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FROM 'DEADBEAT' TO 'DESERVING': THE ROLE OF COVID-19 IN RESHAPING MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF SOCIAL HOUSING

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No. 2022-14

July 2022

NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

Social housing has long been negatively portrayed in mainstream media. National and international media scholarship finds that social housing tenants are often represented as morally deviant and deficient individuals. This prominent understanding of social housing and social housing tenants has historically diminished the viability of social housing as a policy response to social exclusion. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, social, economic, and political contexts have transformed globally. In Queensland, the economic impacts of COVID-19 coupled with rising housing costs has meant that more people are now exposed to housing stress and homelessness. Where once such experiences were seen as resulting from individual moral deficiencies, the widespread impacts of COVID-19 have placed a spotlight on broader social influences that exist beyond individuals' control.

It is therefore timely to revisit representations of social housing in the mainstream media to examine whether such representations have changed in line with shifting social and economic contexts. Our research examines coverage of social housing in a popular Queensland newspaper in the two years before and the two years after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. We find that the newspaper's coverage of social housing prior to COVID-19 is overwhelmingly negative, reflecting the dominant focus on tenants' immorality and deviance found in existing media representations research. After COVID-19, on the other hand, we find that media representations of social housing are almost unanimously in support of social housing, calling for increased investment from the government. Significantly, however, we also find that post-COVID-19 media coverage does not support the provision of social housing to everyone in need, but rather focuses predominantly on the needs of 'hardworking' and 'upstanding' citizens impacted by the pandemic. At the same time, existing social housing tenants are either ignored or continue to be disparaged in the post-COVID-19 coverage.

While the shift towards more support for social housing is promising, this paper questions the value of housing support that is largely predicated on the perceived deservingness of its tenants. As such, we argue that housing scholars and activists should remain mindful of the ways in which social housing is framed by the media to better understand public sentiment and thus the state's continued willingness to respond to the housing needs of its citizens. Indeed, the representations of and identities imposed on social housing tenants by the media directly influence the extent to which governments are willing to invest in social housing policies in ways that respond appropriately to people's needs. We argue that it is critical that policies enable social housing access for all those in need, regardless of whether or not they are deemed by the media to be deserving of such support.

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Acknowledgements

ABSTRACT

Existing research demonstrates that the mainstream media produces and reproduces highly stigmatising representations of social housing. Such representations are largely underpinned by a moral underclass discourse, which blames individuals' social exclusion on their own moral deficiencies. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, social, economic, and political contexts have changed significantly, and problems that were once perceived to be the result of individuals' deficits are increasingly viewed as being beyond their control. It is therefore timely to revisit representations of social housing in the mainstream media, to examine whether such representations have also changed in line with shifting social and economic contexts. To this end, this article examines mainstream media representations of social housing in the Australian state of Queensland in the pre- and post-COVID-19 contexts. Our findings highlight important changes in the discourses invoked in the media articles, underpinned by a shift in who is perceived as being socially excluded and why.

Keywords: social housing; social exclusion; media; discourse

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INTRODUCTION

The provision of social housing to people in need has long been a contentious policy issue in Australia (Arthurson & Jacobs, 2009; Darcy, 2010) and internationally (Kleinhans & Varady, 2011; Pearce & Vine, 2014). While some view social housing as a policy solution to social exclusion, for some governments and the public at large, it has gained a reputation as a taxpayer-funded haven for "feckless individuals who shun work, survive on welfare benefits, indulge in substance abuse, routinely commit crimes, and cause generalised disorder" (Arthurson et al., 2014, p. 1334). Existing research demonstrates that the mainstream media plays a key role in reproducing such views and, in turn, reifying prejudices against the people who live in social housing (Devereux et al., 2011; Warr, 2005).

Both the Australian (Arthurson et al., 2014; Darcy & Rogers, 2017; Jacobs et al., 2011; Jacobs & Flanagan, 2013) and international (Devereux et al., 2011; Hastings, 2004; Kearns et al., 2013) research on media representations demonstrate that portrayals of social housing often reproduce a moral underclass discourse. According to Levitas (2005), the moral underclass discourse positions individuals' immorality and character failures as the leading causes of their social exclusion. From this perspective, individuals have the power to determine their social inclusion (or lack thereof) through their own behaviour (Slater, 2018; Watt & Jacobs, 2000). Access to social housing can thus be made contingent on tenants complying with prescribed behavioural expectations (Flint, 2019). Broader structural inequalities and external barriers that prevent marginalised individuals from participating fully in society—such as access to appropriate employment and a lack of affordable housing stock—are rarely acknowledged or addressed (Gywther, 2009).

However, since the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic in early 2020, social, economic, and political contexts have changed significantly. Existing structural issues have been exacerbated by the impacts of COVID-19, including economic downturn and changes to the property market. As such, problems that were once perceived to be the result of individuals' deficiencies are increasingly being viewed as being beyond their control. Indeed, the years following the COVID-19 outbreak have seen significant changes in how Australian society and governments view and respond to broad housing policy issues (Parsell et al., 2020; Pawson et al., 2022). It is therefore timely to revisit representations of social housing in the mainstream media, to examine whether such representations have also changed in line with shifting contexts. Given the media's capacity to shape public opinion and influence policy decisions, an understanding of current media representations of social housing is a crucial step towards achieving housing justice for people who are socially excluded.

To this end, this article examines mainstream media representations of social housing[1] in the Australian state of Queensland. It addresses the research question: Have media representations of social housing changed during the COVID-19 pandemic and, if so, what are the nature of these changes? To answer this question, we conduct a qualitative content analysis of articles published in Queensland's leading newspaper in the two years leading up to (2018 and 2019) and the two years following (2020 and 2021) the onset of COVID-19. Drawing on Levitas (2005), we find important changes in the discourses invoked in the media articles, and argue that these changes are underpinned by a shift in who is perceived as being socially excluded and why. We conclude the article with a discussion of the implications of these findings for social housing in Australia and internationally.

THREE DISCOURSES OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Social exclusion is core to the experiences of social housing tenants. Generally, social scientists recognise social exclusion as broadly referring "the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society" (Levitas et al., 2007, p.25). However, perspectives on the underlying causes of social exclusion are complex and varied, enabling political actors to construct social exclusion in a way that produces or justifies their desired policy response. Levitas (2005) identifies three discourses that are commonly drawn upon in political discourse surrounding social exclusion: the moral underclass discourse, the social integrationist discourse, and the redistributionist discourse. We outline each discourse in turn.

The moral underclass discourse has arguably been the most salient model for understanding social exclusion in Australian and international political rhetoric (Darcy, 2010; Arthurson & Jacobs, 2009; Harding, 2016; Watt & Jacobs, 2000). According to Levitas (2005), this discourse positions social exclusion as the result of individual moral and behavioural failings, with the underclass being characterised by illegitimacy, immorality, and criminal activity. Disconnected from the moral community and living on the margins, the underclass is portrayed as responsible for their own exclusion and consequently cast as scroungers or delinquents who are undeserving of welfare support (Levitas, 2005). The moral underclass

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[1] The media we analysed tended to use terms such as social housing, public housing, community housing, tax-payer-funded housing, and welfare housing interchangeably. The academic literature, in contrast, treats these as separate concepts. Here, we use the term 'social housing' to encapsulate all forms of subsidised housing, whether the subsidy comes from government, charitable, or other organisations.

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discourse works to both position social housing tenants as the problem and give legitimacy to government claims that social housing is a mechanism that exacerbates this problem.

The second discourse Levitas (2005) identifies is the social integrationist discourse, which casts exclusion as a labour-market concern. Within this discourse, labour-market attachment as a paid worker is treated as synonymous with social inclusion (Levitas, 2005). The extent of this attachment to the labour market is largely ignored, however, with income and employment disparities largely obscured by the blanket notion that any level of employment or income is sufficient for social inclusion (Watt & Jacobs, 2000). In the context of social housing, the social integrationist discourse lends itself to policies that favour mutual obligation schemes, whereby access to social housing is conditional on tenants participating in education, employment, or training schemes to improve their prospects for social inclusion (Watt & Jacobs, 2000; Arthurson & Jacobs, 2009).

Finally, the redistributionist discourse considers the broader structural factors that contribute to an individual's social exclusion. Specifically, the redistributionist discourse explicitly links social exclusion to the unequal distribution of the resources and opportunities necessary for full participation in society (Levitas, 2005). The redistributionist discourse thus explicitly advocates for the redistribution of resources through the provision of universal services (Levitas, 2005). For Arthurson and Jacobs (2009), a redistributionist discourse in the social housing context would recognise that direct state investment in social housing is crucial to enabling those who are socially excluded to access quality and affordable housing, regardless of their behaviour, labour market participation, or social standing. Although the redistributionist discourse has been foregrounded in academic discussions on the persistence of social exclusion in Australian society, it remains largely absent from political discourse (Arthurson & Jacobs, 2009).

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF SOCIAL HOUSING

Much like political discourses, media discourses hold immense power to inform public opinion—and, in turn, policy responses—by constructing social exclusion and its causes in particular ways (Entman, 1993). Examining how the media represents social exclusion, including how social exclusion manifests as a need for social housing, is thus critical for understanding broader public and policy perceptions of social housing and the people who live in it. Indeed, scholars have noted the inextricable and interdependent nature of media representations of social housing and social housing tenants, demonstrating the impossibility of

analysing one independently of the other (De Decker & Pannecoucke, 2004; Devereux et al., 2011; Palmer et al., 2004).

An existing body of international literature (Conway et al., 2011; Devereux et al., 2011; Glasze et al., 2012; Kearns et al., 2013) and, to a lesser extent, Australian literature (Arthurson et al., 2014; Darcy & Rogers, 2017) investigates media representations of social housing and social housing tenants. Although none of these studies specifically invokes Levitas' three discourse model within their analysis, findings across the literature consistently point to a deeply entrenched moral underclass discourse. For example, Arthurson and colleagues' (2014) and Darcy and Rogers' (2017) Australian studies demonstrate that the media largely portrays social housing tenants as uneducated, criminal, lazy, or substance-using individuals who are either incapable or unwilling to contribute positively to society. These prominent and highly stigmatising representations foreground the moral deviancy of those who live in social housing, implying that their social exclusion is a result of their own irresponsible behaviour.

The international literature similarly finds that the media commonly represents social housing as sites of "otherness", disorder, and immorality; all of which are attributed to the behaviour and irresponsibility of the tenants (Devereux et al., 2011; Glasze et al., 2012; Kearns et al., 2013). For example, Kearns and colleagues (2013) find that negative news coverage of social housing estates tends to focus on the instances of criminality and anti-social behaviour of social housing tenants, as well as the deprived or dilapidated environment of the estates. Devereux and colleagues (2011) similarly find an overwhelming emphasis on crime and deviance, and demonstrate that even when good news stories are reported, the coverage is often diluted by the juxtaposition between the positive event and past occurrences of crime and anti-social behaviour in the area (Devereux et al., 2011). As Warr (2005) argues, the media's persistent reference to the crime and immoral behaviour that takes place in social housing reifies the public's prejudicial views of social housing tenants.

Overwhelmingly, then, media representations of social housing tend to align with the moral underclass discourse, emphasising individual moral and behavioural failings as the core explanation for social housing tenants' social exclusion. Indeed, existing media analyses point to a significant lack of acknowledgement of structural barriers to social inclusion, such as impeded access to gainful employment and a lack of affordable housing stock. Critically, however, to the best of our knowledge the existing literature regarding media representations of social housing is entirely based in the pre-COVID-19 context. As we demonstrate below, the COVID-19 pandemic had significant and far-reaching economic impacts,

increasing public and political awareness of the strong determining role that structural factors can have on a person's ability to house themselves through the private rental market (Pawson et al., 2022). These significant changes highlight the importance of continued analyses of media representations of social housing to understand if and how such representations have changed since the onset of COVID-19.

THE QUEENSLAND SOCIAL HOUSING CONTEXT AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Social housing in Australia comprises stock that is owned and managed by the state, as well as community housing that is managed by community housing providers. These dwellings are allocated to applicants who are deemed to be experiencing the greatest level of housing need and rented at a subsidised rental rate equivalent to 25 per cent of household income (Productivity Commission, 2022). This subsidised rental rate is designed to help low-income tenants avoid housing stress, which occurs when households pay 30 per cent or more of their income on housing (Productivity Commission, 2022). In 2019, there were 71,429 social housing dwellings in Queensland, representing an increase of 0.5 per cent from the previous year (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 put Queensland's already struggling social housing system under additional pressure by increasing demand. Widespread job losses and reduced work hours meant that many individuals lost a substantial amount of their income, which in turn, hampered their ability to pay rent and other housing-related costs (Davidson et al., 2021). In addition, Queensland's relatively low number of COVID-19 cases in the first two years of the pandemic precipitated large inflows of interstate migrants (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The resulting growth in demand for real estate properties in the private rental market has led to record-low vacancy rates and soaring rental prices across the state (Pawson et al., 2022). Altogether, these conditions have exacerbated pre-pandemic housing stress and forced many to seek social housing as an alternative. Consequently, Queensland's social housing waitlist expanded from 39,513 people in 2019 to 47,036 people in 2020 (Productivity Commission, 2022).

Given the recent and highly significant changes in social and economic contexts that have occurred since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as their implications for policy responses (Pawson et al., 2022), it is therefore timely to examine if and how media representations of social housing have changed in line with shifting social and economic contexts, and what this means for social housing policy moving forward.

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METHODS

Data

This paper examines how the mainstream media represents social housing before and after the COVID-19 outbreak in Queensland, Australia. To achieve this, we analyse in-print and online news articles published in Queensland's *Courier Mail*[2] newspaper in the two years leading up to and the two years following the onset of COVID-19. As the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern" on 31 January 2020, we take this date as the 'onset' of COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2020). Using the Factiva media database, we searched for all online and print reports published by *Courier Mail* between 1 January 2018 and 30 January 2020, and between 31 January 2020 and 31 December 2021. We conducted the search using the following Boolean search phrase, developed through several rounds of pilot searches to reflect our focus on representations of social housing: (public housing or social housing or housing commission or atleast2 community housing) NOT (election* or letters or Melbourne or climate). This search returned 391 results of potential relevance to our study.

The 391 results returned through Factiva were then imported into the online screening platform Covidence. Through Covidence, two researchers independently screened each result and assessed its relevance for the study. To be relevant, results needed to be news articles, have social housing as a core focus, and be primarily related to the Queensland context. Results that were not news articles (e.g., obituaries, movie reviews), mentioned social housing only in passing, and/or were focused on broader national or international contexts were excluded. All conflicts were resolved through discussions between the two screening researchers, plus an additional third researcher. A total of 81 news articles were ultimately included in the analysis. The distribution of news articles by publication year is shown in Figure 1.

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[2] *Courier Mail* is Queensland's most widely-read in print and online news outlet, with a circulation almost ten times greater than the second-most widely-read new outlet (Statista, 2021).

Figure 1. Number of articles by period
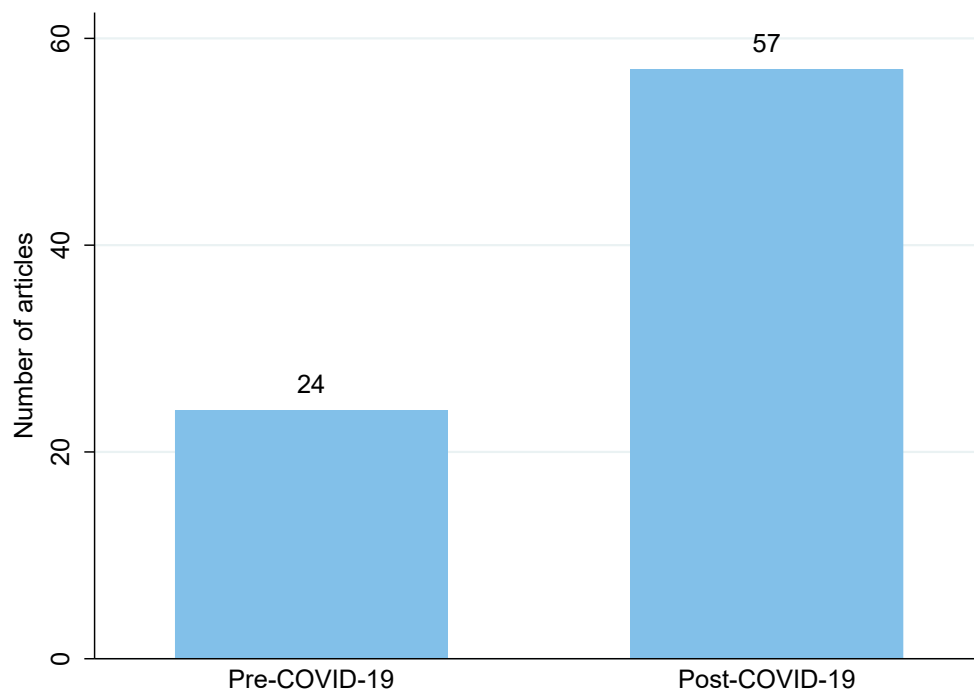
Analysis

Our analysis of representations of social housing tenants in the Queensland mainstream media draws on qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is a set of techniques used to systematically analyse content (including key themes and foci) in textual data (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). This approach allows for the qualitative exploration of complex textual themes, while also enabling for the frequency of the themes to be quantified. Ultimately, this allows patterns in the data to be identified and described.

To begin the analysis, the same two researchers who conducted the screening process together drafted a list of themes, which were identified during the screening process. These themes were organised into codes and sub-codes. Using NVivo software to help organise and manage the data, one researcher coded all articles in the pre-COVID-19 sample and the other researcher coded all articles in the post-COVID-19 sample. Each researcher added additional codes as necessary throughout the analytical process. As well as qualitatively organising the text into thematic codes, the researchers simultaneously recorded pre-defined key characteristics of each article, including the year of publication, key theme/s, and whether the article was overarchingly supportive or critical of social housing as a concept. These data were then used to quantify and compare the dominant themes and framings across sample periods. Periodically

throughout this process, each researcher checked the other researcher's coding and assignment of key characteristics to ensure coding strategies were consistent.

Once we had coded and recorded the key characteristics of all articles, we qualitatively analysed the data drawing on Entman's (1993) media analysis framework and Levitas' (2005) three social exclusion discourses. Entman posits that the mass media holds the power to represent a social issue in particular ways by amplifying or silencing certain voices and aspects of the issue. Each representation embeds certain assumptions and moral judgements regarding the nature of the issue, as well as its causes and appropriate solutions. We sought to identify and examine such assumptions and moral judgements, paying particular attention to how they aligned with Levitas' (2005) three social exclusion discourses introduced above. This involved considering: the use and connotation of certain words and phrases; the invocation of stereotypes and judgements; the type and source of the information presented; the exclusion of information and voices; and overarching themes and arguments (Entman, 1993). These points of focus guided our analysis of the data.

In the remainder of the paper, we present our analysis of the 81 news articles included in the study. We begin with a quantification of their key characteristics to provide a broad picture of how media representations of social housing changed after the onset of COVID-19. We then present qualitative findings from the thematic analysis to provide a more in-depth and nuanced picture of the difference underpinning these broad changes. To support our arguments, we provide extracts from the articles we analysed. These extracts are not exhaustive examples; rather, they were selected to exemplify the themes that were identified during the analysis.

FINDINGS

Quantification of key characteristics

To broadly identify trends in the data, we began by comparing selected key characteristics of the pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 news articles. When recording key characteristics, each article was classified as either being overarchingly in support of the concept of social housing, or overarchingly critical of it. As Figure 2 illustrates, representations of social housing prior to COVID-19 were primarily (62.5 per cent) critical. In contrast, representations post-COVID-19 were primarily (82.5 per cent) supportive. This demonstrates a significant shift in the media's representation of social housing between the pre- and post-COVID-19 time periods. Furthermore, as illustrated in Figure 1, the number of articles relating to

social housing was considerably higher in the post-COVID-19 sample (57 articles) compared to the pre-COVID-19 sample (24 articles). This indicates that social housing was not only portrayed differently in the post-COVID-19 sample, it was also discussed more frequently.

Figure 2. Representations of social housing in media pieces pre- and post-COVID-19
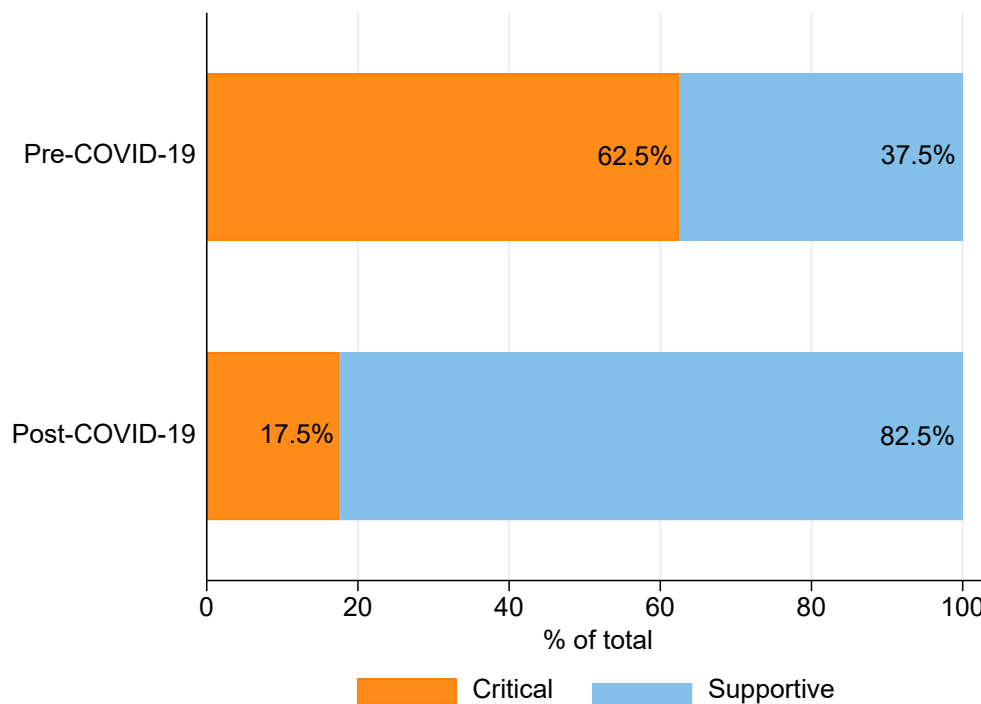
As well as an increase in the number of articles being published about social housing, there was also a shift in their content. Figure 3 shows the breakdown of the core topic focus pre- and post-COVID-19. In the pre-COVID-19 sample, 58.3 per cent of articles focused primarily on the irresponsible behaviour of social housing tenants, with only 20.8 per cent focusing on the announcement of new funding and initiatives, and 12.5 per cent focusing on the need for more social housing. Of the articles that focused on the irresponsible behaviour of social housing tenants, 71.4 per cent explicitly called for stricter management of social housing tenants. Moreover, 33.3 per cent of pre-COVID-19 articles called attention to the cost of social housing to the taxpayer. Significantly, of the 13 articles that alluded to the causes of social exclusion, 84.6 per cent foregrounded personal behaviours, with only 7.7 per cent acknowledging structural factors and 7.7 per cent identifying health and mental health related factors.

Figure 3. Core topic focus of media articles pre- and post-COVID-19
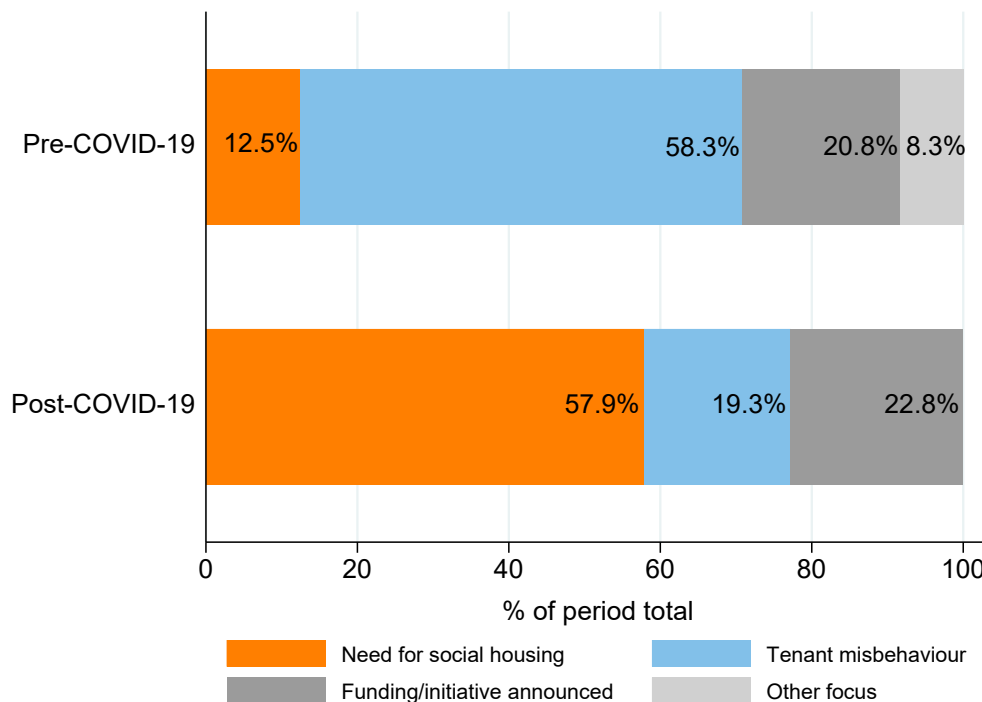
Articles in the post-COVID-19 sample, on the other hand, tended to focus on the need for more social housing (57.9 per cent). A further 22.8 per cent focused on the announcement of new social housing funding or initiatives. In stark contrast to the pre-COVID-19 sample, only 19.3 per cent of post-COVID-19 articles focused on the bad behaviour of social housing tenants. Of the 43 articles that alluded to the reasons underpinning experiences of social exclusion, only 25.6 per cent suggested that individual irresponsible behaviour was to blame. By contrast, 69.8 per cent of articles focused on structural factors, including the difficulties maintaining ties to the housing and labour markets due to the economic impacts of COVID-19. Only 1.8 per cent of post-COVID-19 articles mentioned the impact of social housing on taxpayer funds.

In the following section, we draw on qualitative analyses to contextualise these findings and consider their implications for social perceptions of, and responses to, social housing.

Qualitative findings

Pre-COVID-19

As demonstrated above, media articles published in the pre-COVID-19 period generally portrayed negative representations of social housing. Some articles (25 per cent) positioned the rapidly growing

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waitlists for social housing as stemming from a deficiency of affordable housing stock. However, articles that focused on the government's mismanagement of social housing tenants were more common (45.8 per cent). From this perspective, it was not a case of the government failing to invest adequately in social housing; rather, it was seen that the government was failing to prioritise and manage existing social housing tenancies in an effective way. For example:

> *… more complaints and less breaches showed [the government] was "failing" to take action on unruly tenants. (2019, 25 September)*

> *Neighbours live in fear, some houses sit empty waiting for residents to return from jail … How bad does it have to get before a person can be evicted from public housing? (2019, 6 July)*

In the above excerpts, criticism is levelled at the Queensland Government for its lax policies that fail to keep social housing tenants 'in check' and enable 'bad' tenants to maintain their tenancies.

As well as speaking to how 'the problem' of social housing is framed, the above excerpts hint at the inextricable relationship between representations of social housing and representations of social housing tenants. In 29.2 per cent of the pre-COVID-19 articles, the concept of social housing was broadly presented as a necessary form of support for people experiencing social exclusion. This is nicely summed up in the following excerpt:

> *The way I see it, the provision of public housing is a worthy use of taxpayer dollars, provided it helps people in genuine need. (2019, 6 July)*

More frequently, however, social housing tenants were demonised, with 'immoral' tenants being positioned as the reason why 'more deserving' prospective tenants are missing out. Indeed, the misbehaviour of existing social housing tenants was the dominant focus in 58.3 per cent of the articles. This focus on tenant misbehaviour invokes a strong deserving/undeserving dichotomy, whereby people who engage in immoral or irresponsible behaviour were not considered to be deserving of social housing. The taxpayer dollar was of critical concern here, with 33.3 per cent of the articles highlighting the 'injustice' of taxpayer money being used to house tenants who neither appreciate nor respect their dwellings. For example:

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Taxpayers have footed a $37 million bill to repair damage caused by public housing tenants in just five years. (2019, 2 June)

Child Services has removed this woman's kids and placed them in foster care, yet she still gets to live here on the public purse despite also trashing the house, smashing windows and refusing to mow the lawn. (2019, 30 June)

The latter excerpt, in particular, speaks to underlying perceptions regarding who is deserving of living 'on the public purse'. According to the excerpt, a woman who is unable to look after her children and appropriately take care of the house, does not appear to be seen as deserving of social housing. As another article states:

[A neighbour] wanted the drug-dealing tenant... to be evicted from the three-bedroom, taxpayer-funded house so that it could be given to a deserving family. (2019, 6 July)

This suggests that while the articles disparaged social housing tenants, there was a view that with stricter regulations and better-behaved tenants, social housing could be a positive way to support 'deserving' families experiencing social exclusion.

The need for stricter regulation of social housing tenants was further reinforced through many articles' (45.8 per cent) portrayal of social housing tenants as a threat to community safety and harmony. These articles focused on the stereotypical immoralities that are associated with living in social housing, labelling tenants as 'unruly', 'wild', 'criminals', and 'deadbeats' and positioning them in stark opposition to "good folk who happen to find themselves living next [door]" (2019, 6 July). In doing so, 25 per cent of the articles drew heavily on the voices of concerned neighbours and community members, who were often directly quoted and given a platform to voice their concerns. For example:

"It has been three years of absolute hell," said the 36-year-old father of two, who … has set up video surveillance around his $1 million-plus property in Wavell Heights. (2019, 30 June)

"I'm horrified, I'm very scared, it's not good, I don't know what to do. I have two young kids I don't feel safe in my own home." (2019, 19 February)

Critically, however, social housing tenants themselves were not given a similar platform to share their concerns or experiences. Indeed, in the entire pre-COVID-19 sample, only a single social housing tenant

was given a voice. However, rather than speaking to the tenant's experiences or needs, the quote that was used related to the criminal activity of their neighbour, who was also a social housing tenant:

> *A resident at the [public housing] block where Mr Mitchell lived described the 61-year-old as a "troublemaker", believed to be into hard drugs, possibly including methamphetamines. (2018, 4 December)*

The narrative throughout the articles was therefore dominated by the voices of community members, as well as politicians and government spokespeople, while the very people experiencing social exclusion continued to be overlooked and vilified, and prevented from offering alternative narratives.

Together, these findings suggest that the pre-COVID-19 articles draw strongly on the moral underclass discourse to represent social housing tenants as responsible for their own social exclusion (Levitas, 2005). The articles' focus on tenants' individual character failures, misbehaviour, and immorality positions tenants as undeserving of taxpayer-funded assistance in the form of social housing. By representing social housing tenants in this way, the logical solution becomes implementing more punitive policies designed to deter and punish tenants' irresponsible behaviours (Jones et al., 2014). Through such policies, the 'undeserving' tenants may be held to account and, if necessary, evicted to make room for a tenant who is in 'genuine' need (i.e., a tenant whose social exclusion is a result of factors beyond their own control). Interestingly, none of these so-called 'deserving' tenants are made directly visible in the articles.

Although most representations of social housing were negative and reflective of the moral underclass discourse, there were a small number of articles (12.5 per cent) that drew on elements of the social integrationist discourse. These articles challenged the idea that social housing tenants are to blame for their reliance on social housing, instead highlighting the barriers to employment that prevent the socially excluded from fully participating in society. For example:

> *Today, the fair-go-for-those-having-a-go mantra doesn't seem to take into account parents felled by… unemployment, depression and a swag of other things that can sideswipe families. (2019, 5 October)*

> *Even young people who are working often have casual and insecure employment and this … can make it difficult to secure and sustain housing. (2019, 11 December)*

In addition to the few articles that acknowledged the employment-related factors underpinning social exclusion, there were also a small number of articles that directly challenged negative representations of social housing and its tenants. For example:

> *There is a mentality that community housing breeds problematic residents, but a study ... has found that community housing done properly is beneficial to the surrounding community. (2019, 23 September)*

> *There are so many successful Australians – teachers, chief executives, entrepreneurs, doctors, best-selling writers, sportspeople – who spent a chunk of their childhood growing up in public housing. Many say it saved their family. (2019, 5 October)*

These articles highlight the positive contribution that social housing can make to society by supporting those who are socially excluded to become re-integrated into the community and go on to be productive and responsible citizens. Despite these few positive representations of social housing, however, negative representations underpinned by the moral underclass discourse dominated news media reporting in the pre-COVID-19 period.

Post-COVID-19

As previously demonstrated, the media articles published in the post-COVID-19 period, on the other hand, represented social housing in much more positive ways. These articles were framed within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, foregrounding the significant impacts of the pandemic on people's ability to maintain access to housing and labour markets. For example:

> *Socially we are on the precipice of unprecedented levels of housing stress and homelessness... Rental affordability has already halved for families surviving on a minimum wage or who have lost jobs because of COVID-19. (2020, 14 September)*

> *There are not enough homes to meet demand and it is forcing low to medium income earners into inappropriate living arrangements or homelessness. (2021, 25 October)*

In contrast to the pre-COVID-19 articles, which primarily positioned the problem as being a mismanagement of social housing tenants, the post-COVID-19 articles positioned the problem as being a COVID-19-induced influx of demand for social housing (15.8 per cent), which current social housing stocks are ill-equipped to respond to (36.8 per cent). As such, 24.6 per cent of the post-COVID-19 articles

criticised the government's lack of investment in social housing, and called on them to increase their level of support:

> *We did see a commendable $1.9bn invested by the state government into social housing in this year's budget, those funds will build 260 new dwellings … (This figure) is dwarfed by the 3104 families in need on the waitlist today. (2021, 13 September)*

> *The Queensland Government only plans to deliver 575 social homes this year, that's about 1 per cent of the current waiting list. (2020, 26 May)*

These calls for increased government investment reflect the increasing visibility and, indeed, urgency of the issue in the post-COVID-19 sample.

Underpinning the urgency of an adequate government response to the growing need for social housing is a shift in who is positioned as experiencing social exclusion and being in need of social housing. As discussed in-depth in the previous section, the pre-COVID-19 sample positioned the socially excluded as morally corrupt and undeserving of social housing support. By contrast, the post-COVID-19 sample positioned the socially excluded as people who were previously participating in the housing and labour markets, but are now experiencing difficulties maintaining their connections to these markets due to the impacts of COVID-19. Indeed, 52.6 per cent of the post-COVID-19 articles recognise the structural difficulties preventing access to housing, focusing primarily on the implications for families. For example:

> *Working families with children are sleeping in tents as Queensland's housing crisis deepens with thousands of desperate tenants competing for rental listings. (2021, 3 July)*

> *She is one of thousands of Queenslanders who have been pushed out of the rental market... A full-time job in Brisbane's CBD and 23 years of rental history have done nothing to keep her from sleeping rough. (2021, 23 July)*

> *Mother of five children… has begged the government to build more public housing as her family faces the reality of living in separate houses just to have a roof over their heads. (2021, 26 July)*

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This focus on working families who have been impacted by factors beyond their control is indicative of the overarching shift in media portrayals away from seeing the socially excluded as immoral and undeserving, and towards seeing them as responsible and deserving. Where once the socially excluded were seen as criminals, drug users, and unemployed, they are now seen to be:

> *Our key workers, assistants in nursing, teacher aides, the cleaners, the coffee makers,*
> *the people cleaning our hospitals, there's so many people doing really good jobs but*
> *low paid jobs. (2020, 31 August)*

The need for social housing is thus no longer positioned as a serious risk and benefitting just the lazy and unemployed; rather, it is now seen as a critical risk for the 'good' and 'hardworking families' who are facing economic challenges beyond their control. Thanks to COVID-19, the pool of so-called 'deserving' people in need of social housing has grown exponentially.

The post-COVID-19 sample's focus on COVID-19 as an external factor hindering hardworking families' ability to fully participate in society indicates a dramatic shift away from the moral underclass discourse and towards a social integrationist discourse. According to Levitas (2005), the social integrationist discourse focuses on enabling the socially excluded to work so as to avoid being dependent on state support (Arthurson & Jacobs, 2009). However, our analysis suggests the social integrationist discourse is operating slightly differently within the post-COVID-19 sample. While the focus of the articles was still very much on people's connections to the labour market, there has been a shift away from the view that the socially excluded should be engaged in the labour market, and towards a view that they are either prevented from being engaged or that engagement is not enough to guarantee social inclusion. Levitas (2005) argues that, from the social integrationist perspective, resources should be distributed based on people's productivity through the labour market. This could help explain the media's focus on hardworking, or out-of-work, families post-COVID-19. That is, social housing as a resource is seen as justified for hardworking families given their ongoing productivity. For families who have been excluded from the labour market due to COVID-19, social housing is perceived as being justified, given that their previous productivity has been temporarily impacted by forces beyond their control.

Perhaps reflecting the post-COVID-19 sample's focus on deserving families, the portrayals of social housing tenants are much more forgiving compared to the pre-COVID-19 sample. As the below extracts demonstrate, where issues such as public nuisance, property damage, and criminal history were

sensationalised in the pre-COVID-19 sample, the post-COVID-19 sample tended to contextualise and explain such issues. For example:

> *Ms McKenzie was open about the fact there'd been noise complaints from her large family while she was in social housing, but says with a large family under one roof, it was unavoidable. Her children are polite and well spoken. Her son likes to help neighbours out. (2020, 29 December)*

> *Most tenants take good care of their homes and, as with any tenancy, it's only reasonable to expect a degree of wear and tear to a property while it is occupied. (2021, 29 January)*

With these explanations and justifications of tenants' behaviours, calls for punitive policies, which was prominent in the pre-COVID-19 sample, becomes less visible. Indeed, such policies were abandoned by Queensland political parties in 2020. Importantly, as the first excerpt above suggests, the shift towards more positive representations of social housing tenants appears to be reflected in the articles' engagement with stakeholder voices. Only 5.3 per cent of post-COVID-19 articles quote concerned community members, compared to the 25 per cent of pre-COVID-19 articles. Further, 12.3 per cent of post-COVID-19 articles directly quote social housing tenants and people in need of social housing (compared to 4.2 per cent in the pre-COVID-19 sample). By acknowledging the voices of those in need and allowing them to tell their stories, the media articles positioned people experiencing social exclusion as members of the community with the capacity to make valuable contributions to the discussion.

This is not to say that stories regarding the anti-social behaviour and criminality of tenants are not present in the post-COVID-19 sample, however. There are still references to alleged drug use and criminal behaviour, albeit to a lesser degree. For example:

> *That figure included two drug labs found in public housing. (2021, 6 April)*

> *Nearly 80 lots of bad tenants have won their fight to stay in social housing despite the government finding their behaviour out of line. (2021, 26 May)*

As in the pre-COVID sample, neighbours of social housing tenants expressed strong concerns over the safety of themselves, their children, and the community. This can be seen clearly in reports of the

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government's decision to move 300 people who were homeless or at risk of homelessness into what was previously student accommodation in a wealthy suburb during the height of the pandemic:

> *It's not just break and enters we're talking about. It's the safety of our kids. I don't want to sit back and do nothing, if down the track a little kid gets assaulted. (2020, 20 April)*

> *Another resident questioned whether the decision… was even legal. (2020, 20 April)*

These highly negative representations are in stark contrast to the understanding tone demonstrated earlier in the articles that explained and contextualised tenants' circumstances. One potential explanation for why these 300 social housing tenants were not afforded the same understanding as others is because they are seen to be undeserving of social housing support. That is, these tenants were homeless or at risk of homelessness before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that their social exclusion was a result of their individual behaviours, rather than the economic impacts of COVID-19. These are not hardworking families who have a track record of responsible citizenship; rather, they are seen as the so-called 'unruly', 'deadbeat', 'criminals' who featured so prominently in the pre-COVID-19 discourse. Critically, however, such representations in the post-COVID-19 sample were the exception rather than the norm.

DISCUSSION

The findings from our analysis of Queensland media articles highlight a significant shift in how social housing is represented in the two years leading up to and the two years following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the pre-COVID-19 sample, social housing was largely portrayed as being mismanaged by the government, with 'unruly' tenants being left to take advantage of their taxpayer-funded housing rather than being evicted to make room for more deserving tenants. Indeed, the unruly tenants were not only problematised, but they were also used to draw criticisms of the government for management of public resources. In the post-COVID-19 sample, on the other hand, social housing is seen as both necessary and deficient in its ability to meet the needs of the increasing numbers of families in housing stress. This shift in the overarching portrayal of social housing was accompanied by a radical shift in perceptions of who is in need of social housing and why.

In the pre-COVID-19 sample, the media portrayed people in need of social housing overwhelmingly negatively, foregrounding their individual moral failures as the reason for their social exclusion. In this way, social housing tenants were largely characterised as undeserving of social housing. This reflects the moral underclass discourse that has driven social housing policies that target behavioural management rather than redistributive measures. In the post-COVID-19 sample, however, the social exclusion experienced by people in need of social housing is largely positioned as being the result of the societal upheavals driven by COVID-19, a factor far beyond individuals' control. The post-COVID-19 media articles thus generally positioned those in need of social housing as being hardworking and upstanding citizens who are not to blame for their circumstances. This suggests a shift away from the moral underclass discourse (whereby social exclusion is seen to be a consequence of individual moral and behavioural failings) and towards a social integrationist discourse (whereby social exclusion is linked to labour market participation).

We identify several possible explanations for this shift in media portrayals of social housing. First is the far-reaching nature of the economic impacts of COVID-19. In the pre-COVID-19 context, being unable to access housing through the private market was largely a problem experienced by those who were unemployed or on a low income. In the wake of COVID-19, however, the problem became much more wide-spread, with a large number of working families facing difficulties. It is possible that this made it easier for the broader public to identify and sympathise with others who are excluded from the private housing market, and to recognise that they too may one day find themselves in a similar position. Second, in contrast to purported criminals and drug users, working families are considered to be valued members of society. Where in pre-COVID-19 contexts it may have been easy to write off the problem of affordable housing as a problem of the underclass, post-COVID-19 contexts have firmly positioned it as a problem impacting the broader responsible public. This may have helped to underpin the sudden shift from viewing social housing as a misuse of taxpayer funds, to viewing it as a vital policy response requiring urgent government investment.

This shift in representations is arguably positive in that it speaks to a greater public understanding of and support for social housing. However, it is important to note that even in the post-COVID-19 sample, we did not identify a redistributionist discourse, whereby social housing was supported regardless of the perceived (im)morality and (ir)responsibility of the tenants. Indeed, the deservingness (or lack thereof) of social housing tenants remained a core theme throughout the pre- and post-COVID-19 samples. Even in the post-COVID-19 sample where the social integrationist discourse dominated, the moral underclass

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discourse had not been entirely erased. Rather, those whose social exclusion was seen to be a result of their own moral deficiencies were presented as a smaller—and, indeed, less important—proportion of people in need of social housing. In this sense, the post-COVID-19 articles were advocating increased support for those deemed deserving of social housing, while simultaneously reinforcing the negative stereotypes of those who were already experiencing social exclusion prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The changes identified in this research link well with changes that have been observed during the years of the pandemic. Governments across the world, including the Australian conservative government, have strongly intervened in society, including by providing income support (Brewer & Gardiner, 2020; Davidson et al., 2021) and revising housing policy by placing moratoria on evictions (Pawson et al., 2022). In response to societal changes that impacted the masses rather than just a few, governments have introduced policy levers in Australia—such as doubling unemployment supplements and providing cash to industry to keep their staff employed—that would have been unimaginable pre-COVID-19. In Australia, for example, in the year prior to COVID-19 the Prime Minister rejected calls to increase the unemployment supplement on the basis that the opposition had previously proposed an increase, yet "couldn't come up with a way to fund [it]" (Hansard, 2019, p. 1176). COVID-19 has meant many things for society, and the role of the government in more actively protecting citizens from risk is preeminent. The changed representations of social housing identified in this article can be seen as part of this changing role of the state and changing expectation of citizens.

CONCLUSION

Our findings highlight the importance for social housing scholars—both in Australia and internationally—to seriously consider the significance of media representations of social housing and its implications for those experiencing social exclusion. Scholars must be acutely aware both of the representations of and identities imposed on social housing tenants by the media, as well as how these change in response to shifting social contexts. These are not merely esoteric or fringe concerns, but rather go to the heart of how we think about housing justice. As our findings in the Australian context demonstrate, we cannot decouple public support—nor, indeed, political support—for social housing from media representations of social housing. Given that many housing scholars are interested in governments not only supporting but, indeed, demonstrably increasing the quality and supply of social housing for all citizens, housing scholars must be cognisant that media representations both reflect and inform public understandings and perceptions of social housing. This, in turn, directly influences the extent to which governments are willing

to make policy and funding decisions to invest in social housing in ways that respond appropriately to people's needs, regardless of whether those needs are deemed to stem from individual or systemic issues.

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