

Working for better rental housing in New Zealand

By Elinor Chisholm

For the third of New Zealand households that rent, it can be difficult to find a warm, dry, secure and affordable rental home. Housing conditions are a chief concern. Many New Zealand homes are not built for its climate. Maximum winter temperatures in New Zealand range are only 7°C in some parts of the country, rising to 15°C towards the north. High humidity makes the air feel cooler than the thermometer indicates and contributes to dampness. Heating homes to an adequate temperature is expensive or impossible, as many rental homes do not have adequate insulation or effective heating systems. Daily indoor temperatures in New Zealand during the winter are on average two to four degrees lower than the minimum indoor temperature of 18°C recommended by the World Health Organization.¹ Over a third of tenants report that their homes are often or always cold.² A survey of housing found that mold is present in three-quarters of rental homes.³

Tenants have a right to housing of a “reasonable” condition under the law – and tenants’ protection associations work to support tenants to improve their housing.⁴ However, the difficulties associated with finding an affordable rental home means that many tenants do not assert their rights.⁵ Tenants are often in insecure situations due to affordability pressures and tenancy law: private tenants stay in their home an average of just 15 months.⁶ Landlords can end most leases with as little as 42 days notice.

The poor quality of New Zealand’s rental housing has important implications for health. Cold, damp and mold in homes is associated with asthma and respiratory symptoms and infections. In a survey of doctors in an emergency ward in winter, improving housing conditions would have reduced the risk of children’s admission in a third of the cases.⁷ Last year, a coroner found that the cold living conditions of a state rental home contributed to the death of a child from complications associated with an illness similar to pneumonia.⁸ In addition, and as a result of affordability pressures, many rental homes are crowded. This may contribute to New Zealand’s high rates of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and rheumatic fever, especially in the Maori and Pacific communities.⁹

Many groups, including public health advocates, Child Poverty Action Group and Wellington Renters United are calling for a “warrant of fitness” scheme which would ensure rental houses meet basic standards for heating, insulation, ventilation, safety, and hygiene.¹⁰

About 20% of New Zealand tenants pay below market rents in social housing, mainly provided by the state. Historically, state housing has provided better quality and security than the private rental sector. However, many New Zealanders are worried about current changes to how the state housing stock is managed. Recent legislation requires state tenants to leave their home if their incomes rise above a certain limit.¹¹ State tenants in some communities have been displaced through redevelopment schemes that have demolished homes in order to construct new, mixed-income communities.¹² Finally, some state housing is being sold or transferred to private organisations, and it is not clear that all of the housing will remain reserved for people of low income. The State Housing Action Network is mobilizing against this policy.¹³

Conditions in New Zealand’s rental housing sector are often poor, but a number of groups, including those representing state and private tenants, are working hard to ensure its improvement they improve.

Elinor Chisholm recently finished her PhD in public health at the University of Otago, Wellington, and writes often about housing issues. References for this piece are available at her blog-site at <http://onetwothreehome.org.nz/iut/>

See below for references

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