

**Housing vulnerability reconsidered:  
Applications and implications for housing research, policy and practice**

Against the backdrop of the dismantling of welfare-oriented housing regimes and a deepening sense of housing crises, social housing policies in neoliberal contexts have become residualized. Among other things, this means that social housing policy has become core-need targeted, focusing on the most vulnerable populations such as people experiencing homelessness. Not coincidentally, the notion of housing vulnerability has taken shape within housing policy agenda, such as in Canada, the U.S., the U.K., and the E.U. (Council of Europe 2008; USHUD 2014; Government of U.K. 2018; Government of Canada 2019). The groups classified as vulnerable vary somewhat by cultural and political context but share some characteristics in terms of, for example, age (seniors), household characteristics (single-parent households), income group (low-income households), ancestry or ethnic origin (e.g. Roma, Indigenous peoples), and health status (e.g. people with mental health issues and disabilities).

At the same time, housing advocates and theorists have emphasized the need to recognize housing as a basic need and human right. This is in keeping with the call from scholars for a critical normative approach to housing (e.g. Kimhur, 2020; Lawson, 2020; Taylor, 2020). As one standout example, the 2019 National Housing Strategy Act in Canada establishes housing as a human right (Government of Canada 2019). In so doing, Canada moves closer to EU member states, including Belgium, Finland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, France and the Netherlands, which have all recognized the right to adequate housing within their constitutions or core legislative frameworks for housing (Rolnik 2013).

Because housing impacts every aspect of human life, theories and policies related to housing vulnerability encompass a wide range of vulnerable characteristics and situations. The concept of vulnerability, in general, refers to “the potential degree of exposure to risks of negative outcomes resulting from external risk factors, conditioned by an entity’s ability to respond to the risks” (Zhu et al. 2021, p. 12). However, when it comes to housing, there is still a lack of cohesive and shared understanding about the characteristics and types of vulnerable households and housing situations, let alone the drivers and consequences of different forms of intersecting vulnerability.

Among the conceptual groundings available in social science research to deepen the understanding of housing vulnerability, we can recognize at least three (Zhu et al., 2021). The **resource-based approach** considers a lack of bare minimum housing as the primary housing vulnerability and treats access to material housing as the end goal for housing interventions (Taylor, 2020). This approach has the benefit of being applicable to policy framing. However, it has been criticized as paternalistic, culturally blind, and it masks highly heterogeneous housing experiences and needs among different households and groups. A different, **risk-based approach**, which primarily appears in disaster, environmental and public health studies, conceives of housing vulnerability as the inability of households or communities, as constrained by housing conditions, to manage explicit risk factors like hazards, food insecurity, or health risk factors and to build resilience (Porter et al., 2018). The third, **capabilities approach**, draws on Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum’s work and incorporates housing vulnerability as a component of social vulnerability writ large, which indicates a deficit in the freedoms and opportunities to pursue desired well-being outcomes (Kimhur, 2020). These different understandings of housing vulnerability point to a host of understandings, measures and approaches that we hope to dissect and debate in this special issue.

## Themes

Housing vulnerability plays a role in translating the assertion of housing as a human right into an operational principle for housing governance and provision. A narrow conceptualization of vulnerability risks a residualist application of the right to housing as "a function of eligibility according to needs/risks" (Levy-Vroelant 2010, p.449), as opposed to a universal entitlement. Hence, richer and more rigorous theorization of housing vulnerability is needed. **To that end, this special issue (SI) of *Housing, Theory and Society* invites researchers to revisit the concept of housing vulnerability and its applications in research, policy and practice. We seek to advance conceptual understandings of housing vulnerability – grounded in theory, contextualized in different lived realities, and pointing to different remedies.** Papers may also include a focus on the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified or mitigated pre-existing conditions of vulnerability across different types of households and housing situations, or introduced new vulnerabilities. Papers included in the SI will shine a light on questions of housing vulnerability as interpreted by different theories, experienced by residents, housing operators and communities, and exacerbated by external forces such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

We expect empirical studies to be grounded in substantial conceptual reasoning and contribute to theoretical development. Theoretical explorations of the concept of housing vulnerability are equally welcome. We strongly encourage authors to critically engage with existing understandings and/or theories of housing vulnerability, such as the three lines of thought discussed above, or others. Our scope is international and multi-disciplinary. We will include contributions from across the social and behavioural sciences, health sciences, planning and policy fields to the following areas:

- Across interdisciplinary approaches to research, agreement on key features in the concept of "housing vulnerability" is elusive. Who or what are the vulnerable entities? How do vulnerabilities manifest in housing? Where does housing vulnerability arise, and how is it alleviated?
- How does this retheorizing of housing vulnerability help us to gauge and address the housing needs of vulnerable populations and inscribe these in policy? How do existing housing policy thresholds and measures, such as Canada's National Occupancy Standard and the international 30% affordability threshold, have unintended and perverse consequences for households' vulnerability, and what remedies might be available?
- What relationships exist among different predictors and outcomes of housing vulnerability, such as housing tenure, type, and quality; neighbourhood change; loneliness, social isolation, poor mental and physical health, and social well-being?
- What effects on housing vulnerability and on well-being outcomes can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic? What directions for reducing housing vulnerability and building resilience has the COVID-19 pandemic opened up?
- How can we take a decolonized approach to address housing vulnerability in Indigenous land and territory and in Indigenous communities? How do we address the displacement of Indigenous peoples from their land, kin, culture, language, identities and all their relations?
- What are the particular needs of groups experiencing vulnerability, including racialized persons, people with disabilities, people who are sex and gender diverse, people fleeing domestic abuse, people living with addiction, and others? How do systems of racism and discrimination affect housing vulnerability?
- How can sociogenic environments and processes designed to encourage neighbourliness affect vulnerable housing environments and vulnerable households?

## Important dates

- **May 31, 2022:** Submit 250-word abstract to [chcsfu@sfu.ca](mailto:chcsfu@sfu.ca). Authors of abstracts accepted to proceed to full article submission will be notified by the guest editor team by June 15<sup>th</sup>.
- **September 30, 2022:** Submit draft full paper to [chcsfu@sfu.ca](mailto:chcsfu@sfu.ca) for initial review and comment by special issue editorial team. Adhering to journal requirements, articles should be up to 8,000 words in length, including abstract and references.
- **October 30, 2022:** Authors will receive feedback and advice to submit all suitable papers to the Journal's submission site for external review. Note that the SI guest editors provide no guarantee of acceptance of articles following external peer review.
- **Nov 30, 2022:** Deadline for submission of all invited papers to journal for external peer review as part of the SI.
- **Summer 2023:** Anticipated publication of special issue (online first).

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