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IMMIGRANTS' HOUSING CAREER, REALITY AND PERCEPTIONS

Haoxuan Sa

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Immigrants' housing career, reality and perceptions

Haoxuan Sa
Postdoctoral researcher
University of Helsinki



- Housing is crucial to all people, and it is one of the most important social rights.
- Immigrants as vulnerable groups have showed their different residential situations with natives. It is important to learn more about their housing realities and perceptions in order to help them to get integrated into host societies.
- Immigrants housing issues, such as residential segregation are very complex, and it requires analysing and making policy implementation in the local context instead of taking the results of international debates for granted.

Housing is a pivotal matter for individuals and the societies alike. Housing is a basic component of the built environment and social development, and housing equality is one of the foundations of social sustainability. As a shelter, housing is essential for biological reproduction, and for the development of societal structure and individual identity. Depriving access to housing may lead to existential crises, such as poverty and homelessness. For immigrants, housing plays a specifically crucial role in life choices and everyday practices. Innumerable studies have discussed the housing experiences of immigrants in urban contexts of varying size. Not only in metropolises like London or Hong Kong, immigrants are essential to the vitality of urban economies. Providing more affordable housing is one of the best solutions for attracting more immigrants and hence boosting economic growth.

In broad societal terms, the production and consumption of housing plays an increasingly significant role in the circulation of capital, in both advanced and less advanced capitalist economies (Aalbers, 2016). From construction and raw materials to finance and marketing, the housing industry involves various activities, provides jobs, and stimulates economic growth. The sustainability of the housing market can have profound implications for socio-economic stability. For example, the painful experiences of the financial crisis of 2007–2008 are still being acutely felt in many countries. Perhaps for this reason, the provision of housing, and especially affordable housing, has become a key political and policy priority of governments across the world. In advanced capitalist societies, especially in the Nordic countries, housing has long been a pillar of the welfare state.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated the importance of housing for social security. As mobility was restrained, teleworking became the norm, and citizens were forced to retreat to their homes and closest communities. At the same time, the boundary between the private space and workspace was further blurred. These changes in organising everyday life has also reshaped the ways in which housing is valued. In many Western European countries, there has been a rush to purchase properties, triggering a rapid rise in housing prices. Accordingly, for many vulnerable groups, it has become increasingly hard to achieve home ownership because of the ballooning prices in the owner-occupied housing market. Simultaneously, interest rates in housing loans are expected to rise dramatically in upcoming years. This poses additional risks to the financial system. With housing loans accounting for more than 40% of the total bank loans in all Nordic countries, delayed mortgage payments may cause systemic problems in national and global financial systems.

Housing is one of the most important social rights, but the impacts of the pandemic on housing have been unevenly distributed in the society. Some of the immediate effects were evident when mobility was restricted in spring 2020. Whilst some people were more privileged to stay at home with secure tenure in less densely populated and well-serviced neighbourhoods, those whose incomes drastically dropped had to endure increasingly cramped housing conditions and the threat of displacement (Rogers & Power, 2020). However, research into the longer-term impacts of the pandemic on housing-induced inequalities remains limited. In the United States and Latin America, for instance, studies have reported worrying trends of aggravating housing inequality. Less attention has been paid to the spatial consequences of COVID-19 on vulnerable population groups in the context of the Nordic countries, such as immigrants who suffered from stigmatisation during COVID-19 period. In order to avoid social problems, studies on immigrants' housing realities and perceptions are essential in Nordic context.

Immigrants' housing path differs from natives

Immigrants as vulnerable groups have showed their different residential situations with natives. Usually, they are in disadvantaged positions in housing market (Andersen, 2016), because their financial situations. Plenty of previous research on immigrants' housing experiences in America and European show that immigrants prefer to rent dwellings ethnic mixing neighbourhoods (e.g. Musterd, 2005; Fong & Chan, 2010). On one hand, newly arrival immigrants often have acquaintances or relatives living in such ethnic mixing enclaves, and these existing social networks could supply mutual helps as well as against racist discrimination to them; on the other hand, low rent in these neighbourhoods provide a survival strategy for new comers (e.g. Anderson, 2010). In the course of time, immigrants have integrated in the host society and got better economic and social position, and then they move out from these ethnic dense neighbourhoods and get closer to the housing status of natives (Gordon, 1964).

However, different with previous studies conducting in America and other European cities, in Nordic countries, previous studies show immigrants much less often to achieve homeownership than natives even though the background values, for instance, income, education, age and family status are the same (Kauppinen et al., 2010). Immigrants in Nordic countries show their preferences on renting instead of homeownership than natives which is quite different with Nordic homeownership culture. Whereas, by analysing immigrants' housing data from 1985 to 2008, Anderson (2016)'s research shows that non-Western immigrants in Denmark steadily live in social housing and immigrants dense neighbourhoods during first 10 years; After 15 years, their presence in these neighbourhoods declines. Accordingly, immigrants' housing career and housing perceptions are quite diverse in Nordic context. As Dhalmann and Vilkkama (2009) argued, immigrants housing issues, such as residential segregation are very complex, and it requires analysing and making policy implementation in the local context instead of taking the results of international debates for granted.

In Nordic context, Helsinki is a great example to explore immigrants' housing career, experiences and perceptions. Because Helsinki has a short history of immigration compared with other major European cities, and it provides an unique case for analysing how political and economic transformations internationally and domestically shaping the housing realities and perceptions of immigrants from Finnish perspective.

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Finnish housing policy has great impacts on immigrants housing choices

The main tenure of housing in Finland are owner-occupied and rented housing. The sector of rented housing is divided into private rented, social rented and 'right of occupancy' housing. According to Helsinki City (2021, p.38), rented housing are occupied 48% with private rented housing accounting for 28%, social housing accounted for 17%. Most of the social housing are owned and administered by the city of Helsinki. Helsinki city owned 63,500 dwellings, which is 17% of the whole city's housing stock. 17% of their residents are non-Finnish speaking (immigrants) (ibid.). Rented housing are the main housing choice for immigrants (Dhalmann & Vilkkama, 2009), and more than half of immigrants live in rented housing (ibid.).

Even though, Helsinki has implemented social mixing policy that requires mixing different tenure types in neighbourhoods in order to avoid residential segregation and social problems, the spatial distribution of rented social housing is uneven in Helsinki. Large shares of private rented housing and owner occupied housing are located in the southern part and central part of Helsinki, whereas, the majority of the social housing is located in suburbs (ibid.). In some neighbourhoods, even more than 40% of the dwellings are social housing (ibid.). As a result, some neighbourhoods, especially, neighbourhoods in eastern Helsinki, concentrate large number of immigrants. However, previous research taking immigrants reside in eastern Helsinki as a whole group without categorize them as well as analysing the housing careers of different groups of immigrants chronically, a research gap is significant.

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UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

TOIMITUS / EDIT

Iiris Koivulehto
Kaupunkitutkimusinstituutti Urbaria

OTA YHTEYTTÄ / CONTACT

urbaria@helsinki.fi
0294124931 / 0504716334

SEURAA / FOLLOW US

@urbariahelsinki
www.helsinki.fi/urbaria

PL 4 (Yliopistonkatu 3)
00014 Helsingin Yliopisto