvale, an issue discussed among research participants: "some people say why don't we have a name change ... but the thing is, a name does not solve it. It's just a Band-Aid cover. It's a psychological Band-Aid cover because the problems are still real" (David, homeowner from Midvale).

Problem Suburb or Problem Tenure?

The previous section focused on the construction and communication of stigma as it relates to the suburbs of Midvale and Matchville. However, it is nearly impossible to separate the stigmatisation of a suburb from the stigmatisation of housing tenure within that suburb. As was made clear in the interviews, implicit in the stigmatisation of these suburbs was a stigmatising of the public housing that comprised much of its urban and social landscape. Indeed, accommodation in public housing triggered a range of negative stereotypes from research participants—both homeowners and public housing tenants alike—that related to perceptions of public housing tenants as well as the quality and condition of housing provided by the Housing Trust.

Many of the respondents, both renters and owners in Matchville and Midvale, referred to the long-standing perception of public housing tenants as being somehow 'different' to the other residents. David, a homeowner, referred to a reluctance of people in his area to live within proximity of public housing, describing the general attitudes as being “[Its like] well, I won't live next to a house that's rented. A Housing Trust house.” Such attitudes are felt equally by residents in Matchville, with one woman who bought her home from the Housing Trust describing the attitudes of her family in the following way: “we used to get family members who would say 'oh, you live in a Trust house””.

Such negative associations seem to run deep, with several respondents speaking of a historical dimension to the stigma that goes back to their childhood. Margaret, a homeowner in her late 50s, now living in Matchville remembers that:

I think there's always been a stigma with Housing Trust houses ... I remember our Grade 7 teacher saying to us “look don't you children worry where you come from [public housing], you will be able to succeed if you put your mind to your work. You will be able to get yourself out of here” and so on. We didn't have a clue what she was talking about.

A separate interview with Diane, a young woman in her late teens reports a similar theme, reproduced a generation later:

even growing up with kids who were brought up in the Housing Trust homes, it was still very much a class division there between those who did and did not live in public housing. Even though we were really young it was something that we felt around us.

Much of the stigma associated with public housing related to the 'type' of people who were perceived to live in public housing homes. Respondents referred to public housing tenants as being 'no-hopers', 'rough', 'hoons', 'druggies' and 'crazies'—clear labels that, in Goffman's terms, seek to devalue and disqualify these marginal people from full social acceptance. As is the case with other forms of stigma that frequently find their basis in some sort of overt physical feature (seen most obviously in physical deformity), the basis

for the stigma surrounding public housing was commonly linked to the physical appearance of the house itself. For respondents, the quality and condition of the house and garden somehow reflected the 'quality' of the people inside:

I think it's because the Housing Trust had a bad reputation for a while with the kind of houses they have. Even now they're doing up their houses ... but before it used to be this really scungy house, cheap and nasty. I used to think, well if the house is like that, what's the people like? (Diane, daughter of owner)

Such negative stereotypes were supported by the assumption that those who rent from the Housing Trust were irresponsible and transient. Indeed, there was a persistent stereotype of the public housing itself being poorly maintained by tenants. In the words of Carol, a homeowner from Matchville: "people are short term—they're not concerned about the upkeep of their houses".

Elsewhere, homeowners reported a clear demarcation of ideals in which renters—both those renting privately and renting from the South Australian Housing Trust—were viewed as not sharing the same values as homeowners:

You feel when you've got people next to you that rent, the things that are important to you, they couldn't care less about. I mean, next door has about 4 or 5 cars parked on it, so there's no lawn, just mud—it doesn't look as nice. They're thinking—I'm renting, I couldn't care less. (Barbara)

The notion of renters not staying in a suburb long enough to care about the maintenance of their house and garden extended to a view that renters were unconnected and uncommitted to their communities. One homeowner from Matchville describes the tenants of a group of local rented town houses:

They stick to their own kind. You know that they're all the same because they all sort of.... You sort of see them, the odd one or two together but they don't sort of mix, and even when they get on the bus they stick together.

As we make clear in the following section, such assumptions about community participation and housing tenure were not always born out in practice.

Owners also referred to the concentration of public housing as an issue:

I don't agree that the Housing Trust should build all of their homes in one lump ... because you're always going to get the people who perhaps aren't as educated, or who are on drugs or have mental problems or whatever. (Carol)

The fact that they build these clusters of homes that look the same and they have the stigma because immediately you say Matchville, they go, "oh Matchville. Oh god, Housing Trust houses." (Lena)

These concerns about an overly concentrated area of public housing reflected the view that the number of rental properties in general and Housing Trust homes in particular needed to be diluted in order to minimise the perceived social disruption associated with this form of housing tenure. To quote one female middle-aged homeowner from Matchville: “there are certain pockets in Matchville that is just solely, always going to be rentals and that's just one of those things where you know if it's a mix it's not so bad”.

A minority view, expressed only by homeowners within areas that had a high concentration of public housing, was a sort of 'reverse stigma' in which homeowners perceived that their fellow residents (renters) believed that the homeowners felt superior to them, as evidenced in the following exchange between homeowners from Matchville:

Amy: Well, a lot of the renters think that you're better than anyone else because you're buying a house ... especially if its right in the middle of a Housing Trust sector.

Carol: Sometimes it is the reverse snobbery, where people think, hang on, why have you bought an ex-Housing Trust. If you can buy it why haven't you gone somewhere else.

It is not surprising, given these negative portrayals of public housing, that those renting from the Housing Trust were acutely conscious of the stigma associated with their housing tenure. In several of the interviews, references were made to the lack of positive images of public housing tenants that were portrayed in the media:

Brian: We all see about the person who cluttered the house, mucked it up and was on Ray Martin [Z](#) ...

Patricia: ... You never see the people who keep their houses nice and tidy.

Several public housing tenants also attempted to distance themselves from the negative stereotypical view of a 'public housing resident'. In doing so, they again highlighted their awareness of the stigma associated with their housing tenure. Liz, for example, said: “I do the right thing—I keep my house the way it is, I don't trash my house, I pride my self on my housework.” Thus, the stigma of public housing, at least for some tenants, has an impact on the self-esteem of tenants who both feel the stigma attached to public housing and are upset by the negative associations it evokes.

Following on from this, a distinction was made—by the public housing tenants themselves—between 'good' and 'bad' Housing Trust tenants, with some participants sharing the view that the Housing Trust should exercise greater discretion in screening their tenants.

They're [the Housing Trust] not doing a good job in picking out people you know. But they're not allowed to, so they say. You know, picking the better ones out than all the riff raff ones. (Carol)

Challenging the Stigma

So far, this article has described the ways in which stigma of housing and location is expressed and the effects and consequences of this stigma. It turns now to some of the ways in which residents challenge the stigmatising image of areas with high concentrations of public housing. The research found that, far from passively accepting the stigma, residents in stigmatised suburbs had a range of responses that they would draw upon to diffuse negative comments about their suburbs. In the case of Matchville and Midvale, residents tended to resist and challenge the problem reputation in one of three ways: (i) by defining and separating themselves as living in a 'different' part of the suburb, (ii) by participating fully in a range of social and civic activities that confounded the stereotype of residents who were disinterested and disconnected from their community and (iii) by often simultaneously challenging those who perpetuate the stereotype through resident action and confrontation in conversation.

"My Little Pocket"

The research found that, when describing their suburb, the residents—both homeowners and renters alike—used very particular socio-spatial definitions to delineate “their little pocket” of the neighbourhood from other less desirable parts of the suburb. This was often done using geographical features of the area such as creeks, main roads and train lines, built up from years of local knowledge, with the majority of respondents having lived in their suburb in excess of 10 years. For example, as a means of demarcating 'the good parts' of the suburb from 'the bad bits', residents in Midvale frequently spoke of their suburb as having four distinct quarters to it. Those who lived in 'the bad bits' were those people who fitted into Goffman's categories of stigma; to quote Barbara from Midvale, “the people that live in the bad bits are the people that are more into domestic violence, more into child abuse, more into drugs”.

In keeping with the findings of this article described thus far, the division of good and bad parts—and people—in the suburbs was organised on the basis of housing tenure, as evidenced in the following comments:

I see Midvale as being four components. You know there's that side of [Main Road] and the railway line, and this side, and this half would be sort of all private ownership and that half's all public. (Sarah)

With the exception of one woman who was renting from the Housing Trust in Matchville, all research participants regarded themselves as living in a good part of their suburb. The critical aspect was the perception that they had things in common with their neighbours and that they felt a sense of belonging to their 'bit' of the suburb.

While on first reading, the tactic of separating one type of resident from another within a suburb may appear to be a form of stigmatisation in itself, the research found that those who saw themselves as living in a different or a

'better' part of the suburb were often the people who were the most vocal supporters of the stigmatised suburbs, becoming frequent and public advocates for them. Following Hastings and Dean (2003), these strong supporters of the stigmatised suburbs can be classed as 'committed stayers' who—to varying degrees—were proud of their area, took an active role in community life and believed that overturning the stigma can only be addressed by challenging the attitudes of other residents and those outside of the neighbourhood. Not surprisingly, the majority of those residents who took part in our research could be classed as a committed stayer, even the public housing tenants from Matchville and Midvale who took part in the focus groups who were fiercely loyal to and protective of their suburbs, having lived there for many years. Thus, being a 'committed stayer', in this case, seemed to be related more to *longevity* of tenure, rather than whether one owned or rented their home.⁸

In addition to separating themselves as living in a 'different' part of the suburb, those people from stigmatised suburbs who took part in this research were involved with a wide range of social and civic activities that confounded the stereotype of residents as uninvolved in their community. Respondents, both owners and renters, from Midvale and Matchville attended Neighbourhood Watch meetings, coached school sport, were involved with the Healthy Cities project, volunteered their time in the local school's classroom reading program, stood for local council, advocated for cleaner waterways in the local water catchment, took part in the local theatre group, volunteered at the community centre and attended yoga and t'ai chi classes. For these residents, the only substantial barrier to participation was the cost of activities rather than a lack of interest or willingness to engage in formal and informal social and civic activities.

Nonetheless, the stigma of the suburbs impacted on community participation in that 'high culture' activities such as theatre or the opera were rarely taken to the southern suburbs on the assumption that residents of these suburbs would not appreciate these kinds of cultural pursuits: "I think it is because the stigma of the south. Rough, tough, tattooed, dope smoking people, who really would not be interested in that sort of activity, and that, that's the conception that people have of this area" (Liz, public housing renter).

The third, more explicit challenge, to the stigmatising reputation of suburbs was by residents actively fighting against the negative stereotypes. The research found that feelings of belonging, of having raised children in the suburb, of having lived in the same house and suburb for many years often came together in a strong sense of pride that residents felt towards their stigmatised suburbs. Committed stayers would often take on people who made prejudicial remarks and would defend their suburbs against the negative stereotypes: "we've had that a lot and I find that I really defend the area and sort of say 'oh come on. It's nowhere near as bad as what you guys making it out to be. It's not. It's a really good place to be'" (Margaret, homeowner).

More than this, in some instances, residents would actively fight against the stereotypes. The community response to the aforementioned 'Bronx of the South' article in the now defunct evening paper *The News* demonstrates this. Residents used the framework of the local Healthy Cities project to organise a public meeting labelled "Noarlunga's Right of Reply" to challenge the media's stereotyping of Matchville. One hundred and fifty people attended the meeting and a report on the initiative quoted a local resident as saying she had organised the meeting "because I was irate at having Matchville always being called a bad place to live ... and to tell bureaucrats that we did have community spirit" (Baum *et al.*, 1990, p. 31). The stigma evidently has a long history.

Discussion

For many of our respondents, their experience of living in a stigmatised suburb or housing did not match the broader stereotype ascribed to them. Those residents whose lives informed this article were actively involved with and committed to their community, proud of the suburb they live in and despairing of those media portrayals and popular assumptions that continue to stigmatise them. In other words, the research reported here suggests that the reputation for roughness is a "caricature of a more complex and less spectacular truth" (Traynor, 1990, p. 46), with the negative portrayals of location and housing often unjustified. Such findings are consistent with other research which suggests that residents' perceptions of their housing and location are often *different* to those living outside of the neighbourhood (Brattbakk & Hansen, 2004).

Nonetheless, the persistence of the negative stereotype meant that even those who were vocal supporters of Matchville and Midvale often resorted to the language of difference to set themselves apart from others in the suburb. People spoke about the differences between the 'good' and 'bad' parts of Matchville and Midvale, the differences between homeowners and renters and the differences in the quality and condition of homes and gardens between homeowners and renters. Such findings are consistent with Witten *et al.* (2003, p. 329) who report similar constructions of social difference in Massey, New Zealand. Thus, it is difficult to talk of a single image of a 'suburb' but rather, it is perhaps more useful to speak of several images and identities that coexist within the suburb.

Such findings also draw attention to the fact that stigma can operate on a number of levels. Here, those who already occupy the marked categories of 'problem suburbs' and 'problem housing' would further 'other' those within the same category on the basis that these people were somehow a more appropriate fit for the stigmatising labels attached to public housing. Such a process of demarcation can be seen as a form of 'stigma consciousness' (Pinel, 1999), in which stereotyped individuals vary in how chronically self-conscious they are of their stigmatised status. Even within the categories of 'Us' and 'Them', the 'Them' create differences within themselves. As the research suggests, one of the coping strategies employed by those on the receiving end of such incessantly negative portrayals is to define and

separate themselves as different—as living in a 'different' suburb or not being like a 'typical' public housing tenant. While this tactic of separating one type of resident from another within a suburb may appear to be a form of stigmatisation in itself, such responses were necessary to offset the consequences of stigmatisation we see elsewhere. Such constructions of a different, more socially acceptable, suburban identity, in other words, are key *coping* mechanisms through which the research participants could deflect the negative images ascribed to them and their suburbs.

As reported here, such constructions of difference have very real consequences for those who are 'Othered' or made different by the stigma. There is a certain *habitus* attached to public housing, in which housing tenure acts as a “practice-unifying and practice-generating principle” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 84) that serves to unify those who share similar housing status while generating a whole raft of behaviours and assumptions which pre-determine that those in public housing necessarily have a reduced range of life options and young people, in particular, will need to work harder to make a go of things. However, it is important to state that this negative portrayal fails to recognise the positive aspects of public housing, such as the security of tenure, affordability and assistance to maintain a tenancy for low-income tenants. These aspects are scarce in the low-income private rental sector. The stigmatisation of 'poor' suburbs has the net effect of impoverishing *all* areas of residents' lives, with people believing that, as well as being economically disadvantaged, they receive lower quality services as a result of the stigma attached to their suburb (Peel, 2003). For residents in Midvale and Matchville, homes are harder to sell and jobs are harder to find.

In this way, the stigma associated with living in particular areas or in particular types of housing may have important public health implications. Macintyre and Ellaway have identified the reputation or image of an area as an important 'opportunity structure'. Opportunity structures are the “socially constructed and socially patterned features of the physical and social environment that may be health enhancing or health damaging” (2000, p. 343). They argue that how areas are perceived by their residents and outside policy and service planners and investors can have an important impact on the infrastructure available in an area, the self-esteem and morale of residents and also who is likely to move in or out of an area.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed the question of the extent to which poor suburbs and public housing tenants suffer the double jeopardy of comparative material disadvantage and a stigma associated with poor reputation. Evidence has been presented that the stigma may act to reinforce and perpetuate the material disadvantage suffered by residents in poor suburbs. From a public policy viewpoint, issues of reputation and stigma should receive serious attention in any strategies designed to improve the wellbeing of residents and the quality of these suburbs. We have also noted that stigma is substantially related to levels of public housing tenure in a suburb. We have presented data that suggest that while residents do indeed perceive the stigma as real, there

are also ways in which these negative reputations are challenged and resisted. Both homeowners and public housing tenants present the stigma attached to their suburbs and residents within them in a more complex framework. In this framework the extent of community-mindedness and involvement is seen to be greater than that portrayed by outside images. They also have more fine-grained accounts of their communities in which the problems are conceived within a complex social context that rejects simple stereotypes.

The stigma perceived by the residents and their responses to the stigma imposed on them suggests that they struggle to overcome the loss of control and stress they feel when their suburbs are stigmatised by outsiders. An increasing body of evidence indicates that lack of control and stress can have an impact on health status (Brunner & Marmot, 1999), meaning that the stigmatisation adds another area of life in which residents of poor suburbs have to struggle in order to be equal with residents of richer and less stigmatised suburbs. Taken on its own the stigma may not seem like a massive burden but as part of broader pattern of disadvantage and difference it emerges as significant in terms of a being a way in which social exclusion is reinforced. Social inclusion is about ensuring people are “able to participate as valued, respected and contributing members of society” (Mitchell & Shillington, 2002, p. viii) and living in a stigmatised suburb is one means in which this is undermined.

These findings are relevant to a range of public policies as they suggest ways in which interventions in what are usually characterised as 'problem suburbs' can build on the strengths identified by residents. In many OECD countries, there has been increased policy interest in measures that seek to increase social inclusion by focusing on localities rather than individuals. A range of strategies including Action Zones, Healthy Cities projects and neighbourhood regeneration projects (PolicyLink, 2002) seek to improve the life chances of residents through intervention in education, health, housing, other physical infrastructure and employment. These interventions may face a greater chance of success if the issue of stigma and negative reputation is challenged. Hastings and Dean (2003) note that 'image management' or challenging the negative stigma or reputation of an area is likely to be a key process in regeneration efforts and attempts to promote healthy neighbourhoods. Our findings indicate the potential for locality-based projects to address the issue of stigma directly. We have found that residents do not accept the outsider view of their suburb in a passive way and can readily point to ways in which their suburbs counter the negative reputations. Community development strategies that involve residents in designing campaigns to promote more positive images of their suburbs may have some effectiveness. Such strategies should be part of overall initiatives that seek to improve overall quality of life through increasing chances for involvement in employment and education, improvements in the physical infrastructure and increases in the amenities and services available and that seek to increase the positive image of the suburb and its residents.

The policy implications, for housing authorities in particular, of the findings presented here are that the stigma associated with public housing is likely to increase, in light of the requirement for tighter targeting of tenants accessing public housing which accompanied the 1998 Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement. That is, a greater proportion of public housing will be rented to the homeless and people with more complex needs including those with mental health and domestic violence issues. In other words, rather than having a true 'social mix', in the future there will simply be ever greater numbers of tenants with complex needs even where public housing tenants are dispersed within the broader community. Public housing authorities may need to weigh up any cost savings associated with the greater targeting of public housing to these tenants, with the likely increases in negative stigma associated with their housing, and the health and wellbeing outcomes of this stigma.

Given the likely harmful effects of living in a suburb with a poor reputation public policy interventions should explicitly address issues of reputation and seek means to improve the poor reputation of a suburb. Understanding ways of doing this will require further research on aspects of stigma of areas and well-designed and evaluated interventions that tackle this issue.

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Notes

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1 Pseudonyms have been used to preserve the anonymity of this—and other—suburbs featured in our research.

2 When the estates were first constructed in the 1950s and 1960s, they raised the standards of housing to higher levels than previously existed (Neutze, 1977; in Newton & Wulff, 1983). However, the post-war stock is ageing, leading to ongoing demands for maintenance and upgrading. By today's standards, the housing is often poorly designed with problematic structures. Much of the better quality more attractive and dispersed housing has been sold leaving the remaining less popular housing concentrated on the estates (Hayward, 1996).

3 Data from the third suburb—Hilltown—are not reported here as there were no public housing tenants or private renters who took part in the research.

4 To ensure anonymity when releasing data at smaller aggregations, the ABS randomly alters some Census information slightly. This means that overall totals, for example, for the population or number of dwellings, can vary slightly. Percentages may also not add up to 100 due to rounding.

5 As is the case with any research that relies on volunteers, a number of methodological limitations need to be acknowledged. Those who volunteer for research tend to do so because they have a particular interest in what is being discussed, or because they are more 'community minded' than average. In this case, those who volunteered for the project also tended to be actively involved in neighbourhood and community activities. This, in no way, suggests that such behaviour is necessarily reflective of all of the residents in the study areas, rather it is typical of 'volunteers' more generally. Thus, the research needs to be thought of as indicative rather than representative of the study areas.

6 Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of respondents.

7 Ray Martin hosts a popular nightly current affairs program.

8 We note, however, that not all of the residents who took part in the research were 'committed stayers'. Several respondents who, while resistant to the stigma that surrounded their suburb, expressed the desire to move to a different area if they had the chance.

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