Dire consequences: Waiting for social housing in three Australian states

Introduction

In many advanced economies a substantial proportion of the population is finding it difficult to find well-paid and secure employment (OECD, 2019). This is occurring in a context where the financialisation of housing has meant that housing is increasingly viewed as an investment vehicle rather than shelter (Aalbers, 2016; Madden and Marcuse, 2016). A consequence is that an increasing segment of low-income and even middle class households are unable to access home ownership (Arundel & Doling, 2017; Bentley *et al*., 2019; Duncan & Gershenson, 2016). These households are thus dependent on the private rental sector (PRS) for their accommodation or social housing (Arundel & Ronald, 2021; Kemp, 2015). In many countries affordable housing in the PRS has declined and a substantial percentage of low-income private tenants suffer intense housing insecurity and stress (Byrne, 2019; Dewilde, 2018; Desmond, 2016; Productivity Commission, 2019).

Unfortunately, increasingly social housing is not an option. Social housing waiting lists are extensive and growing[1], however the cuts in spending on social housing in many advanced economies means that access is rarely automatic (Watt, 2017). Applicants for social housing must prove their eligibility by illustrating that they are sufficiently disadvantaged to qualify for social housing. Only then are they placed on the waiting list[2] where offers of housing are based on priority need and stock type availability. Once placed, the wait for a social housing dwelling can be interminable and often there is no way of knowing when or if the wait will end (Koppelman, 2018; Swanton, 2011).

Drawing on 75 interviews with people on the social housing waiting list (waitees) in three Australian states – New South Wales (NSW), Queensland and Tasmania, this article examines the circumstances of waitees whilst waiting. We also look at the impacts of waiting. Despite hundreds of thousands of people having to endure life on the social housing waiting register in Australia and elsewhere (Angel, 2021), there has been minimal research on what happens to waitees whilst they are waiting. Desmond and Gershenson (2016) and Bentley *et al* (2019) highlight the double precarity – insecure employment and housing – that a substantial proportion of low-income households are experiencing in the contemporary period. What we argue is that in fact waitees endure *triple* precarity. Not only are waitees

unemployed or intermittently employed and suffer from housing stress and insecurity, but they also have to endure endless waiting. This adds another challenging dimension to their already difficult lives. We argue that besides insecure housing and employment, waiting for social housing contributes fundamentally to their poor living conditions, quality of life, difficulty seeking employment and health. Waiting for social housing has emotional and material costs.

The article first profiles social housing in Australia amidst an increasing housing crisis. It then maps the literature on waiting and its impacts and outlines the concept of triple precarity. Next, the methodology is outlined. There are four findings sections. First the living circumstances and quality of life of waitees are discussed. We then examine the impacts of waiting on employment followed by its impacts on health. Finally, we profile how waitees described waiting for social housing. Although these are distinct sections there is much overlap; material circumstances certainly affect health as does the lack of employment.

Social housing in Australia amidst an increasing housing crisis

In Australia, the proportion of households housed in social housing has declined from 6% in the mid-1990s to around 4.2% of all households in 2021 (AIHW, 2022a). Over the same period, the increase in house prices has continually outpaced the increase in earnings. Pawson *et al* (2020) estimate that in the three decades prior to 2020, house prices trebled whilst real earnings increased by 50%. The weighted average increase in house prices across the eight capital cities in the year to December 2021 was 21.7% (ABS, 2022a), however in the same period wages increased by only 3.3% (ABS, 2022b). Not surprisingly an increasing proportion of households are no longer able to access home ownership (Ong Viforj, 2022) and are stuck in the expensive and insecure PRS (Stone *et al*., 2013).

The decline in social housing and home ownership has been accompanied by the steady growth of the PRS; in 1994, 18% of Australian households were private renters, in 2021, 27% were. The PRS has become increasingly unaffordable for the approximately 1 million low-income private renter households. In 2019, it was estimated that two-thirds of low-income private renter households were in rental stress, i.e. they were having to use more than 30% of their household income for rent (Productivity Commission, 2019). Nationwide rents have increased considerably since the Productivity Commission report. For example, in the year ending March 2023, the median asking rent for apartments in Australia's capital cities

increased by 22.2%, from $450 to $550 a week or just under 70% of the minimum wage of $812.60 for a 38 hour week (Razaghi & Heagney-Bayliss, 2023).

Almost all waitees would be mainly or solely reliant on a government benefit (the unemployment benefit, the Disability Support Pension, Carers Allowance, the government Age Pension, etc) for their income. The latest national snapshot of the PRS conducted by the NGO, Anglicare, found that of the 45,895 residential properties advertised for rent across Australia on the 17 March 2023, only 0.4% of properties were affordable for a single person on the government Age Pension. For a person on the Disability Support Pension only 0.1% were affordable and for a single person reliant on the government's unemployment benefit (known as JobSeeker) no properties were affordable[3]. A property was judged affordable if less than 30% of household income was required to pay the rent.

Besides having to contend with significant rental stress, private renters also have to endure constant insecurity (Hulse *et al*., 2018). Regulation of the sector is light and once the written agreement ends, leases are rarely longer than 12 months, the landlord can ask the tenant to vacate for a range of reasons. In some Australian states 'no grounds' evictions are legal – landlords do not have to provide the tenant with any reason to vacate.

In this housing context, not surprisingly, accessing social housing is viewed by many low-income households as a solution to their precarity (Flanagan et al., 2020). Rents in social housing are limited to 25% of household income and the tenure of responsible tenants is virtually guaranteed. However, the limited supply of social housing means that year to year the waiting list hardly moves and many people who manage to access it face waiting for an extended period, or even in perpetuity (Flanagan et al., 2020; Pawson & Lilley, 2022). Many people who are eligible for social housing do not bother to apply (Pawson, 2022). Nationally, in June 2021, there were 175,600 households on the waiting list for social housing (AIHW, 2022b). A key factor determining how long a waitee will wait for social housing is whether they are on the priority or general waiting list. In June 2023, in NSW, the most populous state in Australia, there were 55,880 people on the waiting list of whom 48,307 were on the general list and 7,573 were on the priority list (NSW Government, 2023a). The possibility of waitees on the general waiting accessing social housing is negligible. A NSW government website indicates that for most parts of NSW, waitees on the general waiting list would have to wait for at least ten years (NSW Government, 2023b).

Clearly waitees are necessarily among the most precarious individuals and households in Australia as in order to access the waiting list applicants must provide evidence of low income and high vulnerability. Each of Australia's six states and two territories has its unique admission criteria (see Pawson & Lilley, 2022). For example, in NSW the income of a single person has to be below $690 a week, which is marginally above the poverty line which in December 2022 was estimated to be $602 a week for a single person including housing (Melbourne Institute, 2023). In order to have any chance of accessing the priority list an applicant has to be in 'greatest need'. Greatest need is defined as being 'homeless or their life or safety was at risk in their accommodation or their health condition was aggravated by their housing; or their housing was inappropriate to their needs; or they had very high rental costs' (AIHW, 2021). In 2020-21, 81% of the 12,300 public housing dwelling allocated were allocated to those in greatest need; six in ten were homeless. In the community housing sector, 86%, about 11,800 dwellings, were allocated to those in greatest need of which two thirds were homeless (AIHW, 2022c).

Waiting, triple precarity and its impacts

Chronic waiting (Carswell *et al*., 2019; Pardy, 2009) is characterised by the prolonged time between 'the original desire for something and its failed attainment long term' (Pardy, 2009, pp. 142, 143). There is no knowing when the object desired will be attained. Chronic waiting is now a common feature of contemporary societies, more especially for more marginalised groupings (Fee, 2021; Koppelman, 2018). This situation of endless waiting has been a major focus of studies of refugees and migrants in immigration detention (Bayart, 2007; Griffiths, 2014; Philipson Isaac, 2022; Turnbull, 2015) or people waiting for employment (Honwana, 2014; Singerman, 2007). Another area where the impacts of waiting has been a focus is the lot of people waiting for transplants (Burns *et al*., 2017; Gagliardi *et al*., 2021). Although very different situations there are common features - powerlessness, unpredictability and a lack of control are key features of this long-term waiting (Fee, 2021). Also, as the length of time waiting expands, anxiety and depression increase (Gagliardi *et al*., 2021; Rota *et al*., 2022).

The situation of refugees has been described as one of 'permanent temporariness' (Hart et al., 2018; Steigman & Misselwitz, 2020). Besides the endless waiting for the right to stay in the country to which they have fled, their intense precarity extends to employment and housing.

Employment is usually impossible to attain and their housing is often rudimentary. Hart et al. (2018, 377) conclude, 'While refugees may reside for years in conditions of permanent temporariness and their lives become routinized, their displacement continues to constitute a situation of chronic crisis'.

Auyero (2012) in his analysis of poor people waiting for state assistances in Argentina, links the endless waiting that precarious populations invariably endure to domination: .

> Domination works … through yielding to the power of others; and it is experienced as a waiting time: waiting hopefully and then frustratedly for others to make decisions, and in effect surrendering to the authority of others' (Auyero, 2012, p. 4).

Waitees experience this this unique form of domination on a daily basis. They are totally dependent on the power of others and have no control over how long they will wait; potentially it could be forever.

Similarly, Bourdieu (2000, p. 228) argues that 'Making people wait ... delaying without destroying hope' is a central feature of domination. When a person loses their employment or is forced to alter their routine due to some catastrophic event, everyday life can become exceptionally difficult as it is no longer predictable. Bourdieu views the waiting around that follows this dislocation as an enormous 'burden'.

In the case of social housing, the most intense dislocation is probably felt by people who escape domestic violence. Overnight their daily routines are shattered and their lives are on hold until they can find safe and affordable accommodation. About 30% of the waitees we interviewed had escaped domestic violence. Another major dislocation was due to disability, or caring for someone with disability. Almost 50 % of our interviewees were in this position. Two thirds of the waitees interviewed had not been able to access the PRS at the time of the interview and were staying in emergency or supported accommodation, shelters, with family, their cars or were sleeping rough. Not surprisingly all of these waitees viewed accessing social housing as potentially life changing. For those who had managed to access the PRS (about 34 % of our interviewees), their rent usually accounted for a large proportion of their income. This impacted on their ability to provide basic care and nutrition for themselves and their families. In addition, the constant possibility of a rent increase or being asked to vacate were the fundamental reasons for these waitees desiring social housing.

Endless waiting can be extremely debilitating psychologically. In their analysis of young refugees in Sweden and their wait for legal documents, Rota *et al* (2022, 1036) draw on Welander and de Vries's (2016) concept of 'politics of exhaustion' to describe the endless waiting and its impacts on young refugees: '…the endless waiting . . . [led] to feelings of disappointment, psychological exhaustion and even suicidal thoughts'. A study of Iranian refugees in Vienna waiting for resettlement to the United States, revealed the precarity that waiting necessarily evokes (Fee, 2021). The refugees Fee interviewed highlighted how their lives had 'stalled' and how the 'unknowing fuels stress, which becomes an all-consuming state of being …' (Fee, 2021, p. 2666). Having 'nothing to do' was a source of enormous stress.

The features and impacts of waiting outlined also capture the situation of people waiting for social housing. Most waitees have to endure 'chronic waiting'. They have no control as to when or even if they will ever access social housing. How long the wait will be is unpredictable and whilst waiting they are powerless to influence the bureaucracy responsible for their fate. In sum, they are subject to chronic uncertainty.

In advanced economies there is probably no other benefit for which low-income citizens wait longer than subsidised housing. The attenuation of the welfare state has certainly added to the length of time waitees have to wait (Forrest & Murie, 2011; Goetz, 2013). A Canadian study on the experiences of 18 households waiting for social housing concludes, 'Themes of uncertainty, lack of control and lack of choice were pervasive throughout the interviews …' (Swanton, 2011, p. 35). In some contexts the lack of control and endless delays has the potential to lead to what Koppelman (2018) has called 'temporal contestation'. Drawing on an ethnographic study of waitees in Santiago he argues that waiteees are not necessarily passive and compliant. Rather, a segment engage in 'open contestation' and resistance by forming housing committees (composed of waitees) to confront and pressurise government to speed up the provision of social housing. In other contexts, in response to endless waiting, waitees have resorted to land invasions (Levenson, 2017; Oldfield & Greyling, 2015). However, in most contexts waitees simply have to wait and direct energy and resources to immediate survival needs.

A question that emerges is how does this 'temporal domination' (Reid, 2013) shape the lives of waitees. In her analysis of victims of the Katrina hurricane waiting for assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Reid highlights how survivors who did

not fit into the mainstream notion of the family were made to wait for assistance while their circumstances were investigated. What she calls 'temporal domination' had serious psychological and material impacts. She argues that the temporal domination that some victims experienced was 'a punishment for not conforming to middle class norms … [and] is a central aspect of the larger sociotemporal marginalization of the poor …' (Reid, 2013, p. 743). Certainly the waitees we interviewed were being implicitly punished for failing to succeed in the conventional private housing market.

Triple precarity

Double precarity is characterised by precarious work and precarious housing (Bentley *et al.*, 2019; Desmond & Gershenson, 2016). People in precarious employment would usually reside in precarious housing and be using a substantial proportion of their income to cover their housing costs. They would also often be struggling to retain their accommodation and employment. Desmond and Gersheson (2016) show that low-income workers in precarious housing are more likely to experience job loss. They conclude that 'Each renter may experience a forced move differently, but all of these paths have the potential to lead to decreased job performance and, in some cases, job loss' (Desmond and Gersheson , 2016, 50).

Precarity has been defined as 'uncertainty, unpredictability and insecurity' (Parla, 2019, p. 104). We contend that being on the waiting list for social housing in the current context of neoliberalism and the weakening of the welfare state adds a further layer of precarity. Nothing is certain or predictable while waiting for social housing. Also, once an applicant manages to access the waiting list it can impede their employment prospects; being employed and increasing one's income as a result can hamper a waitees' chances of being offered social housing or may even result in them being removed from the waiting list. In addition, in order to be prioritised it pays to continue to be marginally housed. Perversely, if a household temporarily improves their housing situation whilst waiting, they could be removed from the housing register. The impacts of triple precarity are discussed below.

The chronic waiting is intimately linked to the nature of the contemporary welfare state which sustains and intensifies precarity and in the process deepens uncertainty and waiting (Wacquant, 2009). The substantial reduction in spending on social housing and the persistent sell-off of existing stock has made accessing social housing extremely difficult and lengthened waiting times dramatically for many households. It has occurred in a context

where for low-income households accessing home ownership is extremely difficult if not impossible and a household's rent in the PRS often accounts for much of their income (Bates et al., 2020). The inevitable result is a desperate desire for social housing by precarious individuals and households.

Methodology

So as to unpack the impacts of waiting for social housing the research team conducted 75 semi-structured interviews with people on the waiting list in three Australian states, NSW, Queensland and Tasmania. Recruitment varied slightly in each state, as did the impacts of COVID-19 restrictions and shutdowns, which meant that some interviews were conducted face-to-face and others by phone or online. The phone and on-line interviews appeared to be as effective as the face-to-face interviews. Waitees were invited to participate through an arms-length approach via government housing departments, community housing providers, and non-government organisations by email, invitation flyers and advertisements in relevant offices and social media. Interviewees were based in the capital cities (Sydney, Brisbane and Hobart) and in regional areas[4].

We conducted two rounds of interviews approximately a year apart with a 10-15 minute catch up phone call between interviews. The research team focused on delivering continuity of contact with participants, individually building the research relationships needed to engage meaningfully with the same participants' experiences over time. Interviewees thus had the same interviewer over time. Of the 75 first round interviewees (79 people, there were four couples), 28 were on the general waiting list and 47 were on the priority list. Just under two thirds of the interviewees were women. Approximately half of the interviewees were living with disability or caring for someone with disability. Almost 30% had had to leave a domestic violence situation. All of the interviewees were contacted for a second interview and 42 waitees responded - 16 on the general waiting list and 26 on the priority list.

The first round of interviews focused on people's living circumstances, what prompted them to apply for social housing, what the application process was like, their background, living circumstances, the impacts of waiting on their quality of life, finances, family, social ties, employment and their health and where appropriate their children's health. We also asked how they would describe waiting. In the second round of interviews we were interested in whether there had been any change in their circumstances and, if so, the impacts thereof. This

article focuses primarily on the data from the first round of interviews due to these interviews having as their primary focus, the impacts of waiting for social housing. At the time of the first interviews almost all of the interviewees had already been waiting for a considerable period. The second round of interviews tended to be more schematic with respect to the issue of waiting. They focused more on waitees' engagement with the state housing departments in the year since the first interview and, where pertinent, the impacts of accessing social housing.

Interviews were transcribed and organised using the qualitative software NVivo. Thematic and iterative analysis was guided by the interview schedule. The transcripts were coded by a single researcher, however the coding frame was reviewed at regular intervals by the lead researcher.

Findings

We first examine the living circumstances and quality of life of waitees whilst waiting. Next we discuss the impacts of waiting for social housing on the capacity to find and retain employment. This is followed by an analysis of the impacts of waiting on health. The findings section concludes with a discussion of how waitees describe waiting and its impacts.

Living circumstances and quality of life

The waitees lived in a range of circumstances, however a common theme was precarity. Insecure or no employment and intense housing insecurity were dominant features of waitees' lives. Their living circumstances were often dire and impacted on their wellbeing. The waiting for social housing accentuated the despair many felt.

The most common accommodation whilst waiting was private rental; a third of the 75 first round of interviews were with people who were private tenants. Twelve interviewees were forced to reside with family despite the dwelling being seriously overcrowded and / or the situation being extremely fraught. Seven waitees were in shelters and 14 were in other emergency accommodation (motels, boarding houses, transitional housing). Four waitees had had to live in their cars at some point whilst waiting. One waitee was living in a tent under the house of a family friend and five were sleeping rough or couch surfing. About 40% of the interviewees had slept rough or couch surfed at some stage.

Natasha (all the names used are pseudonyms), a single parent in her fifties on the Disability Support Pension, was on the general waiting list. Like most waitees in the PRS and on the general waiting list, she was extremely pessimistic about ever accessing social housing. She had managed to find a house to rent in Sydney for her two children still living at home and her mother, but the $700 a week rent accounted for around 70% of her household income. She was only able to manage by pooling her Disability Support Pension, her daughter's youth allowance and her son's apprenticeship wage. Besides her rent accounting for most of her income, the family had to endure intense insecurity as the landlord had mentioned that he wanted to demolish the house in January 2023. She was constantly worried about what would happen if they had to move:

> So, you'd rather starve than miss your rent because come next year January I need that ledger to be perfect. I need that ledger to be exactly showing $700 a week non-stop, not late. [There's] not anything that's more important … because it just means that [if not perfect] I would be unlikely to be approved for anything.

Waitees in the PRS constantly had to make choices. If they had extraordinary expenses everyday life could be extremely difficult. Irene was living in regional Queensland and was in her late fifties when interviewed. She had escaped a domestic violence situation and was reliant on the Disability Support Pension:

> And the disability pension, you can't get a market-going rental with that amount of money at all. It's very hard. And sometimes on the disability pension, I had to pay, the other day when I went for my needles in my back, $200 … So once you pay the rent … I need the injections in my back, so I won't get groceries this week. I'll just see what's in the cupboard and you do have to make those choices all the time.

Several of the interviewees in the PRS, besides living in poor circumstances, were forced to share. Angela, 59 years-old, was sharing with two others in regional Queensland. The house was prone to flooding forcing her house-mate living downstairs to move upstairs:

> Queensland is subtropical. When the rains comes, depending where you are, the ground may soak … It literally forced her [Angela's housemate] to move upstairs because it wet her carpet and her furniture and it hasn't dried out. It's not liveable.

Their limited ability to choose can result in waitees finding themselves in challenging private rental situations. Pat, early her thirties, was scared to go out of the rental property she had shared with her partner in outer Sydney:

> We were lucky to find one [a private rental] but unfortunately it wasn't a nice, good, safe place to live in. It actually really affected my mental health really bad. I had actually really severe anxiety that I couldn't even leave the house to even go to the shops and do some grocery shopping.

Jamal lives in Sydney with his elderly parents and his young son. He dramatically captured the potential difficulties waitees had when forced to live with family due to not being able to access a private rental:

> We are living in a crowded house. I've been waiting on the waiting list now as priority for six months. I've been sleeping on a couch for six months … And I have been like a yo-yo with the Housing … Calling them, calling them, showing them how desperate I am … And where I'm staying now is very terrible. I can't stay with my parents because they're very old and fragile, and my son is autistic, and it's just getting to them … Look, I'm depressed every day now … Could you imagine waking up every day and not smiling or being very depressed every day? You don't know where it's going to end.

The 22 interviewees who had escaped domestic violence were invariably living in highly precarious situations. Phoebe and her 18-year-old daughter had been living in a room in a refuge in Sydney for eight months after escaping domestic violence. Prior to moving into the refuge she had been forced to endure temporary emergency accommodation which often involved moving every day. Perversely, her not being able to afford private rental had allowed her to access a refuge and the priority list and had enhanced the possibility of her eventually obtaining social housing:

> I couldn't afford any of the rentals like in Sydney anyway, so I guess that worked in my favour in a sense that you know I proved to have a bit more of a need for public housing so yeah, and then that's how we got into the refuge because we were homeless, yeah.

Probably the most dire consequence of extreme housing precarity is where this contributes to or triggers the removal of children into alternative care. Liz in Sydney had escaped domestic

violence but had not been able to access social housing. Subsequently her three children were removed by a state government agency:

> I've been on the housing waiting list for about seven years. I'm currently facing homelessness again in about seven weeks. At the moment I'm in transitional housing. My last period of homelessness was just before Christmas … I have three children. Now, because of all the instability, DOCS [the government department responsible for child protection] have removed them from my care … So in the last three months I've had my children removed from my care because I'm waiting for a house, a safe house.

A few interviewees had not been able to access a private rental or emergency accommodation. After losing her job Jenny, in her mid-sixties, had been living in her car in regional NSW with her two dogs for over two years:

> Yes, I had a short brief time when I drew out the rest of my super[5] and I rented this small house, but that ran out and then Jobseeker [the unemployment benefit] doesn't pay enough to pay private rent, yeah.

The living circumstances of waitees reflected their intense precarity. All were waiting - living with the hope that accessing social housing would give them the foundation to resolve their grim circumstances.

Employment whilst waiting

The triple precarity of waitees was evident when they contemplated employment. Waitees feared that if they earned too much they would lose their priority status or even be taken off the waiting list. For some waitees their housing insecurity and the impacts of endless waiting made envisioning or seeking employment extremely challenging. Clara, a single mother in regional NSW, was working casually but was fearful of seeking a full-time position. She was explicit that her main focus was obtaining social housing and full-time employment could impact on her chances:

> Yeah, so I'm only working casually … but I still qualify for housing with my income. … So if you earn too much you don't qualify for [social] housing which is sad because you know I was waiting for years before this and was struggling way back when and couldn't be housed. But yeah, I mean if I was to get full-time work soon I'd

> be straight off the housing list … The one thing I need more than anything is to be housed, yeah. It really does feel like that, yeah. I need a roof over my son and my self's head so that's our stability where I can then do everything else.

Many of the waitees in private rental were having to live in small regional towns where rents were lower, but where employment opportunities were limited. Angela captured the nexus between waiting for social housing, having an affordable rent and having access to employment opportunities:

> But it is very difficult. There's very little work up here and you're always weighing that up. If you move somewhere where there is the possibility of work you can't afford the rent and if you go where like it's cheaper there's no work.

Their intense housing insecurity and the stress associated with waiting made the notion of seeking employment impossible for many. Liz felt she would not be able to hold on to a position even if she happened to find employment:

> Yeah, mentally I don't feel like I'm able to maintain work if I got work. I feel like DCJ [the NSW government department responsible for social housing and child protection] have ruined my prospects of my career where I was like working with disadvantaged, disabled … children.

Jenny reflected on how housing insecurity and waiting for something to possibly happen, made looking for work exceptionally difficult to contemplate:

> Well it means that it [waiting] takes over your thought processes. It is hard to think about anything else because everything revolves around having the roof over your head and you know that all this torture will stop if I had a roof over my head where I could shut the door, have a kitchen and you know my own bathroom and then I could get back to work. But I cannot. There's so many things where it is a vicious cycle. You need a residence to get a job, and I need a job to get a residence to get accommodation so I cannot get either without the other one and each one is dependent on the other.

When Kathy, a single parent in her mid-twenties in Hobart, was asked if she had been able to consider working, she highlighted her unstable housing situation as a key obstacle:

> No, because I'm always moving. There's no stableness there for me to have a job and that's why they actually took me off ParentsNext[6] because I don't have a stable place yet … ParentsNext helps you get on the right track because my youngest has just turned six, like getting to work and having a job plan. And she [the counsellor] said, "We're going to take you off [the program] for now because you're still not in stable accommodation and accommodation is the first thing".

Sleeping rough or couch surfing made seeking employment particularly difficult. Sam, early forties, was sleeping rough in Sydney at the time of the interview. He described the difficulty of contemplating employment:

> You know how hard it is to go for a job interview when you're living on the streets, or how hard it is to even try and work when you're living on the streets? For me to go to work I'd have to find somewhere to put my bag, I'd have to be able to have a shower, I'd have to be able to put some food in my stomach, I'd have to have a high-vis [worker's vest]. All that sort of stuff … You know all these little things that people take for granted.

Ralph, also in Sydney, had been couch-surfing for several years. He was asked if accessing social housing would change his life:

> Well it would make it easier for me to get a proper job again because I don't feel like I would be very successful at keeping a job for too long living like this, yeah. So it would probably inspire me to go back to work cos I don't mind working and also I'd be able to get interested in things again …

The health impacts of waiting for social housing

The interviews indicated that the triple precarity waitees faced played a key role in shaping their health status. Housing and employment precarity certainly generated severe anxiety and stress which was compounded by the endless waiting. Many waitees spoke about how the waiting and the uncertainty was pivotal in heightening their anxiety and depression. When interviewed John's mental health was clearly poor. He was temporarily housed in emergency accommodation in Tasmania having left an abusive relationship in his late forties and was acutely concerned about what would happen once his time in temporary accommodation ended. He described the impact of the lack of certainty around his accommodation:

> A lot of stress, a lot of mood problems, a lot of negative thinking. Suicidal thoughts even. Like, maybe you're better off not putting yourself through what's likely to happen. It's a lot of stress to bear on top of a relationship breakdown.

Alex had spent three years on the streets in Sydney. She captured the hopelessness of waiting as a unique form of psychological and physiological precarity:

> It grates on your nerves … It's always in the background … And I remember when I used to walk around looking for private rentals I'd cry. You do a lot of crying when you don't have a house cos everything just seems hopeless … Everything, everything is just too big and that's why I think a lot of people take drugs cos it's a lot easier to take drugs and to be knocked out for that day than to try and pretend that you have anything else to do. Cos without a home you don't get a job, so they're really linked together.

Kim had been struggling in the PRS and had had to move a number of times before being forced to move back to her father's home in regional NSW. She was adamant that the instability, her constant struggles around accommodation and the endless waiting for social housing, had had major impacts on her health and her son's:

> Yes a lot. So during that time like obviously my mental health was declining … My doctor said that I had depression and I kind of spiralled with my weight. I put on so much weight. Like I went from … maybe 90 kilos and then I went up to like 150 kilos.

Like Kim, Caroline had been unable to access private rental and had also been forced to move back to family in a small town in regional NSW. When interviewed Caroline and her eight-year old son, were living with her aunt. She viewed having to move in with her aunt as a failure on her part and primary contributor to her feeling depressed:

> It's just really daunting cos I feel as if I'm not getting anywhere. I'm not you know, … I don't see myself anytime soon leaving my auntie's place and being in my own place. Yeah, so it gives me a bit of, I don't know if you could say depression, but it gives me a bit of a down feeling. You really want it [social housing] but it's just not going to happen anytime soon. Yeah, especially when you're putting in all the effort

> and you’re constantly calling and you're doing all the private rentals and you feel like you're doing it all for nothing.

Hazel had managed to find a private rental for herself and her son in Sydney. Like many other waitees when asked what impact waiting had had on her, she mentioned stress and an inability to relax:

> Stress, it’s the stress … I can't really remember the time when I've gone to a movie or sat and read books or like sort of yeah just relaxed … You're in this bit of survival mode … Unfortunately that’s how it is, yeah.

Probably the worst affected waitees health-wise are those that have had to resort to living in their car whilst waiting. Pat and her partner had lived in their car for a few weeks whilst trying to find a private rental. She felt that the experience had had an extremely negative impact on her physical and mental health:

> Like by a couple of months in I was just skin and bones … I was eating the packet of noodles … that have to go in the hot water. I was eating them dry and any tins that we could open with the little circle thing we would eat them as well. So it was not healthy physically. Mentally, it was just, it’s something I do not wish on anybody. … I mean it was terrifying cos people kept looking in the window and the police kept coming and harassing us … Like we would just be in a park in the middle of nowhere. It would be pitch black and yeah, just terrifying.

The context of waiting had particular impacts for those waitees with disability as they had less scope to cope with the limited amenity of temporary accommodation options.. Greg lives alone in outer Sydney and his mobility is very limited:

> At the moment I have a wheelchair, but the nature of the accommodation has been assessed … and it’s not suitable for me to live in. Now the reason for that is because this is a very old house … There is a bathroom, but to do the shower you have to stand inside the tub and … so I can't do that shower any more … and also the access for the wheelchair is not suitable because the doors are not wide enough for the wheelchair to go through.

Two of Ali's children have complex physical and mental disabilities. His wife also has a disability. They have been on the social housing waiting list in Sydney since 2002. The private rental he was in until 2019 was totally unsuitable. He eventually managed to find more suitable accommodation, but was asked to vacate by the landlord. They had to move to an apartment owned by his oldest daughter. The health impacts on Ali whilst waiting have been profound:

> Nobody would actually give us a [private rental] property because we're on a pension. … Yeah, so my daughter knew that I was under a lot of stress and I was going through hell. [I was] in hospital every couple of weeks with anxiety affects and I couldn't go through the process of finding another property cos I was really bad, really bad health-wise … Every couple of weeks I was in hospital, I was getting panic attacks, high blood pressure. It was all anxiety attacks.

Waitees found the relentless insecurity and having to constantly move extremely unsettling and draining. Kim in regional NSW, powerfully described the potential benefits stability would give her and her young son:

> Make more connections in the community, being able to like set up a structure and routine, … but I think the main thing is even like going to work. Maybe I could have done that because I could have got all the supports in one stable place. It takes time but at least I'd be stable enough to implement those instead of moving from here to there and then have to restart all over again … … and then like obviously my son would get the support that he needs and I'd be able to work part-time you know so I feel like yeah if I had a stable place I would have probably gained employment and better care provided for my child.

She felt her son was deeply affected by the uncertainty and constant movement.

> It's quite challenging for him to make relationships with fellow peers … but I feel like with the uncertainty of, "Oh do we have to move again mum", and he just kind of puts those barriers in place for himself and … like he loves to play rugby league and you know moving from club to club and obviously that type of sport is about playing in a team and if you have to move from here, there, everywhere it is affecting him too.

Waitees' descriptions of waiting

The triple precarity waitees experience was perhaps captured most explicitly by the responses to the question we asked all waitees: 'What words would you use to describe your wait for social housing?' The responses revealed how extended periods of waiting exact an emotional toll. A common sentiment was that the act of waiting for social housing left one feeling powerless and anxious. Many waitees felt unable to finish their studies, find work or access the physical and mental health supports they needed. Similar to what Fee (2022) established in her study of Iranian refugees waiting to be resettled in the US, many waitees spoke about their lives being stalled. Hailey felt stuck and not able to plan ahead: 'Yeah, …, just uncertainty and not knowing when you might be able to start making some plans …' . Tania who had escaped domestic violence, powerfully captured the perception of her life being on hold whilst waiting:

> It [waiting] sucks. … Well, they just give you no answers. Nothing at all. It's like they put you on a computer and who cares? And when I ring them up all I get is, "Stop harassing us. When one [social housing dwelling] comes up we'll contact you." … Yeah, it's stopped our whole life. Running from him [her ex violent partner] was hard enough, but asking them [the state government housing department] for help is ten times worse than leaving him, and that says a lot. To ask for help is hard … They don't care … Yeah, as I said, it's like jail and they're the screws, whatever they're called. They're the ones that run the jail.

The lack of certainty and predictability as to when they would obtain housing was a huge burden. When asked what words she would use to describe her waiting for social housing, Nadia who was in her seventies and had been on the waiting list for several years, responded,

> Yes, I've got a few words— frustration, disappointment, nerve-racking, just being beside myself sometimes: "Why do I have to do this? Why do I have to keep moving and packing and finding places?" It's soul-destroying, really.

What waitees found intensely difficult was the 'temporal domination' as described by Reid (2013). Not having any idea as to when or even if they would be allocated a dwelling evoked enormous frustration. Natasha captured this sentiment:

> I would describe it [waiting] as anxiety provoking and frustrating because they [the state government housing department] don't tell you things … I would say it is a one-

> sided venture. Except for the text messages to remain on the register [waiting list], you do not hear from them.

Jenny found the experience of waiting deeply disturbing. She emphasised the impact of having no control of the process and akin to previous studies (see Fee, 2022; Swanton, 2011) found the perceived lack of any control deeply troubling:

> You feel shame every day and other than that you … have to deal with a loss of control over your information, over your position on the wait-list. You have no control over anything. And you're left, I think it leaves you with an unwillingness to ever ask for help again.

The impact of waiting on one's sense of self was also noted by Janet. Janet was close to fifty, has a disability and when interviewed had been on the priority list in NSW for nearly two years:

> Yeah, you feel deficient. You feel forgotten, you feel really forgotten. Yeah, and if you ring up and it's about a number and even once they've got your file open I can't remember being addressed by my name very much.

Sam felt that the impact on his sense of self of waiting and not knowing whether he would ever access housing, was worse than sleeping rough:

> Yeah, … it [sleeping rough] is uncomfortable, but I think … like it's doable, but the hardest thing is the fact that you're actually in that situation and the services have allowed it to happen when you're asking for help. I [would] understand if I wasn't asking for help ... but when you are reaching out and you're not getting anywhere that really takes a toll because yeah it's there's nothing else you can say apart from "You don't matter" … "You're just not important". "You're not one of the people who deserve our help" … It's just that you're not worthy.

Kaitlin, in Tasmania, had been waiting for seven years with her four children and had no other options:

> Very disheartening, very emotional, emotionally draining just year after year thinking, okay, because this is the year, we're going to get a Housing house, and we don't.

The exhaustion of refugees as described by Welander and De Vries (2016) and Rota et al (2022) was also a feature of the state of those waiting for social housing. Several mentioned how exhausting waiting was. Liz described the wait for social housing as 'Tiring, lengthy, yeah really, I'm just really tired of it'. Jenny commented,

> Yes, I think it just, it robs you of your pride and your dignity, your peace of mind … and it leaves you psychologically exhausted … Being on that waiting list thinking that is today the day that they call … and then the call doesn't come. It is like that loss of you know, self-esteem and loss of hope.

Pat had a similar response and analysis:

> Just exhausting. It's tiring, it's draining. You've got to go through hundreds of loops to even get anywhere with Housing and even then you call them up to find out, "Hey what's going on with my application? I just wanted to follow up". They can't tell you anything.

Discussion and conclusion

We argue that waitees face triple precarity. Not only is their housing and employment situation precarious, but the 'chronic waiting' adds another unique layer of precarity. The chronic waiting is a central feature of waitees' experience and in many cases has profound impacts.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from our analysis. First, the housing affordability crisis combined with the dramatic shortage of social housing means that most waitees are on the waiting list for many years and those who find themselves on the general waiting list are unlikely to ever access social housing. Even if an applicant manages to access the priority list, they could find themselves waiting for an extended period. This is especially so for waitees with disability or who have a family member with disability.

Secondly, whilst waiting for social housing waitees invariably find themselves having to endure challenging living conditions. Those waitees who manage to access the PRS usually face severe rental stress and insecurity. The condition and the location of their accommodation may be poor adding to the wretchedness of their situation. Clearly, the longer the wait for social housing, the greater the chance that they will lose their footing in the PRS and find themselves homeless. For many, this was a constant anxiety.

The waitees who had managed to access the PRS were relatively fortunate. Many of the waitees we interviewed were not able to access private renting and were forced to return to living with family (if possible), emergency accommodation of various kinds, couch surfing, living in their cars or sleeping rough. All of these situations involved difficult living circumstances with a range of consequences. The most confronting consequence was the removal of waitees' children due to a lack of stable accommodation.

Perversely, the greater the precarity of a waitees' living circumstances the greater their chance of accessing the priority list and ultimately social housing in a relatively short period of time. Waitees who had managed to access the PRS were much more likely to be placed on the general waiting list and thus face the possibility of never accessing social housing.

Thirdly, another perverse implication of accessing the waiting list, more especially the priority list, was a reluctance to seek employment or even think about the possibility. The primary focus of waitees was securing social housing. Those waitees who were in a position to find employment, were acutely aware that if they entered the labour force and increased their income as a result, their position on the waiting list could be negatively impacted. Retaining employment precarity was essential.

Fourth, the health of waitees whilst waiting is perhaps the most apparent implication stemming from the triple precarity waitees experience. While recognising that poor physical and mental health are due to a range of factors, the interviews suggested that 'chronic waiting' contributed to and accentuated the poor health status of many of the waitees. Like the studies that have focused on the impacts that endless waiting has on refugees (Fee, 2022; Griffiths, 2014; Rota *et al*., 2022), or people waiting for transplants (Gagliardi *et al*., 2021), waitees noted their exhaustion linked to endless waiting (see Welander & de Vries, 2016; Rota *et al*., 2021). The uncertainty and the not knowing wore waitees down and many were adamant that it contributed fundamentally to their poor mental health.

When waitees were asked, 'How would you describe your wait for social housing', the triple precarity that characterised their lives was explicit. Waitees spoke about feeling powerless and having no control. They spoke about their lives being stalled (Fee, 2022). Many had suffered a catastrophic event and their routines had been shattered. As Bourdieu (2000) argues a lack of certainty and predictability is a huge burden. Many waitees spoke about the

impact of the endless wait on their sense of self. They felt totally disempowered. The lack of any control over their future was debilitating.

It is apparent that the triple precarity waitees face is a function of the profound shortage of social housing. Access to secure and affordable housing would certainly help lessen or even resolve precarity. Secure and affordable accommodation would lay the foundation for resolving a key feature of precarity - the lack of employment for those waitees who are in a position to enter the labour market[7]. It is apparent that what is required is a massive increase in government support for social housing. The crisis necessitates that there be a set target with respect to federal and state government expenditure and the number of dwellings to be built annually so that all waitees have a realistic chance of ultimately accessing social housing and rebuilding their lives.

Although this article has focused on Australia, there is no doubt that the issues raised are pertinent for many other contexts. Globally, the rise of neoliberalism (Brown, 2015) and the shrinking of the welfare state (Hamnett, 2014) has precipitated a constant decline in social housing as a proportion of the housing stock (Watt, 2017). As long as this decline endures endless waiting for social housing and its various dire impacts will continue.

Notes

[1] In Australia social housing is made up of public and community housing. The former is owned and controlled by state governments whereas community housing is owned and managed by community housing providers which are non-profit organisations.

[2] Waiting list implies that there is some order in the allocation process and waitees merely have to wait their turn. This is clearly not accurate. There is no clear queue and waitees often have no idea if or when they will access a social housing dwelling. However, we decided to use the more familiar term ‘waiting list’ rather than the less familiar ‘housing register’ which is now the term favoured by state governments in Australia.

[3] In March 2023 the full government Age Pension for a single person was $532 a week and for couples it was $802. The Disability Support Pension benefit was the same as the Age Pension. The unemployment benefit was much lower - $346 a week. In addition, depending on the rent paid, households reliant mainly on government benefits are entitled to rent assistance. The maximum rent assistance in March 2023 was $78.60 a week for a single person and $74 for couples.

[4] There were no differences in the way waitees experienced waiting in the respective jurisdictions. Also, whether they were in a regional or metropolitan area did not have an impact. The pervasive scarcity of housing in all three states meant that the waiting experience was similar.

[5] Superannuation was introduced in 1992. An employer has to contribute a proportion of an employee's salary into a 'super fund'. The fund is supposed to provide for a person's retirement.

[6] ParentsNext is a government support service for parents whose children are under 6 and who receive the government's parenting payment. It helps parents 'plan and prepare for future study or employment'.

[7] For a large proportion of waitees employment is not possible due to them having a disability that makes employment impossible or being retired and on the government Age Pension.

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