International Journal of Housing Policy

ISSN: 1949-1247 (Print) 1949-1255 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/reuj20

Introduction: housing affordability and affordable housing

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HOUSING POLICY
2019, VOL. 19, NO. 1, 1–16
https://doi.org/10.1080/19491247.2018.1560544

INTRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT
This introduction discusses select aspects of housing affordability in terms of household expenditures and household incomes and select aspects of affordable housing. It provides a contextual base for considering the relationship between housing and affordability issues across diverse examples and the national, state, and local cases discussed in the articles of this special issue. The final part of the introduction briefly introduces the papers that follow, before going on to consider some potential policy solutions.

KEYWORDS Housing affordability; affordable housing; household expenditures; household incomes; regulations

Introduction

Over the past few decades, housing affordability at the household level and the affordable housing stock more broadly have gradually declined for most low-, very low-, and extremely low-income renters and for some low-income homeowners in many countries, including the United States (McClure, 2019; Richter et al., 2019), Australia (Pawson et al., 2019), Germany, and Sweden (Hansson, 2019). Housing affordability and affordable housing challenges may impact a household's budget, leaving less to pay for food, utilities, transportation to work, health and child care expenditures and reducing savings for emergencies, retirement, and other opportunities, such as pursuing higher education or starting a small business. These challenges may result in decreased opportunities and a lower overall quality of life (Drew, 2018; Sawhill, 2018).

Recently, the public's awareness of housing affordability and affordable housing has increased. In the United Kingdom, for example, the main political parties focused on housing affordability and affordable housing in the general elections of 2015 (Kelly, 2015) and 2018. More recently, Prime

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Minister Theresa May has delivered a number of speeches on the national housing crisis, referring to several new programmes and approaches (May, 2018).

On the demand side, since 2010 Help to Buy has helped first-time home-buyers save for a home deposit through individual savings accounts, receive government bonuses of up to £3,000, and, for some eligible buyers, forego stamp duty (HM Government, n.d.a.; May, 2018). On the supply side, the Housing Infrastructure Fund, a government capital grant programme, is facilitating the construction of up to 200,000 new homes (HM Government, Department for Communities & Land Government, 2017; May, 2018). Homes England, the new national housing agency, secures land and supports smaller and innovative developers (Ministry of Housing, Communities, & Local Government, 2018a). The Home Building Fund assists small developers who have difficulties obtaining conventional funding from the private sector (HM Government, n.d.b., May, 2018). The updated National Planning Policy Framework, released in July 2018, provides a framework for locally prepared plans for housing and other development to be produced, aiming at building more affordable homes more quickly (May, 2018; Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2018b).

In Germany, by comparison, the Federal Government passed rent control laws in March 2013. Select municipalities that have experienced large rent increases began implementing these laws in June 2015. However, their impact has been mixed so far (Deschermeier, Haas, Hude, & Voigtländer, 2016; Kholodilin et al., 2016). In the summer of 2014, the Federal Government, states, municipalities, and associations formed an affordable housing coalition, which published its final report in November 2015. In terms of housing affordability, the coalition suggested increasing housing assistance for renters and analysing the implications of high housing costs. In terms of the affordable housing stock, the coalition suggested (1) establishing and increasing subsidies for housing construction by states and municipalities for the sustainable rehabilitation of buildings; (2) decreasing property taxes on newly purchased homes; (3) selling federally owned properties at a discount; (4) encouraging municipalities to sell lots, especially in urban areas; (5) subsidising states and municipalities to reduce the asking price of properties; (6) increasing the affordable housing stock for students and apprentices; (7) improving, establishing, and streamlining legal and construction standards; (8) increasing density; (9) allowing mixed uses; (10) encouraging flexible parking regulations; (11) reforming noise and fire regulations; (12) encouraging collaboration among developers and stakeholders; and (13) establishing policies and programmes that facilitate aging in place, among other things (Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat, n.d.).

In the United States, former Secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Shaun Donovan called rental affordability a 'silent crisis' in December 2013 (Donovan, 2013). Current Secretary Ben Carson suggested an 'all hands on deck' approach to solve the current shortage of affordable rental homes in November 2017 (Carson, 2017). In June 2018, Secretary Carson broke ground on the first EnVision Center in Detroit in June 2018. The 17 projected EnVision Centers, to be built on or near public housing developments throughout the United States, will serve as hubs to facilitate self-sufficiency in terms of character and leadership, educational advancement, economic empowerment, and health and wellness (Lloyd, 2018).

While these strategies address housing affordability and affordable housing, it remains to be seen whether they will be effective. In the case of the United Kingdom and its Help to Buy programme, some may wonder whether individual development account balances will satisfy the downpayment requirements for mortgages of homes that may not necessarily be affordable, especially for those first-time borrowers who do not have access to parental support for homeownership. With regard to the Housing Infrastructure Fund, Homes England, the Home Building Fund, and the updated National Housing Policy Framework, some may wonder whether these strategies will have a significant impact on the past and current shortage of affordable homes. In the case of Germany, it remains to be seen whether the suggestions of the affordable housing coalition will be implemented. In the case of the United States, some may wonder about the relationship between EnVision Centers and housing affordability and affordable housing.

This introduction discusses select aspects of housing affordability in terms of household expenditures and household incomes and select aspects of affordable housing. It provides a contextual base for considering the relationship between housing and affordability issues across diverse examples and the national, state, and local cases discussed in the articles of this special issue. The final part of this introduction briefly introduces the papers that follow, before going on to consider some potential policy solutions.

Brief history of housing affordability and affordable housing

Over the past few decades, the relationship between rents and house prices on the one hand and household incomes on the other has diverged in the metropolitan areas of many Western countries. There are several reasons for this trend. First, rents and house prices have increased because there is less easily available land for development. Over the past few decades developers have gone from building out (i.e., expanding outwards), to building up (i.e., replacing lower-level with higher-level buildings when allowed by local height limits), to building in the back (i.e., densifying by splitting parcels or building in a homeowner's back yard, as has recently occurred with accessory dwelling units (Peterson, 2018). Building out is relatively inexpensive when pieces of land are large, are in single ownership, and fall under conventional zoning. However, building in the back is relatively expensive when most sites are small, have a 'main' building nearby, and may be subject to unconventional residential zoning or require zoning modifications.

Second, rents and house prices have increased because developers have faced increasingly tight planning regulations and increasing costs for construction materials over time (Jakabovics, Ross, Spotts, & Simpson, 2014), as well as tighter lending standards during and after the global financial crisis (Geithner, 2014).

Third, rents and house prices have increased because filtering and moving chains have not worked in practice. On the one hand, most developers have continued to build or rehabilitate for upper-income households (Prevost, 2013; Sherman, 2017) or high or ultra-high net worth individuals (Harrington, 2016; Hay, 2013; Keister, 2005; Piketty, 2014; Rogers, 2017) to satisfy their desired profit margins, which are not regulated. While these newly built and rehabilitated units increase the number of housing units, they may not be primary places of residence and thus may not necessarily result in moving chains (Hay, 2013; Ley, 2010). On the other hand, many landlords or developers have continued to tear down old (i.e., affordable) units, partly because of gentrification pressures or code issues, and then replaced them with new units geared towards higher-income residents.

Fourth, rents and house prices have increased because many national, state, and local governments have retrenched from social policies or pursued austerity, resulting in reduced funding for affordable housing (Lennartz, 2017; Lennartz & Ronald, 2017; Ronald & Dewilde, 2017).

Conversely, household incomes have lagged behind rents and house prices. There have been several reasons for this trend. First, most household incomes have lagged as technology has provided efficiencies, resulting in a stubborn productivity-pay gap (Economic Policy Institute, n.d.).

Second, while household incomes have lagged, many households have been able to compensate for this trend because of increased access to credit following the introduction of risk-based pricing (De Graaf, Wann, & Naylor, 2005). Before 1980, the vast majority of mortgage applicants either qualified for prime mortgages or did not. However, this changed in the U.S. with the Depository Institutions Deregulation and Monetary Control Act of 1980, which gave lenders the flexibility to set rates and fees for mortgages, and the Alternative Mortgage Transaction Parity Act of 1982, which allowed lenders to make variable rate mortgages and mortgages with balloon payments (Ludwig, Kamihachi, & Toh, 2009). Risk-based pricing, which resulted in borrowers paying higher interest and fees in exchange for a higher risk of predicted default, contributed to the Global Financial Crisis (Engel & McCoy, 2011; Wolf, 2017).

Third, household incomes have lagged behind because of a decrease in unionisation and union membership, resulting in reduced negotiating power when it comes to preventing layoffs and decreases in benefits and salaries (Dorling, 2014; Warren, 2014). Fourth, household incomes have lagged behind because many employers are more focused on shareholder value or profits and less focused on employee wellbeing (Madrick, 2011).

Finally, and most critically, household incomes have lagged behind because many Western countries have reduced regulations due to demands and pressures by businesses and their lobbyists as well as concerns about their global competitors, all of which have resulted in laissez-faire economies with minimal government intervention (Madrick, 2011).

Housing affordability

Housing affordability may be a particular challenge in communities with increased and increasing demands for housing because of an absolute increase in the number of households in general due to net population growth and immigration; absolute and relative increases in low-income renter households, in particular senior households and households of color (Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2013); and insufficient government programmes (Morduch & Schneider, 2017). Addressing housing affordability challenges, however, has been difficult for at least three reasons. First, it is difficult to decrease household expenditures; second, it is difficult to increase household incomes; and third, household expenditures and incomes grow slowly over time. Thus, many policymakers may not act immediately, as was the case during the foreclosure crisis and the Great Recession (Anacker & Carr, 2011; Rajan, 2010), resulting in suicides (Fowler, Gladden, Vagi, Barnes, & Frazier, 2015), sudden evictions (Desmond, 2016), crime (Ellen & Lacoe, 2015), and health crises (Currie & Tekin, 2015).

Household expenditures: Difficult to decrease

Household expenditures may be classified into three groups: somewhat fixed, less flexible, and more flexible (Cohen, 2017; Warren & Tyagi, 2003). There are several examples of somewhat fixed expenditures, which have very limited room to decrease (Cohen, 2017; Warren & Tyagi, 2003). First, taxes are typically due on a certain date (Internal Revenue Service, n.d.a, n.d.b). While taxpayers can negotiate file dates and payments by filing requests to negotiate monthly installments, an offer in compromise, or a temporarily delayed collection (Internal Revenue Service, n.d.a, n.d.b), taxes are due eventually.

Second, health care premia are typically not negotiable (HealthCare.gov, n.d.). However, individuals can decrease their health care premiums by changing their locations of residence, changing habits, dropping spouses and dependents from their insurance plans, changing to less expensive plan categories, or (in the case of the United States) dropping their health insurance and paying a lower individual mandate penalty (HealthCare.gov, n.d.). While these strategies may lower premia in the short run, they may not necessarily result in long-term savings because deductibles may be higher or a particular procedure may not be covered.

Third, rent payments are typically due on the first day of each month. However, there may be a grace period of three to five days during which most landlords will not charge penalties or start an eviction (Desmond, 2016). Renters may negotiate installments or possibly reduced rents with their landlords, try to find apartments with lower rents, sublet rooms, or "couch surf" with family or friends (Desmond, 2016). Nevertheless, there is a limit to how low rents can go, and there may be a limit to family members or friends providing accommodation.

Fourth, mortgage payments of fixed-rate mortgages are fixed expenditures, while payments of adjustable-rate mortgages may be flexible. There is some leeway for payments, which may be paid up to 90 days late, when lenders start foreclosure procedures (Anacker, Carr, & Pradhan, 2012). Until December 31, 2016, when the home affordable mortgage programme expired, some eligible borrowers had lower monthly mortgage payments in return for an extension of the repayment period, possibly avoiding foreclosure (Federal Housing Finance Agency, n.d.). Nevertheless, mortgage payments are due eventually.

In summary, households have little room to decrease somewhat fixed expenditures. Interestingly, renters, who may be disproportionately low-income, have less room to maneuver than borrowers. While the grace period for rent payments is 3–5 days, the grace period for mortgage payments is 90 days (Desmond, 2016).

Over the past few years there has been a bifurcation of expenditures. On the one hand, somewhat fixed expenditures, such as health care premia and rent payments, and less flexible expenditures, such as transportation to work, health care expenditures, child care, and utility expenditures, have increased. On the other hand, more flexible expenditures, such as food and clothing, have decreased. Indeed, somewhat fixed expenditures are more difficult to decrease than less flexible expenditures. This bifurcation has resulted in reduced room to maneuver (Cohen, 2017; Morduch & Schneider, 2017; Warren & Tyagi, 2003). Ultimately, the question of what households will do when all of their strategies to decrease expenditures have been exhausted and there remains little or no room (Edin & Shaefer, 2016).

Household incomes: Difficult to increase

As it is difficult to decrease expenditures, some households consider pursuing strategies to increase their household incomes with two strategies: sending additional earners in the households into the work force and finding employment with higher salaries. Both strategies are discussed below.

First, households may send additional earners in the household into the workforce. Indeed, the female labour force participation rate in the United States has continuously increased over the past few decades (January 1950: 33.4%, December 2017: 56.9%; Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, n.d.a, n.d.b). However, women tend to have lower average and median wages than men because of sorting into lower-paying jobs, family responsibilities, the 'glass ceiling', possible discrimination, and other factors (*The Economist*, 2017). By contrast, the male labour force participation rate in the United States has constantly declined over time (January 1950: 86.2%, December 2017: 69.0%; Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, n.d.a), similar to the teenage labour force participation rate (August 1978: 59.3%, August 2017: 35.2%; Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, n.d.c). The decline in the male participation rate may be because of decreased demand for workers in the manufacturing sector (Krause & Sawhill, 2017), increased mortality among middle-aged non-Hispanic White males (Case & Deaton, 2015), and increased disability rates (Krueger, 2017). For the most part, labour participation may have already been exhausted by some households, as the day only has 24 h, there are limited numbers of workers in each household, and all teenage and adult household members may have already entered the workforce.

Second, some earners may try to find employment with higher salaries. However, real salaries for workers at or below the 75th percentile have increased very little in the United States in the past few decades (Desilver, 2014). For example, the federal minimum wage has increased from $5.15 per hour in September 1997 to $5.85 in July 2007, $6.55 in July 2008, and stands at only $7.25 as of July 2009 (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). However, 30 states now have minimum wages higher than the federal standard. For example, in Washington, DC the minimum wage is $11.50 per hour, while in Massachusetts and Washington it is $11 (McCarthy, 2017).

A few cities have minimum wages higher than their respective state minimum wages (for example, the minimum wage in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle is $15 per hour; *Time*, 2015). However, these federal, state, and city minimum wages may not be sufficient to rent two-bedroom apartments in many communities (Aurand, Emmanuel, Yentel, Errico, & Pang, 2017). In addition, some large employers have started raising wages. For example, Walmart increased the wage for new employees from $10 to $11 per hour, following Target's lead (Domonoske, 2018). It remains to be seen whether the recently passed Tax Cuts and Jobs Act will have an effect on wage levels (Congress.gov, 2017). Generally, household incomes are difficult to increase.

Affordable housing

Affordable housing may be a particular challenge in communities with decreased and decreasing housing supplies. In the recent past, there has been a shortage of affordable rental units, especially for households with low incomes, because of several factors. On the supply side, there has been insufficient construction and a deteriorating housing stock, neither of which meets increasing demand, in addition to possible excessive profit seeking by landlords (Anacker & Li, 2016). On the policy side, some point out exclusionary zoning and insufficient government subsidies, all resulting in high rent burdens and possible displacement and homelessness (Massey, Albright, Casciano, Derickson, & Kinsey, 2013).

Addressing affordable housing challenges has been difficult for at least three reasons. First, it is impractical to regulate inter/intra-state and inter/intra-city movement; second, it is difficult to reduce building regulations; and third, it is difficult to decrease design, construction, utility, and regulatory fees and developer profits.

Inter/intra-state and inter/intra-city movement: Impractical to regulate

Almost all countries grant freedom of movement among and within states and cities. However, China's past Hukou household registration system restricted migration (Yu, 2014). In the former Communist countries, many renters were assigned deeply subsidised, rent-controlled, tenure-secure, centrally planned housing units in exchange for relatively low wages and political loyalty (Lux & Sunega, 2014). Singapore has allocated public housing for the bottom 90% of its population since 1960 (Chua, 1997). Germany currently has a quota system for asylum seekers and refugees in order to spread responsibilities evenly among states (Bundesamt für Migration und

Flüchtlinge, n.d.). Although freedom of movement is impractical to regulate, its absence makes long-term planning for affordable housing challenging, as high-income renters may rent units with relatively low rents, reducing the number of affordable units available to low-income renters as some neighborhoods change (McClure, 2010).

Building regulations: Difficult to reduce

Recently, the Trump administration revisited the America's Affordable Communities Initiative, which was established during the Bush 43 administration but retired under the Obama administration. The Initiative's goal was to remove local regulations that affected the affordable housing stock, including outdated building codes, redundant or lengthy design review or approval processes, burdensome rehabilitation codes, and excessive land development standards (Carson, 2018; U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development, 2010). While local planning departments are able to address some regulations, they will not compromise health, safety, and welfare. While regulations have made homes safer in the long run, many have also become unaffordable.

Design, construction, utility, and regulator fees and developer profits: Difficult to decrease

Recent discussions have focused on (1) reducing the costs of affordable housing development and promoting cost-effectiveness, such as through the consolidation, coordination, simplification, and streamlining of processes, including underwriting; (2) facilitating more efficient deal assembly and development timelines; (3) improving and aligning incentives; (4) improving knowledge about and the flexibility of existing sources of financing; and (5) creating new financial products to better meet needs (Cohen, 2015; Jakabovics et al., 2014). While cross-subsidising affordable units with market-rate units has been practiced for decades, reducing fees and developer profits has been challenging (Fergus, 2018; see Weber, 2015 for an exception).

In sum, most Western countries have found themselves with increasingly less room to maneuver in terms of housing affordability, as household expenditures are difficult to decrease and household incomes are difficult to increase. Very recently, these countries have had difficulties coming up with strategies that address affordable housing challenges. As discussed above, recent strategies may be laudable but not necessarily sufficient to solve current challenges in housing affordability and affordable housing.

Table 1. Overview of Articles in this Special Issue

Author/Authors	Country/ Countries	Geography/ Geographies	Unit(s) of Observation	Data Set(s)	Method(s)	Major Finding(s)
Richter et al.	United States	Ohio	Households	U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; Ohio Housing Finance Agency	Principle component analysis; multinomial logit analysis	Use of additional rental assistance in the LIHTC may be complementary for select high-need households.
Pawson et al.	Australia	Australia	Providers of affordable housing and stakeholders in the affordable housing industry	Surveys; interview notes; focus group notes	Surveys; interviews; focus groups	Industry capacity restrictions have impacted affordable housing production.
McClure	United States	United States	Population; households; housing units	U.S. Bureau of the Census; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics	Content analysis; descriptive statistics; regression analysis	The Housing Choice Voucher program depends on an ample supply of reasonably priced rental units; the LIHTC program focuses on units in the rent range between $500 and $1,000 where a surplus exists.
Hansson	Germany Sweden	Berlin Hamburg Stockholm Gothenburg	Municipality	Administrative documents	Case study; literature review; content analysis	Policymakers in Berlin and Hamburg have clearer goals, more tools, and greater incentives to promote housing construction compared to policymakers in Stockholm and Gothenburg.

Source: The Editor of this special issue, based on review of articles in the issue.

Articles in this special issue

The articles in this issue discuss select nation-, state-, or city-specific strategies that address affordable housing challenges in select Western countries (i.e., the United States, Australia, Germany, and Sweden). Their units of observations range from households, to organisations, to municipalities. The authors utilise primary qualitative data (e.g., interview and focus group notes, surveys, and administrative data) as well as secondary quantitative data (e.g., U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Ohio Housing Finance Agency). Some articles focus on national programmes (e.g., the Housing Choice Voucher and Low Income Housing Tax Credit programs in the U.S.), others focus on local policies (e.g., Hamburg in Germany and Gothenburg in Sweden), and others focus on long-term trends impacting the non-government affordable housing industry (e.g., Australia). Table 1 provides an overview of the articles in this special issue.

The articles show the complexity of housing affordability and affordable housing that may nevertheless be solved with the assistance of national, state, and local policies, in addition to public-private partnerships. For example, in the United States, states and cities have pursued a so-called dual approach, utilising Housing Choice Vouchers (HCVs), established in 1974, and the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC), established in 1986, to assist eligible low-income households (McClure, 2019; Richter et al., 2019). In Australia, policy makers and advocates have recently engaged non-government affordable housing providers to solve the country's affordable housing challenges. In Hamburg and Berlin, Germany, and Stockholm and Gothenburg, Sweden, municipalities have recently applied and combined organisation, urban planning, land allocation, and public housing and reduced obstacles to construction to increase housing supply, thus increasing housing affordability. In Australia, policy makers and advocates have recently engaged non-government affordable housing providers to solve the country's affordable housing challenges. In the United States, states and cities have pursued a so-called dual approach, utilising housing choice vouchers, established in 1974, and the low-income housing tax credit (LIHTC), established in 1986, to assist eligible low-income households (McClure, 2019; Richter et al., 2019).

Conclusion

In summary, while housing affordability and affordable housing may be difficult to address through policies and programmes, the articles published in this special issue show that there are effective strategies to tackle housing affordability and affordable housing. Other suggestions to solve housing affordability and affordable housing may be (1) building on vacant urban land already zoned for multifamily development; (2) adding units to existing single-family homes; (3) adding units to underutilised urban land zoned for multifamily development; (4) developing affordable and adjacent single-family housing; (5) incentivising local governments to approve already-planned-for housing; (6) accelerating land-use approvals; (7) prioritising state and local funding for affordable housing; (8) attracting new investors in affordable housing; (9) designing regulations to boost affordable housing while maintaining investment attractiveness; (10) raising construction productivity; (11) deploying modular construction; (12) accelerating construction permitting; (13) reducing housing operating costs; and (14) aligning development impact fees with housing objectives (Woetzel, Mischke, Peloquin, & Weisfield, 2016). These approaches, in addition to the discussed strategies in the articles in this special issue, may be worth considering in the short, mid, and long run.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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