



Unpacking 'housing crisis'



Housing insecurity has become such a routine topic of political discourse and everyday life in Australia that we often take for granted what it means to declare a 'housing crisis.'

Indeed, in the lead up to the 2025 federal election, both major parties framed the 'housing crisis' as a key policy priority. Over the past decade in Victoria, we have seen a jumble of initiatives introduced with the intent of 'fixing' the housing crisis. However, they have so far been categorically incapable of achieving this goal.

But what exactly are we talking about when we talk about a 'housing crisis'?

In general terms, we can think of the term 'housing crisis' as referring to a prolonged state of housing instability marked by unaffordability, insecurity, and inadequate living conditions. These conditions are driven by the remaking of housing as an asset under capitalism, worsened by policies that prioritise markets over welfare. Experiences of housing crisis are unevenly distributed, and, depending on who you are, your experience of housing crisis may be considered more or less significant by political decision-makers.

This is primarily because the existence of crisis is not a bug in our housing system, it is a feature.

In Australia, any discussion of a housing crisis should recognise the role of colonisation in transforming First Nations land into alienable property. This original dispossession is not an incidental part of Australia's housing history; it is foundational to our system of property law. The Australian property – and therefore, housing – system was formed through colonial processes of valuing, transacting and (re)developing stolen land. It is the physical and conceptual ground from which housing must be understood. This points to the intrinsic injustice of property in Australia, an injustice that is often hidden amidst the immediate effects of widespread and acute housing stress. We need to consider these injustices as related rather than separate – a both/and situation.

The accumulation of landed property forms the basis of Australian housing policy. Cemented in Menzies' ideal of the quarter-acre block, this rationale shaped policy choices and created a housing system geared towards homeownership. Despite a brief postwar flurry of public housing construction, Australian economic policy has trended over the last 40 years towards promoting asset-based welfare. The promotion of housing as a stable and safe asset has intensified its treatment as an intergenerational investment.

Australia's limited and shrinking social safety net has deepened inequalities in the housing system, where homeownership is increasingly dependent on access to intergenerational wealth. This has led to fragmented and often contradictory narratives about what the housing crisis is and how it should be addressed.

In recent years, we have seen a patchwork of initiatives in Victoria that are supposedly aimed at fixing the housing crisis. However, these efforts often lead to the dismantling of current social protections, meagre as they are. This has occurred most notably in the case of Victoria's divestment from and managed decline of public housing. While community housing has expanded both in the state and nationally, this has occurred at the direct cost of public housing, signaling a turn toward corporate landlordism. With rents continuing to rise in the private market, a net loss of rent-regulated public housing stock, and the entry of financial capital into the social housing space, marginalised communities and individuals are increasingly excluded and displaced within our housing system.

Australia's response to housing crisis remains wedded to technocratic and market-led approaches. Policy attempts to reconcile urban sprawl, sustainability, and housing stress are bound to fail when the crisis is framed as simply one of supply or inefficiency in planning regulations. Further, the breadth of experiences of housing stress is vast, ranging from homelessness to the anxiety of uncertain future ownership.

Despite the drivers of the housing crisis being rooted in our system of property and successive economic and social welfare policy decisions, political discourse routinely targets planning laws, housing activism, and First Nations land justice claims as standing in the way of progress.

If the housing crisis is a systemic issue, then so are the incentives upholding what produces it. Policy responses are inadequate not because of poor design, but because of the interests they serve. A reliance on market logic and silver bullet fixes distracts from the political and economic architecture that propel the crisis. And yet, alternative visions persist. From First Nations movements to tenant unions and public housing advocacy campaigns, there are grounded, collective responses that challenge the terms of dispossession and affirm housing as a right.

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