Building Alliances with Marginalised Communities to Challenge London's Unjust and Distressing Housing System

Nina Carey, Sally Zlotowitz, Samantha James, Aysen Dennis, Thomas Gillespie, and Kate Hardy on behalf of The Housing & Mental Health Network

Aysen's Story

Aysen Dennis is a housing activist from the Aylesbury estate in Southwark, London. She started the Aylesbury campaign to resist the 'regeneration' of the large council estate back in 1999. A 'regeneration' which would see her displaced from the estate, or at best under the control of a housing association with inevitable rising rents. Aysen's life and the lives of her community have been immeasurably changed by the UK's unjust housing system. A system in which local and national government policies privilege the story of 'economic development' and powerful business over the views and experiences of local communities. Aysen summarises this as, 'they don't think working class people deserve to live in zone 1 of London.' The campaign has fought against

Dedication: we would like to dedicate this chapter to all the housing activists in Focus E15 and other London campaigns who devote so much of their time in the struggle for a just housing system and for which there is little recognition or paid work. Their support for those most affected by the unfair housing system simply cannot be quantified.

N. Carey
Homerton University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust/ East London NHS Foundation Trust, London, UK

S. Zlotowitz (✉)
MAC-UK & Art Against Knives, London, UK

such 'social cleansing' through many tactics including direct action, legal action and the occupation of unused buildings. In other ways, Aysen's resistance has been through her optimism and humanity: making links with neighbours, creating relationships and a sense of community, supporting and advocating for those who have no voice or are afraid of the authorities; mostly those from BAME communities.

All of this action and housing insecurity, which includes according to Aysen 19 years of lived experience of witnessing evictions, empty buildings, boarded up areas, security guards, stigma, community blaming, the withholding of maintenance repairs by the authorities, mistrust and fighting against powerful others, takes its toll on a community's psychological health. It is no surprise that individuals might feel distressed, given that we know insecurity is linked to good mental health (McGrath et al., 2015). It is also easy to see that the typical 'prescriptions' for mental health would be no replacement for solidarity, community cohesion and your own secure and personal place you can call 'home.'

Aysen, like all the housing activists we meet, is a true force of determination and deeply passionate about equality and justice. She has started working alongside the 'Housing and Mental Health Network' to mobilise mental health[1] professionals, calling on us to do our part in changing this unjust system, speaking out against social cleansing and speaking up for oppressed communities.

'The Housing and Mental Health Network'

A group of us set up a network made up of community members, academics, community and clinical psychologists, trainee clinical psychologists, teachers, students, artists and many more. We wanted to recognise the profound impact

S. James • A. Dennis
Fight for Aylesbury Campaign, London, UK

T. Gillespie
Global Development Institute, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK
e-mail: thomas.gillespie@manchester.ac.uk

Kate Hardy on behalf of The Housing & Mental Health Network
University of Leeds, Leeds, UK
e-mail: K.R.Hardy@leeds.ac.uk

[1] We note that the use of the term 'mental health' can be problematic, but the network honours the local communities who use this term to describe their experiences.

that the UK's unjust housing system has on the psychological health and well-being of our communities. These injustices are described below and are a result of neoliberal economic, financial and social policies which have led to gentrification, 'social cleansing' and huge shortages of council homes and affordable housing (Elmer & Dening, 2016; Watt & Minton, 2016). We had a shared goal of resisting these injustices to improve wellbeing at the community level and prevent the development of distress resulting from housing inequality and insecurity.

We worked together with other housing activists and groups to raise awareness and take action against London's unjust housing system through organising and speaking at events, participating in grassroots resident-led campaigns, doing *useful* (usually action) research, advocacy, creative productions and developing policy briefings and other informational materials. We campaigned about the structures, systems and policies that maintain housing insecurity, are profoundly coercive and that displace people from their communities. Our message is that good psychological health is a product of social justice, including adequate and secure housing and a connection to our community (Anderson et al., 2003; Marmot & Bell, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011).

The Unjust Housing System in London

In the context of the UK, and particularly London, neoliberalism, privatisation and financialisation of the housing system has ensured a system that is rigged towards property developers and the already rich in combination with the reduction of social housing stock and a housing crisis for the poorest (Minton, 2017; Watt & Minton, 2016). These policies have included: the selling off of council housing under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s onwards; the limitation of local authorities to build social housing; the austerity policies after the financial crash of 2007–2008 that grew inequality in London and undermined wages of the poorest and of course the buying of London property for investment and profiting purposes by the global rich and elite (for fuller overviews see Edwards, 2016 and Watt & Minton, 2016). As Beswick et al. (2016) state: '*London is now the unrivalled king of the global property league for the super-rich, with prime property values rising faster than any major city in the last decade* (Knight Frank, 2015)' (p. 321). Indeed, Edwards (2016) quotes a study suggesting that just 189,000 families own nearly two-thirds of the UK's 60 million acres and a further 40,000 families own three quarters of that (Cahill, 2001).

In addition, corporate power has also contributed to the housing crisis. The campaigning organisation, 'Debt Resistance UK,' has shown how corporate banks have loaned local authorities harmful 'LOBO' loans that result in huge interest rates and council tax being used to directly pay off these loan interests. Debt Resistance UK estimates that approximately 80% of Newham's publicly raised council tax is being used to pay loan interest; money going straight to corporate banks. As they state on their website, 'Debt is a tool to uphold the status quo, part of a system that distributes wealth from the majority and public to the super-rich' (http://debtresistance.uk/). (And on the back of the public 'bail-out' of the corporate banks.) Newham is not alone, hundreds of councils across the UK hold LOBO loans and as a result citizens are paying huge amounts in interest across the UK and Debt Resistance UK are encouraging local action to challenge these corporate debts (see http://lada.debtresistance.uk/).

Meanwhile, 'affordable' homes, otherwise known as 80% of the market rate, are deeply unaffordable to local people (Elmer & Dening, 2016; e.g. this definition includes monthly rents of £1500 and one-bedroom flats sold at £450,000). Although gentrification has been promoted in policies as a way to decrease segregation in communities, research suggests it results in inner cities being claimed by the middle classes to the detriment of the communities that are assumed to be helped by the process (Lees, 2008). When areas are 'regenerated', homes are often demolished, and existing residents forced to move out of an area (Elmer & Dening, 2016). When people are displaced, not only are they moved away from their friends, family and networks, they are often not allocated a permanent home and may end up homeless. There are many ways a person can be legally categorised as homeless, including not having accommodation available, the accommodation being uninhabitable, or a person being at risk of violence by continuing to live in their accommodation (Shelter, 2010).

As a network, we believe that a permanent home is a human right. We are becoming increasingly concerned about the number of households, including families with children, who are being placed in temporary accommodation, up by 60% since 2011 according to recent government statistics (House of Commons, 2018). Temporary accommodation can include hostels, bed and breakfast hotels, registered social landlords and local authority accommodation or private rented properties which can be arranged through the local authority. People do not get to choose which type of accommodation they are placed in, and there are huge variations in the quality of these homes (Shelter, 2010).

By the end of December 2017, 78,930 households in England were in temporary accommodation, and these households included 120,510 children. Sixty-nine per cent of these households were in London. There has also been an increase in the number of families with children who have been placed in B&B style temporary accommodation from 740 in 2010 to over 2000 in 2017 (House of Commons, 2018). This is shocking considering at a conservative estimate there are over 200,000 empty homes in England and the number is rising, many of them left purposefully empty by foreign investors in London or owners cannot afford to renovate them (Action on Empty Homes, 2019).

The Impact of Injustices in the Housing System

It may come as no surprise that distress named as stress, depression, panic attacks and insomnia has been attributed to difficulties people face going through the social housing system (Thompson et al., 2017). In fact, research from a range of cities suggests that families pay a particularly high price for housing instability. Longitudinal research has demonstrated that mental health problems are higher in mothers who have experienced housing instability in comparison to a control group of families of low socioeconomic status in stable housing (Vostanis et al., 1998). Children are also hugely impacted, and those who have experienced homelessness have often experienced traumatic events such as witnessing domestic violence, being separated from parents or being threatened with being separated from their parents (Herbers et al., 2014). This may be particularly relevant in current cases where social care agencies threaten to remove children from their families as a result of homelessness, as the agencies only have a duty to the child.

Samantha James is a teacher in a London secondary school and a member of the Housing and Mental Health Network. She writes about her experience of working with pupils facing homelessness: *As a teacher, you quickly learn behind every student is a story. The 'quiet ones' who 'get on with it' in at 7:30am to prepare before school are also carers for parents, maybe grieving the loss of loved ones or survivors of domestic violence. The loud ones, impulsive and (mostly) quick witted shouting out in class because when you're one of seven children at home; you shout to be heard, listened to. Knowing your students is the concrete used as the foundations of your practice. But what about when you know your student has an unfit home environment or is in fact, homeless?*

For children to thrive they need safety, security and consistency. Abstracts enabled by one, single entity: a home. You need look no further than Maslow's

hierarchy of needs to recognise the fundamental importance of shelter to allow students to be cognitively prepared for the process of learning. In fact, a report commissioned by Shelter, found "Homeless children are more likely to have behavioural problems such as aggression, hyperactivity and impulsivity, factors that compromise academic achievement and relationships with peers and teachers."

How Did the Network Begin?

The network was established in April 2017, launched at a meeting in East London following the findings from a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project undertaken by campaign group Focus E15 and two researchers (see Hardy & Gillespie, 2016 for the full research report).

Drawing on the experiences of people from the Focus E15 campaign group threatened with displacement from their home borough of Newham, East London to places such as Hastings, Birmingham and Manchester, the research examined the experiences of people facing homelessness and displacement. Activists from the Focus E15 campaign, some of whom were struggling with homelessness, were trained as researchers and conducted 64 structured interviews with participants who had approached Newham Council with a housing need in the previous year.

Amongst other findings, a key and striking outcome of the research was the demonstration of a dramatic detrimental impact on people's mental health. In sum, 89% of respondents report worsening mental health as a result of their housing situation (Hardy & Gillespie, 2016). The research informed Focus E15's decision to launch their 'Housing Is a Mental Health Issue' campaign and led to a realisation that stronger networks needed to be built between activists, campaigners, practitioners and academics working on the intersection of wellbeing and housing. The launch event was the first step towards developing this community in order to generate and share knowledge and campaign for housing and health justice for the most marginalised.

What Have We Been Doing So Far?

Since we set up, we have been hosting monthly meetings where we plan events and invite speakers in to learn more about particular issues. Working jointly with other activists and activist groups is a very important part of our work, such as Focus E15 and Medact. For example, we hosted a screening of the film

Dispossession directed by Paul Sng, which sheds light on the long-term failure to maintain council estates resulting in widespread demolition and 'regeneration' projects. The film follows residents who have been pushed out of their homes as a result of this process and the many communities that have been fighting tirelessly to protect their homes. We showed the film at a community cinema in Hackney in London and was followed by a Q&A panel with Paul Sng and a number of housing activists. We promoted the event through many psychologist networks and platforms (e.g. on psychologist Facebook groups), plus our own social networks and in local community spaces, reaching people who might be concerned by the issues but unsure how to respond. Over 300 people attended, and it was an important opportunity to inform a large number of people about the difficulties faced by people living in social housing.

We have also written letters to the media to shed light on the impact of the housing system on mental health, such as an open letter to the *Evening Standard* which stated the importance of finding permanent homes for ex-residents of the Grenfell tower. This was shared and signed widely on social media by psychologists and many others, which showed us how many people have been concerned about the wellbeing of Grenfell residents.

We have also been able to join events by other activist groups to offer a mental health lens, for example when joining Focus E15 mothers' event on child homelessness to speak on their panel. This was a successful event which demonstrated the effectiveness of mental health practitioners joining people with lived experience of housing insecurity to spread awareness and encourage action. We were also joined by the *Please Hold* theatre group at the community psychology festival in 2017 in Bristol in the UK. They performed a powerful spoken word piece based on their own experiences of housing insecurity, which was a creative way to draw people in and mobilise people into action. This type of joint work must be conducted thoughtfully, ensuring activists are not used to further professionals' interests or that 'professional voices' are not viewed as 'legitimising' the lived experience voices.

Our Hoped for Aims and the Realities of Organising

In 2018, we hoped to run a campaign about the misuse and overuse of temporary accommodation. We started to focus on this and plan our campaign with the following aims:

- To raise awareness of the impact of being placed in temporary accommodation on the mental health of families.
- To work towards putting an end to any family being placed in temporary accommodation for more than six weeks.
- To support local campaigns to empower residents of temporary accommodation to resist temporary accommodation and improve the conditions of any temporary accommodation they are in.
- To mobilise mental health and social care professionals to get involved in the campaigns and work towards social change (potentially taking direct action through their job roles if required, e.g. refusing to facilitate 'parenting' sessions for families in temporary accommodation).

Despite having good numbers of people attending meetings regularly, and a wonderful person doing some overall coordinating work, we struggled to make this campaign a reality. Many of us were volunteers doing this in our spare time and at times it became difficult to keep momentum going and to effectively absorb new members of the network. Indeed, as we write in 2019, we are less active as a network although still all connected via the social media app, 'WhatsApp' which has been a key organising tool. Partly this was also a response to changes in context: the European Union referendum and the outcome to 'leave' the EU ('Brexit') took over the political agenda of the UK in 2016 and it has been difficult to get any other political issues on to the national agenda. Austerity has continued, indeed worsened over the years, and so local government has continued to struggle to meet its housing duties, with ever growing social housing waiting lists. Members of the network have also been involved in these struggles. Nonetheless, activity does continue. Two trainee clinical psychologists (including author Nina Carey) have or are completing research theses on the topic of temporary accommodation or related issues in order to drive our knowledge of the impact. Other members have supported newly forming provision for single mothers. An organisation called 'The Magpie Project' in Newham in London (https://themagpiepro-ject.org) arose around the same time to provide childcare, solidarity and support for the local mums in temporary accommodation. One of the Magpie's founders came and spoke at a community psychology event and it led to a series of connections being made. Invited by the group, psychologists volunteered to provide reflective spaces for staff and share psychological knowledge about social adversity, trauma and good practices in peer support and psychosocial accompaniment.

It is useful when these types of connections are made organically and so psychologists (and those of other backgrounds too) are invited in directly by

community groups. However, it's important to stay reflexive about being clinical psychologists (or counselling, educational psychologists etc.) in these community spaces, making sure we do not 'over-professionalise' the nature of this community support (e.g. insisting on 'evidence-based' therapies only), checking in about what the mums, volunteers and staff really want (not assuming what we might think they want or need) and that we interact as humans not professionals in these spaces. Acting as 'professionals' is so embedded in our cultural norms it can be difficult to unpick; it doesn't mean losing all boundaries but an awareness that people's experiences of institutional services can be dehumanising. From these mums' perspectives, for instance, they are fully aware that professionals (who are often white and middle class) may see them primarily through a lens of 'poor parenting', 'unhelpful' thoughts or 'poor coping'. As Sonn (2004) outlines it is part of our work as psychologists in any context to pay attention to our multiple social identities in order to *'reveal the different positions of power and privilege we occupy in different contexts and how these can work in empowering and disempowering ways'* (p. 7). See that paper for a more detailed example of this process in practice.

In 2019, the London branch of the health professional campaigning organisation, 'Medact' (https://www.medact.org), invited members in to talk on the impact of temporary accommodation on mental health, with a view to launching their own housing campaign with an emphasis on both physical and mental health impacts. With this development came the opportunity for our original campaign aims to be realised and the network's members could now support Medact's campaign, who as an established organisation, fortunately have more funding, resources and infrastructure for organising.

As our resources and capacity reduced, we started to see the network role as one of supporting the wider housing movement and this work continues. For example, by making connections between different groups, creating platforms to reach new audiences, supporting activists and conducting research. Movement-building training by the New Economy Organisers Network (NEON) in the UK (https://neweconomyorganisers.org/) emphasises the different roles groups can have in the 'ecology' of a movement. Certainly the Housing and Mental Health network has played a small role within the ecology of London's housing movement, highlighting the very real distress caused by the system (for impressive groups in the movement have a look at the Radical Housing Network, the various estate-specific housing campaigns, e.g. Cressingham Gardens, Renter's Union, Defend Council Housing, Grenfell Action Group) and our contribution though small was welcomed and appreciated.

Just Do It!

We would encourage other mental health professionals to engage with other movements and offer their contribution with humility and passion as our members did. To maximise impact and to be sustainable, this may require finding ways of bringing these conversations into workplaces, such as the NHS or local authorities. There is so much robust evidence to support the link between health, mental health and social determinants that it should be part of psychologists' roles to find local or regional structural issues that are affecting the community's health and act on them. Potentially linking up with local public health practitioners or community groups and inviting them to speak could be one way of opening the conversation to these issues whilst working in traditional mental health services. After all, these opportunities have to be proactively created otherwise the status quo just continues. Don't wait for leaders—become them!

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