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ARTICLE

They must live somewhere! The geographical dimension of residualized social rented housing in urban Norway

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Abstract
The residualization of public rented housing is a prevalent phenomenon throughout Europe, and strongly present in the small and strongly means-tested social housing sector in Norway. In this article, we discuss the contested geographical dimension of residualization. Scientific studies of the geographical and locational aspects of social housing are scare in Norway and modest internationally. Based on qualitative interviews with representatives of social housing administrators in the fifteen largest urban municipalities in Norway, this paper contributes to the literature by exploring how these social housing bureaucrats perceive, reflect on, and respond to, questions related to the *spatial localization* of residual social housing. Does it matter where social housing is located? What are the consequences of the geography of social housing for tenants, their neighbours, and the wider socio-spatial development of cities? These are questions pondered in the interviews. In our qualitative analysis, we identify three broad themes. First, the theme of the internal social milieu – inclusive communities versus neighbour complaints and conflicts in the public housing projects. Second, the theme of neighbourhood effects; how concentrated poverty is influencing the local community in general and the upbringing of children in particular. Third, the theme of response from external neighbours and communities, in the form of either predominantly exclusive strategies (NIMBYism – Not in My Backyard), but also less prevalent inclusive strategies like (PHIMBYism – Public Housing In My Backyard).

Keywords Social housing · Clustering · Social mix · Neighbourhood effects · NIMBYism

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1 Introduction

The question of localization – clustering and dispersion – of social housing has received public attention all over Europe and is often linked to the parallel process of increasing residualization, the process whereby publicly subsidized rental housing transforms to a mere safety net for low-income households (Angel, 2023). The social rented sector in Norway is one of the more residualized in Europe (Sørvoll, 2019), and the perceived neighbourhood effects and localization of this form of housing has been frequently addressed in the political debate (Sørvoll et al., 2020). Despite this, scientific studies of the geographical and locational aspects of social housing are rare in Norway and surprisingly limited internationally, albeit empirical studies focusing on social housing, social mix and residential segregation certainly exist (see for instance: van Ham & Manley, 2012; Doney et al., 2013; Korsu, 2016; Verdugo & Toma, 2018; Friesenecker & Kazepov, 2021; Rosengren et al., 2024). What is particularly scantly covered in the literature is the perspective of social housing bureaucrats, namely the local government employees that are responsible for planning or executing policies that maintain, increase or reduce the geographical concentration of social housing (see Rosengren et al., 2023 for a relevant study incorporating the perspective of urban housing bureaucrats from Finland). The purpose of this paper is therefore to gain more insight by exploring how social housing bureaucrats in urban areas in Norway perceive, reflect on, and respond to, questions of residential segregation and spatial localization. In line with a weak realist ontology (King et al., 2019), one may argue that our qualitative analysis of the social housing bureaucrats' perceptions provides valuable information about the external reality of Norwegian social housing, as well as insight into the subjective world view of the interviewees. The latter is important to analyze since local government representatives make decisions that affect the spatial aspects of social housing based on their interpretation of the social world.

Based on interviews with social housing bureaucrats in the fifteen largest urban municipalities in Norway, we analyze their experiences and reflections on issues related to the *spatial localization* of public social housing. Does it matter where social housing is located? What are the consequences of the geography of social housing for tenants, their neighbours, and the wider socio-spatial development of cities? These are the questions explored in the interviews and our analysis. In the article, a particular emphasis is placed on the interviewees' reflections regarding the level of clustering and dispersion of social housing, as well as their perceptions of different tenant groups and their impact on local environments. The bureaucrats' perceptions of the consequences of geographical concentration and dispersion of social housing are analyzed in the light of residualization processes in the social housing sector, and the rich international scholarly literature on neighbourhood effects, social mix, relative deprivation, and NIMBYism (see for instance: Galster, 2013; 2019).

The Norwegian public social rented housing sector is very small constituting of only four per cent of the total housing stock, highly needs-tested, and offers tenants fixed-term tenancies, market-like rents, and targeted housing allowances. These institutional features have arguably contributed strongly to creating an increasingly disadvantaged tenant group. In Norwegian cities, social housing is allocated on a temporary basis to people deemed unable to satisfy their housing needs in the private market, including low-income families and individuals struggling with concurrent substance abuse and mental health disorders (Sørvoll, 2023). Thus, the Norwegian case is broadly similar to Flanders, Australia, New Zealand

and other national or regional contexts where social rented housing is highly targeted at disadvantaged low-income groups (Murphy, 2020; Morris et al., 2024; Winters, 2023). We have little exact quantitative evidence about the social profile of public renters in Norway, but a recent study shows that they are poorer, less likely to work full-time, and less likely to become homeowners than tenants in the private sector (Turner & Aarland, 2023). Even though a relative high proportion of immigrants are homeowners, they are still overrepresented in the private and social rented sector (Grødem & Hansen, 2015). The information we have also strongly suggests that the level of residualization in Norwegian social housing has increased in recent decades. In a recent survey answered by representatives of most large urban public housing providers, the vast majority of respondents reported that it had become harder to induce tenants to move out of social housing since they were increasingly too disadvantaged to succeed in the private market. Moreover, 75% of the respondents stated that low-income was not sufficient to access social housing, and that additional challenges, such as disabilities or concurrent mental health disorder and substance addiction, were necessary entry requirements (Osnes & Sørvoll, 2023). In 2021, 22% of newcomers to social housing were tenants with mental health disorders and/or some form of addiction, 10% were refugees, 40% needed assisted housing, and 23% were categorized as having ‘other problems’ (NSHB., 2022). This underscores the residual character of social housing in Norway in the age of deinstitutionalization, meaning that care for various groups has increasingly been transferred from institutions to private homes since the 1990s (Ellingsæter et al., 2020).

The social housing sector in urban Norway consists of a variety of different housing projects and housing types. The most common are larger apartment buildings where all flats are owned and let out by the municipality (see photo 1 and 2). Municipalities also own and sub-let apartments in co-operative housing associations or buildings with private condominiums. Additionally, most local governments offer a variation of housing types consisting of several independent housing units with personnel base providing services, and housing projects which are more institution-like with staff and 24/7 comprehensive social services. Many municipalities also offer small “robust” detached houses in remote locations for a smaller group of tenants often suffering from concurrent substance abuse and mental health disorders.

As we will return to, the social housing bureaucrats interviewed in our study use their discretionary power to distribute eligible tenants between all the forms of housing mentioned above. However, because of the limited size of the social housing stock they normally do not have a wide range of options. Recently, many Norwegian local governments reported that demand for social housing outstripped supply. Most social housing providers in urban areas have waiting lists (Osnes & Sørvoll, 2023). Severe shortages and therefore also extreme rationing is something the Norwegian social rented sector has in common with other targeted sectors, including social housing in Australian states and territories (Flanagan et al., 2019). The limited number of vacant social housing units means that the bureaucrats must house new tenants in one of a handful of different locations, at most.

In what follows, we start by reviewing selected theoretical perspectives relevant for the localization of social housing, continued by a presentation of the data and the methodological aspects of the study. Then we present our empirical analysis of the qualitative data and proceed with the discussion and conclusions.

2 Theoretical perspectives: issues of localization: the spatial dimension of social housing

2.1 Upbringing of children & neighbourhood effects

Families with children's search for and understanding of what constitutes a good and safe place for the upbringing of children, are drivers of moving patterns, segregation processes, and neighbourhood stigmatization (Ellen, 2000). Essential for both perceptions and residential mobility are expectations regarding change; do parents perceive it as likely that their neighbourhood will improve or deteriorate? In most cities' urban planning, the underlying ideal is socially mixed neighbourhoods – with a balanced mix of socio-economic and ethnic groups – where residents are exposed to and get to know 'the other'. This is assumed to promote tolerance and social equalization (Bergsten & Holmqvist, 2013; Hamnett et al., 2013). When this ideal of balance between different groups in the neighbourhood is disrupted – like it may be in areas with clustered social housing dominated by marginalized groups – they are seen as less attractive areas to live in and raise children. These understandings of adverse local surroundings affecting residents also find support in research on neighbourhood effects (Galster, 2019; Sampson, 2012; Andersson & Malmberg, 2015, 2018), including Norwegian urban areas (Brattbakk, 2014; Nordvik et al., 2020) where such negative impact of disadvantaged neighbours in social housing also are expressed by youths themselves in qualitative studies (Brattbakk & Reiersen, 2023). However, neighbourhood effects are shown to be heterogenous and depend on several conditions like the intensity, duration and types of clustering and the type of individual outcome under study (Small & Feldman, 2012; Sharkey & Faber, 2014) as wells as welfare schemes (Hermansen et al., 2020). A particular relevant finding from this research tradition is that children from families with low socio-economic status (SES) are particularly vulnerable to influences from social arenas and may be more affected by negative neighbourhood effects than children from more affluent families (Galster, 2019; Sampson, 2012). Additionally, high shares of unemployed neighbours are significantly linked to worse outcomes – like educational attainment – for children and youths (Brattbakk & Wessel, 2013; Nieuwenhuis & Hooimeijer, 2016). Furthermore, neighbourhood effects have been shown to be stronger in urban settings with higher levels of segregation and clustered deprivation (Galster, 2019) making it relevant for this study focusing on the largest Norwegian cities.

2.2 Social mix and relative deprivation

The impact of neighbourhood effects is closely related to the composition of residents in the local community. Social mix, as mentioned above, is frequently championed by politicians, planners, and bureaucrats to avoid homogenous neighbourhoods with concentration of wealth or poverty. In the research literature, however, the support for social mix as a solution to the undesirable effects of clustering is less consistent (Musterd & Andersson, 2005; Arthurson, 2012) and dependent on a varied set of parameters (Galster, 2007).

Despite the vagueness of the term and the mixed findings in research, several review articles citing casual evidence from Europe and North America, conclude that social mix has positive effects on equalization of social inequalities:

> [D]isadvantaged individuals are (1) harmed by the presence of sizable, disadvantaged groups concentrated in their neighborhood and (2) helped by the presence of more advantaged groups in their neighborhood, probably due to positive role modeling, stronger collective control over disorder, and violence and elimination of geographic stigma, not cross-class social ties. Thus, there is a sufficient evidentiary base to justify the goal of social mix on grounds of improving the absolute well-being of the disadvantaged (Galster & Friedrichs, 2015, p. 175).

The "slippery concept of social mix" (Galster, 2013) is an intrinsically vague term which seems to mean different things for different policymakers and planners. Following Galster (2013), Tunstall & Fenton, (2006), and Kleinhans (2004) the ambiguity concerns *composition, concentration, and scale.* First, the question of *composition*; on which criteria are we trying to mix people? Income, ethnicity, immigrant status, and housing tenure are among the most used criteria. Other criteria, like social and health issues are less, but increasingly more, frequently discussed related to social mix as a planning concept. In the case of the increasingly more residualized Norwegian public housing sector, households struggling with substance abuse or mental health disorders often reside in social rented housing. The ideal in Norway and most other OECD-countries for the last decades in the wake of comprehensive de-institutionalization, is to provide community care, integrate and normalize these groups in ordinary residential areas (Hall et al., 2021). In some cases, however, this may not only change the social composition of an area, but also increase the risk of violence and other deviant criminal activity (Hansen et al., 2022). Secondly, the question of *concentration*; what is seen as the adequate amount of mixing and what share of the different groups are ideal to achieve the desired outcomes? The more deviant groups we are talking about, the less shares are usually suggested as ideal. A high concentration of residents suffering from substance abuse may be adverse both for the ones in question and their neighbours. Thirdly, what *scales* are we talking about? Which geographically levels of clustering are most relevant for mixing, and do different levels involve different causal processes and outcomes? Whether we are mixing inside or between housing projects, neighbourhoods or urban districts are assumed to be of significance. Summing up a study of social mix, Arthurson (2010a, p 49) writes:

> [I]f policy makers persist in implementing such [social mix] policies, then we need a better understanding of the consequences of operationalizing social mix at different spatial scales, such as the street, block, or neighbourhood. Social mix is likely to have different consequences at different scales of operationalization and a too fine-grained social mix, especially given the current stringent targeting arrangements for social housing, may increase the potential for conflict rather than the anticipated social cohesion.

In an Australian study of regeneration Arthurson (2010b) identifies two main arguments for the creation of socially mixed neighbourhoods; "first that lowering concentrations of public housing and developing more mixed income communities offers a means to reconnect socially excluded public housing tenants to mainstream society; second that a balanced social mix is a prerequisite for the development of 'inclusive', 'sustainable' and 'cohesive' communities" (Arthurson, 2012, p 245). She concludes that there was no evidence that a

socially balanced mix was a necessary condition for building an inclusive community and questions if policymakers are over-emphasizing the need for social mix. Summing up the results from a wide range of studies concluding in different ways, it seems plausible to follow Alves (2022, p. 1174) conclusion from her Copenhagen-study calling for "more context and more sensitive analysis of social mix policies and practices".

Low levels of social inequalities in a society – both on a national and local level – contribute to more productive societies with better health outcomes and a wide range of other positive social outcomes (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Relative deprivation is a term referring to the idea that individuals measure their degree of well-being with reference to their knowledge and interpretation of the living conditions of co-existing social groups. For instance, disadvantaged households may compare themselves unfavorably with affluent neighbours. Moreover, self-reported welfare outcomes may be worse for poor households that reside in areas where the majority is quite affluent, e.g., social housing tenants in middle-class or upper-class neighbourhoods (Brattbakk, 2014). Relative deprivation may also characterize the experiences of older children and adolescents, as indicated by an Oslo-study showing that youths from low-income families felt they were poorer and more outside of the mainstream society when living in affluent neighbourhoods than in less well-of districts (Pettersen & Sletten, 2019). Although coming from a low-income family in a richer neighbourhood can have such adverse psycho-social effects (Odgers et al., 2015; Pettersen & Sletten, 2019), adolescents may still be positively affected when it comes to their socio-economic prospects later in life (Toft & Ljunggren, 2016).

2.3 No social housing in my backyard

The NIMBY-term (Not in My Backyard) describes how residents protest and counteract planned changes or new developments in their area. Even if residents acknowledge and support the need for such plans or developments for the city or region in general, they may nonetheless oppose them in their neighbourhood. Such NIMBYism interests or fears may include preserving local amenities (views, green spaces, services), protecting property values, or preserving class status (excluding lower income households and affordable housing projects) (Wassmer & Wahid, 2019). When developments involve affordable housing, especially rented, social, or assisted housing (Galster et al., 2003), a well-known NIMBY tactic is to promote a narrative of prospective tenants as anti-social, troublesome, potentially criminal (Scally & Koenig, 2012) and depict them as a threat to the well-functioning local community, its stability and reputation (McNee & Pojani, 2022). An insight stemming from several studies is that NIMBYism is stronger in affluent neighbourhoods than in deprived ones, sustaining socio-economic residential segregation by restricting affordable housing developments in high-status urban districts and increasing social housing projects in low-status areas (Galster et al., 2003; Nguyen et al., 2013; Matthews et al., 2015).

NIMBYism connected to social housing is found to be a significant phenomenon and barrier to housing and social mix in many cities, like San Francisco (Galster et al., 2003; McNee & Pojani, 2022), and residents may selectively mobilize "various aspects of the social mix discourse to strengthen their opposition" (Ruming, 2014b, p. 164). YIMBYism (Yes in My Backyard) is a movement which has emerged partly in dialectic opposition to NIMBYism by being pro-development arguing that new housing development for all income levels is positive in terms of social mix, as it provides opportunities for shelter to

more people (McNee & Pojani, 2022). While YIMBYism has been criticized for paving the way for private developers, gentrification (Wyly, 2022), rising housing prices (Brunes et al., 2020) and ethnic segregation – reducing social mix in the longer run – PHIMBYism (Public Housing in My Backyard) is a movement supportive of new housing but also promotes the resurrection of public buildings and public control over the private market to strengthen tenants' rights (McNee & Pojani, 2022; Schneider, 2018; Zoie, 2019). Even though the Californian and Norwegian contexts are very different, there have also been PHIMBY-advocates promoting local public housing in Oslo (Brattbakk et al., 2015, 2017; Øiern, 2001).

NIMBYism has mostly negative connotations in academic circles (Petrova, 2016), but may also be seen as a sign of a well-functioning local democratic system (Matthews et al., 2015). Planning decisions may systematically favor private developers (Kwok et al., 2018), harm the environment, or be made by authoritarian public authorities without public participation and thus undermining urban democracy (Ruming, 2014a). Therefore "the balance between efficiency, fairness, and inclusiveness is a delicate one, and NIMBYism may be viewed as a manifestation of collective action and popular resistance" (McNee & Pojani, 2022, p. 556). A Finnish study stresses the potential of non-moralizing use of the NIMBY concept when describing how the *common good* is frequently referenced in land-use conflicts (Eranti, 2017).

Studies of local resistance to social housing projects or tenants in the Norwegian context are rare, but a few reports mention the NIMBY-phenomenon. The main findings from international studies seems to be in line with results from a survey covering 14 Norwegian municipalities regarding detached housing adapted to tenants with concurrent substance abuse and mental health disorders (Veiveiseren.no), and an in-dept analysis of the same phenomenon in six municipalities (Wågø et al., 2020). Studies of deprived urban areas in Oslo, finds both NIMBYism and YIMBYism and inclusive and exclusive strategies towards social housing and tenants (Brattbakk et al., 2015, 2017). The phenomenon of such local resistance is closely related to the widespread stigmatization of tenants and deprived neighbourhoods in Norway (Vassenden & Lie, 2013; Brattbakk & Hansen, 2004) and other countries (Ramzanpour et al., 2023) with a strong tradition of homeownership.

3 Data and methods

The study is based on interviews with social housing bureaucrats, mostly middle managers, with responsibility for housing provision, housing allocation, or other key tasks related to social housing in the most populous urban areas. Of the 28 bureaucrats who participated in a total of sixteen individual interviews and group interviews, fourteen were employed in a unit responsible for housing allocation. We also interviewed five policy advisers and eight bureaucrats working in administrative units responsible for the planning, building, and management of social housing. One of the interviewees belonged to a unit that encompassed most functions in the social housing sector, including planning, building, and housing allocation. Most of the bureaucrats had long-standing housing policy experience. Around half of them held management positions and were either head of their unit or department. Around one out of four were policy advisors for a local government councilor and the rest were experienced case managers.

As they had expertise regarding different issues related to the spatial localization of social housing and the social mixing of tenants, the interviewees were all well placed to offer information and reflections of high relevance to our study. Not surprisingly, not all interviewees were equally familiar with all the topics that interest us in what follows. For instance, interviewees with first-hand experience from housing allocation were presumably most knowledgeable about issues related to social mixing. Moreover, bureaucrats involved in planning and building were probably primarily up to date on NIMBYism and other aspects of social housing related to spatial localization. However, differences between the vantage points and reflections of the bureaucrats interviewed are not our primary concern in this article. We are rather preoccupied with the general thematic patterns in the interviews with bureaucrats that come from similar urban settings. In our qualitative data set we have an additional ten interviews conducted in other smaller municipalities, but we have chosen to omit them from this study to preserve the relative similarity between our fifteen urban cases.

The social housing bureaucrats interviewed come from the fifteen largest urban municipalities, all with populations exceeding 60 000 inhabitants, including the three largest cities in Norway: Oslo (700 000), Bergen (290 000) and Trondheim (210 000). The interviews were all conducted in 2022, each lasting between 1 and 1,5 h. Urban ethnic and socio-economic residential segregation are prominent in most of the municipalities, but in general less so in the smallest cities and suburban municipalities, while Oslo stands out as the most segregated (Hernæs et al., 2020; NOU, 2020:16).

All the semi-structured interviews were conducted with the aid of an interview guide covering questions hitherto unanswered by previous research on Norwegian social housing (see for instance: Sørvoll, 2019), including questions relating to housing allocation, rent-setting, tenure security and the topics covered in this article. The interviews were transcribed and thematically coded focusing on the interviewees' factual statements and reflections concerning issues of localization, mixing of social housing and tenants, and resistance and complaints from internal and external neighbours in housing projects and local communities. Thematic analysis is a method used to code data in a way that captures common perceptions and sentiments across a large qualitative data set. The method may be used inductively, basing codes directly on the data content, or deductively, building on the theories and pre-existing knowledge of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In this study, our thematic analysis has been primarily deductive. While we have paid close attention to the semantic content of the interviews, we have coded and interpreted the empirical material in light of theoretical concepts, pre-existing knowledge of the Norwegian case, and the scholarly literature covered in the previous section on neigbourhood effects, social mix, relative deprivation, spatial localization of social housing, and NIMBYism.

After the initial coding, we grouped the content of the interviews relevant to this article into three themes or topics. First, the theme of the internal social milieu – inclusive communities versus neighbour complaints and conflicts in the public housing projects. Second, the theme of neighbourhood effects; how concentrated poverty and hypermobility influences the local community in general and the upbringing of children in particular. Third, the theme of response from external neighbours and communities, in the form of either predominantly exclusive strategies (NIMBYism – Not in My Backyard), but also less prevalent inclusive strategies like (PHIMBYism – Public Housing In My Backyard).

4 Results: spatial localization of social housing: dilemmas of dispersion and clustering

Most of the fifteen largest municipalities have a political declaration, a program of policy action, or at least a bureaucratic intention concerning the issue of spatial localization of social housing and groups of tenants. Dispersion of social housing based on the ideal of creating a socially mixed city is the predominant guideline for issues related to spatial localization in these urban areas. A few municipalities represent exceptions from this main tendency, as interviewees from some cities state that they either already have a spatially well-dispersed social housing sector and/or no or low residential segregation in the housing market in general. One might argue that these exceptions also emphasize social mix as an ideal, but that they do not see questions of spatial localization as a priority, as they perceive that they have no challenges in this area. Dispersion and mixing of tenants inside the social housing sector is, however, an issue also in these cities, according to the social housing bureaucrats interviewed.

4.1 Deprived communities, residential mobility, and relative deprivation

The challenge of social housing clustering is mentioned in most of the interviews. The social housing bureaucrats have a wide range of reflections on its consequences and degree of seriousness, as well as thoughts regarding actual or possible housing policy countermeasures. An interviewee from one of the larges municipalities puts it this way:

> We have a concentration of social housing inside each of our city districts, which is a challenge to well-functioning local communities. We are on the one hand striving to apply the right services to improve the local social climate and to handle and reduce conflicts, but on the other hand we may also do something to minimize these geographical concentrations of social housing. This is something our municipality is working on, but it's a slow process due to lack of funding. (Interview, large municipality).

The perception of clustered social housing as problematic is, however, not accepted by all interviewees without pause. Several of the bureaucrats have a very nuanced understanding of the challenges connected to the clustering of social housing and express different perspectives on the matter. A few problematize the implicit notion that clustering is always highly problematic by referencing the social-psychological idea of 'birds of a feather flock together', to illustrate the social networks created between like-minded residents or people that assume they have something in common. Some social housing bureaucrats thereby challenge the idea that limited social mix is detrimental for an area in economic and social-psychological terms:

> Theory and practice are not the same. In theory, geographical dispersion is very good, but if we buy a flat in […] it will cost four times more than in […]. So, with that money we could house a lot more people. Unfortunately, that's reality. Politicians are eager to talk about dispersion of our public apartments, but in reality, it is not favorable. Additionally, one may ask if they have got the tenants' best interests at heart.

> Maybe it is more troublesome to live in the most affluent central district surrounded by successful and healthy people than among their own kind." (Interview, medium sized municipality).

The economic realism of dispersed social housing in a municipality with a combination of scarce economic resources and strongly diverging real estate prices between urban districts is problematized in this quote. At the same time the desirability of settling poor and vulnerable individuals in well-off areas are questioned, clearly hinting at the concept of relative deprivation. Another bureaucrat, in one of the largest municipalities, expresses similar thoughts when using a disadvantaged neighbourhood located in an affluent district to illustrate a point. According to this interviewee, despite spatial proximity, social interaction and networks is rare between low-income families residing in the disadvantaged neighbourhood and the richer families in the surrounding communities. "Residents seem to stick with people of their own kind". Nonetheless, the interviewee emphasizes the following point:

> Children from the disadvantaged area go to the same school as children from affluent families. […] And even if I acknowledge that it may be tough to be poor in a rich area, I really do not doubt that they benefit, and acquire some extra resources, by growing up in that area. (Interview, large municipality).

This reasoning is very much in line with studies referenced in a previous section. Although coming from a low-income family in an affluent area can have adverse psycho-social effects making you feel like an outsider and less valued when growing up (Odgers et al., 2015; Pettersen & Sletten, 2019), you may still be positively affected in terms of better socio-economic prospects later in life (Toft & Ljunggren, 2016).'Hypermobility' among low-income families in social housing (Metzger et al., 2018) is another topic related to the upbringing of children addressed in the interviews. Frequent moves may not only have adverse effects for the families and children in question, but also on the collective level of local communities and their institutions. The social climate in the local community, schools, kindergartens, and leisure activities may suffer from the continuous in and out-migration of families. One of the social housing bureaucrats is worried about the social capital, social networks and stability of these children and their families as well as for those staying put:

> Especially in one urban neighbourhood, there are few children in the public rental and private housing sector completing primary education in the same local school due to high moving frequency. A delegation of parents representing the more affluent and stable families not living in rental homes problematized that the circulation of pupils in the local school had adverse effects for all and compromised the social climate in the school and leisure activities. Their children were constantly losing friends and introduced to new ones. (Interview, large municipality).

4.2 Vulnerable and violent tenants? Nuanced perspectives

> We have a very challenging tenant group to settle, which becomes especially evident when taking their neighbour's wellbeing into consideration. (Interview, medium-sized municipality).

A local community characterized by high levels of social problems, unrest, conflicts, substance abuse, severe psychiatric disorders and co-occurring addiction and mental health problems may of course have negative impacts not only on children and youths, but also adults. Such stressful environments can be adverse for most groups of residents including groups which themselves are struggling with their lives and for different reasons cause unrest and unpleasant incidents that may terrify themselves and others. Most of the social housing bureaucrats also try to adopt the perspective of the social housing tenants with troublesome or unpleasant social behaviour. The clustering of social housing, with an increased number of marginalized and challenging tenants, is seen to be undesirable for these groups themselves.

For instance, substance abusers may find it challenging and undesirable to live in neighbourhoods filled with continuous temptation from other substance users. The social housing bureaucrats, especially the ones with training from social work, often adopted a treatment perspective when talking about tenants who were motivated to take part in treatment for substance abuse but were still settled or had to stay put in such counterproductive communities with prevalent drug use. A similar perspective was also expressed regarding persons with mental health disorders, especially the ones who under certain circumstances are inclined to act out or those suffering from anxiety, withdrawal from social arenas and self-isolation, which could be triggered by living among neighbours with aggressive and noisy behaviour. The notion of protecting such vulnerable individuals from themselves and from other vulnerable tenants was frequently mentioned as an important justification for avoiding clustered social housing for these groups. The same perspective – protecting the most vulnerable and volatile persons from themselves and others – was prevalent when the bureaucrats advocated the need for social housing in the form of small robust detached homes for 'rough living' located at a physical distance from other residents. Dispersion of social housing units was then seen as appropriate. However, not all the interviewees were partial to the popular idea of locating some disadvantaged tenants far from others. One bureaucrat voiced the following concern:

> I'm not able to count the times somebody has said that we should've had 'a house in the woods'. But I'm a little uncertain if it is the local government that wants them to live somewhere in the woods, or if it is they who wish to have a place in the forest themselves. I think it is mostly the former. But we maybe, you know, lack housing where people do not live so close to others […]. (Interview, medium sized municipality).

The quote illustrates that this bureaucrat questioned the motives of municipalities that build housing for 'rough living' at a distance from major population centers. Even though expressing sympathy for the needs and preferences of individuals who lead lives that dif-

fer from the mainstream of society, even this interviewee acknowledged the need for some social housing that was somewhat isolated from neighbours, for instance with a separate entrance or staircase.

The interviews also reflect that violence is a regular occurrence in social housing estates in some large urban municipalities. Even if it may not occur every day or very frequently, some bureaucrats report that violent episodes have become more frequent in recent times. One interviewee connects violence to the increasing deinstitutionalization of care, and states that the municipality currently has to handle tenants with 'a high risk of violence'.

4.3 Social climate – conflicts and complaints

The frequency and seriousness of residents' complaints about their neighbours may be used to measure the 'social climate' in a neighbourhood (Cheshire et al., 2019), giving an indication of the level of mutual trust, social capital, and social networks. Many of the social housing bureaucrats reported that the number of complaints from neighbours – both internal social housing tenants and external ones – have increased steadily in recent times.

> In the last couple of years there has been a significant increase in complaints from neighbours. It's a growing number of cases where mental health disorders are involved, and especially where there is a mix of substance abuse and psychiatric diagnoses. It is difficult to find adequate and suitable housing for these groups and some of them tend to be quite problematic for the neighbours to handle. That's also a reason why we have been more focused on offering smaller and more isolated houses to shield both the neighbours and the person in question. There are more complaints from neighbours, the complaints are thus more aggressive, and we [social housing workers] are spending more time trying to solve conflicts. These are very familiar challenges to us." (Interview, large municipality).

Neighbour complaints may of course be directed at everything from a single loud party once a year, to regular and extreme noisy behaviour and threatening incidents.

> I: Would you say most of the complaints are real, reflecting actual and heavy trouble, or more baseless and whimsy kind of complaints?
> B: I think 95% of the cases are real complaints in the sense that the resident in question has extensive challenges and their behaviour is really troublesome for their neighbours and where we need to take action and implement measures. In our public housing system, I think unfounded or insignificant complaints would be revealed quite quickly due to the knowledge of our janitors and housing supervisors which are visiting regularly and have a good overview of the situation." (Interview, large municipality).

Other studies also indicate that tolerance for house disturbance and troubling living environments are higher among tenants in public housing than private renters and homeowners, and that the threshold for making complaints is quite high. The reasons may be that it is hard to find out how to complain and to whom (depending partly on the municipality), or a higher

tolerance of noise and in some cases fear of revenge and reprisals if you complain or are seen to 'snitch' (Brattbakk et al., 2015; Elvegård & Michelsen, 2015).

The level of neighbour complaints and unrest in a housing project may also be one of the important indicators when the social housing assigners make decisions on where to settle new tenants.

> …they [social workers] drop by if there are neighbour complaints and such problems. … so together we have a constant understanding of the social climate in the apartment buildings due to our cooperation across agencies. It's of course for better and for worse. If they [housing managers] consider a particular address to be totally crazy and they really don't want to settle him there, whereas the housing assigners needs to get him a place to stay quite quick, contradictory interests come to the surface and are made visible. The housing manager wants a smooth community with less neighbour complaints, whereas the housing assigners are under pressure to get people settled. We have different interests. We have different roles, but together we can… we must…. solve it. They [the residents] must live somewhere!" (Interview, large municipality).

Following this quotation there is often a pressure to settle newcomers quite fast as their present housing situation is critical or they live in temporary accommodation that is very expensive for the municipality. When there is a limited number of vacant apartments and the few vacant ones are not considered to be suitable for the person or family in question, contradictory interests arise which may be conflicting for different units in the social housing agency. Several of the social housing bureaucrats reports that in such situations they sometimes make settlements that is less adequate both for the settled themselves and their neighbours, and that these dynamics partly explains why unsatisfactory neighbourhood conditions are sustained despite professional knowledge and will to do otherwise. The social housing bureaucrats refers to limited room for action due to structural factors like lack of suitable housing and economic resources. Because of the limited size of the social housing stock, it is hard to avoid that groups with radically different lifestyles – such as families with children and individuals struggling with mental health disorders and addictions – coexists in housing estates. One interviewee stressed that the lack of social housing means that very different people are 'stuck' together. Another bureaucrat comments on the challenge of creating and maintaining safe neighbourhoods in a world of limited resources:

> We regularly get reports from internal neighbours feeling unsafe in the social housing project due to the unpredictable or aggressive behaviour of other tenants. There are occasionally some unpleasant and threatening events that are scary for neighbours and that we take very seriously, and which also reach the headlines in the newspapers. A few years back, a man had gone around with an axe and destroyed some front doors. We are aware that these things happen, and that tenants may experience terrifying incidents that they should not have been exposed to. Then we try to find solutions to improve the situation and follow up persons and families which have witnessed intimidating behavior so that all, and especially children and youth will feel safe at home and in the housing estate. Follow-up services, forced relocation, and other measures are tools we may use. This is also linked to the overall […] challenges of trying to avoid mixing families with children and persons with severe substance abuse and/

> or mental illness and providing the right housing facilities to handle, settle and provide services to those with the greatest needs who needs us the most. (Interview, large municipality).

Regarding the 'right housing facilities' mentioned in the end of the quotation above: in several of the largest cities in Norway the social housing stock is either old pre-WWII inner-city apartment buildings or blocks from the early post-WWII period which partly need renovation and are generally not considered to be appropriate for the increasingly more marginalized group of residents in the public housing sector (Elvegård & Michelsen, 2015; Brattbakk et al., 2015). This is also pointed out by another bureaucrat from a large municipality stating: "Our housing stock is obsolete and poorly adapted to today's needs." Another relevant aspect of these housing estates is the strong geographic concentration giving strong patterns of micro-segregation where vulnerable and low-income neighbours reside side by side with more affluent residents in private condominiums.

> Our most urgent challenge is to offer a good housing situation for a person with a comprehensive service need and with an expected behaviour that will not work in most of our housing projects. On the one hand, we need to consider the neighbours and surroundings and on the other it is the physical building, which is not sufficiently robust to endure the lifestyle and behaviour of this person. (Interviewee, large municipality)

Closely related is the central argument made by most of the social housing bureaucrats about the link between a more deprived tenant group and settlement challenges. An interviewee from one of the largest municipalities put it this way: "Those living in social housing are increasingly more disadvantaged" and a main reason for this "is the downscaling of institutional capacity in the social- and health sector, everyone is supposed to live in an ordinary flat". According to the interviewees, deinstitutionalization is an important explanation for the residualization of the public social housing sector in Norway.

4.4 NIMBYism: "They must live somewhere, just not Here"

In this section, we explore how the interviewees reports and experiences the feedback and reactions of external neighbours, living close to existing and planned social housing projects, or to individual housing units owned by the public housing authorities inside co-operatives and condominiums. This topic will be analyzed within the frame of the outlined *exclusive strategies* like NIMBYism (Not in My Backyard) or *inclusive strategies* like YIMBYism (Yes, In My Backyard) and PHIMBY (Public Housing In My Backyard).

A representative from one of the largest cities in Norway argue that complaints from neighbours have increased in recent years:

> Increasingly, we get critique and yelling from neighbours when we plan new social housing projects, either they are small or larger units. In one planned housing project with six units for persons suffering from substance abuse or psychiatric illness the neighbouring residents delivered more than 500 inputs and proposals to the zoning plan. … We spend a lot of resources on long lasting and unpredictable planning processes. The uncertainty has become stronger over time: will it lead to a completed

> project, or will it be changed or cancelled along the way? In most cases we find the different perspectives voiced in the political process fruitful and useful, and I would say we very much respect the process of shedding light on different aspects of the matter in the political process, including the democratic involvement of neighbours. But lately we find that populism, symbolic politics, and polarization of the political process increases and stand in the way of sensible solutions. Especially when we are planning and building new social housing projects in urban districts where there is hardly any existing social housing, residents start resisting by forming campaigns, Facebook groups, contacting politicians and media, and make a lot of noise. Then these things spread. Local communities are copying each other. People in other districts learn that by protesting they may change or stop planned developments they see as undesirable in their community (Interview, large municipality).

The increased emergence of local resistance (NIMBYism) towards planned social housing projects, and the exclusive strategies used to counteract it, is striking in this narrative. At the same time, the interviewee is nuanced in line with Scally (2013) and Scally and Tighe (2015), and values and respects the voice of neighbours and the democratic aspects of NIMBYism. The same bureaucrat also recognized that input from neighbours in some cases made them adjust the original plan to the betterment of projects. The observation of stronger resistance in affluent urban districts without or with just a few social housing estates is interesting and in line with findings in several studies (Galster et al., 2003; Nguyen et al., 2013; Matthews et al., 2015).

According to several social housing employees, the complaints from external neighbours (outside the social housing sector) have also become more aggressive towards the presence of social housing flats or plans to buy such apartments inside co-operatives or condominiums over the last couple of years. One of them, from one of the largest cities, puts it this way:

> The housing co-operatives are hiring lawyers more frequently when they want to remove troublesome residents in a public housing apartment. In the most extreme cases, the co-operatives or condominiums gathered and tried to prevent the municipality from buying flats [.], because they fear what kind of people will come into the neighbourhood. This is typical “Not in My Backyard” behaviour; residents trying to avoid what they think will represent something negative for their neighbourhood. I think this reflects what kind of people are living in public housing, not to say, the rumors and popular perceptions of who they are. (Interview, large municipality).

According to the social housing bureaucrats, some residents have a more inclusive approach to social housing tenants and social housing projects in their neighbourhood. It may also seem that in many cases these inclusive external neighbours represent “the silent majority” of local residents; they just ‘do not shout so loudly’:

> Luckily there are also often some neighbours which are positive and defend the social housing tenants – either in existing or planned projects. In public meetings where we inform about future plans some of them stand up and say “We have to endure this. Let us be reasonable, it’s six new residents coming to our area, we are 7000 already living

here, the neighbourhood will not be destroyed by these six tenants even if they may have a lot of challenges. (Interview, large municipality)

In this quote, the tendency of PHIMBYism is clear. Some of the social housing bureaucrats stress that they put a lot of effort into dialogue with neighbours and developing information strategies towards communities where they plan to localize social housing. Such strategies for how to take care of communities, tenants and neighbours are reported in studies of small robust houses for tenants with concurrent substance abuse and mental health disorders (Wågø et al., 2020).

5 Discussion and conclusion

The significance of the spatial distribution of housing and tenants was acknowledged in our interviews with social housing bureaucrats in the fifteen largest municipalities in Norway. The bureaucrats' reflections regarding *where* to settle various groups of tenants, the *level of clustering* of social housing and vulnerable tenants, and *how and where to settle* tenants with anti-social behaviour and tenants with concurrent substance abuse and mental health disorders all show that issues of *geography* and *place* are important for social housing bureaucrats.

The social housing bureaucrats interviewed express nuances and highlight dilemmas concerning the relative merit of geographical dispersion and clustering of social housing. However, most of the bureaucrats expressed concern about issues relating to clustering and dispersion of social housing and social housing tenants. The dominant understanding was to view geographically concentrated public housing as problematic, adverse and something to be avoided. This was also evident from the fact that many of the interviewees also referred to existing municipal policies and measures to minimize clustering or expressed such measures to be favorable. Moreover, many interviewees reported that the frequency and severeness of neighbour complaints had increased in their municipality and linked this to the residualization of the social housing sector and the clustered physical structure of social housing. Additionally, they referred to the widespread resistance against social housing projects from external neighbours and local resident groups, which many of them designated as classic examples of NIMBYism (Not in My Backyard).

While most of the social housing bureaucrats mentioned some arguments in support of the widespread idea that clustering of social housing is undesirable, a few also just referred to it briefly as a self-evidently negative phenomenon without detailing what exactly is troublesome about it. Using words like "segregated communities", "clustering" and "deprived areas" they imply that these are problematic phenomena without explaining how and why they are undesirable. The interviewees who follow up with slightly more elaboration often use phrases like "too much trouble gathered in one place", "a gathering of tenants with severe challenges", "too much tension, unrest and conflicts" and "not a good place for the upbringing of children". Thus, like some of the urban local governments studied by Rosengren et al. (2023) in neighbouring Finland, critical attitudes to segregation and geographical concentration of deprivation are present in the fifteen municipalities covered in this study. Even though segregation is arguably at odds with the egalitarian ethos of the Nordic welfare state these critical perspectives have so far not been accompanied by comprehensive anti-

segregation reforms. Unlike Denmark and its parallel society legislation of 2018, Norway (and Finland) have avoided policies that aim to ‘physically transform disadvantaged social housing areas and create socially mixed neighbourhoods with a balanced socio-economic composition by, among other initiatives, attracting more resourceful citizens’ (Nielsen et al., 2023, p. 142). In Norway, such policies seem unlikely because the social housing sector is small and therefore a less potent policy instrument than in Denmark, where it houses 17% of the population (ibd.).

Localization issues are also prominent in the social housing bureaucrat’s presentation of complaints from internal and external neighbours and local resistance from residents towards development plans involving social housing. According to the bureaucrats, there seems to be a common perception among residents that the level of clustering of tenants considered as demanding and vulnerable are causing challenges for neighbour relations and well-functioning local communities. Especially when new housing services are planned for tenants with substance abuse, mental health disorders or concurrent substance abuse and mental health disorders exclusive strategies like NIMBYism seems to emerge and resistance become particularly strong. Some tendencies of inclusive strategies among residents defending space for vulnerable groups in their communities, like PHIMBYism (Public Housing In My Backyard), are also mentioned by the interviewees, but much less prevalently.

The sources of the interviewees’ explicit and implicit understandings seem to derive from the literature and popular and widespread notions that we introduced in the second section; namely the perceptions of the ideal of socially mixed neighbourhoods, the ideal neighbourhood for children to grow up in and negative neighbourhood effects rising from clustering of disadvantaged groups. Obviously, *geography matters* in the daily work of social housing bureaucrats in Norway’s largest cities. Our study of the subjective world view of the employees that execute policies affecting the geographical distribution and social composition of public rented housing adds to the literature on social mix, residential segregation, and social housing in the era of neoliberal inspired housing policy (van Ham & Manley, 2012; Doney et al., 2013; Korsu, 2016; Verdugo & Toma, 2018; Friesenecker & Kazepov, 2021; Rosengren et al., 2024). The study is arguably important because the interviewees offer a unique perspective from the inside of a highly needs-tested social rented sector that has counterparts in Flanders, Australia and other parts of the Anglo-American world (Flanagan et al., 2019; Winters, 2023; Morris et al., 2024). Thus, our study should be particularly relevant for these and other national or regional contexts where targeted social rented housing dominates.

The interviewees’ experiences arguably reflect core features of highly means-tested and residualized social housing. In a context of a small social housing stock with few vacancies adapted to the needs of tenants on the waiting list, children risk growing up in environments that are detrimental to their safety and future life chances. Given the shortage of social housing the bureaucrats’ room of maneuver when allocating housing is minimal, and their influence over the residential composition of existing housing estates is therefore limited. Thus, even though geography matters, bureaucrats are not always able to let it weigh heavily when deciding where to allocate or build housing. Preventing homelessness, a major concern in Norwegian housing policy (Dyb, 2021), will often prevail over other competing concerns. Presumably, a similar situation may be found in Australia, New Zealand, and other countries with a small and strongly targeted social rented sector (Flanagan et al., 2019; Murphy, 2020). Conflicts between residents and complaints from neighbours are arguably

endemic to this form of housing. In brief, providers of highly needs-tested social housing are asked to house very different groups that have primarily one thing in common, namely that they are unable to access affordable and decent quality housing in the private rental market. This may breed conflict, complaints and NIMBYism from relatively affluent groups worried about falling property prices and decreasing quality of residential areas.

Moreover, the study indicates that neighbour complaints, NIMBY-protests against highly targeted social housing in relatively wealthy areas, and soaring housing prices in attractive urban locations, constitutes serious obstacles to local government influence over the social composition and geographical concentration of different household categories. It is evidently hard to disperse social housing when both property prices and NIMBYism in wealthy districts acts as counterforces. To transcend the obstacles mentioned above, ambitious urban local governments probably need to go beyond the confines of the very (neo)liberal Norwegian housing regime, that is characterized by limited government subsidies for housing construction, and negligible legal power for local governments wishing to influence the tenures and prices levels of homes built by private companies (Sørvoll et al., 2024; Nordahl, 2014). The main policy implication of the article is arguably that more government investment in public rented housing is needed, to make it easier for municipalities to influence the geographical distribution of social housing and increase the room of maneuver for social housing bureaucrats looking to house tenants in residential environments that are safe and beneficial to their future prospects. However, new investment does not seem to be on the agenda of the government, despite the fact that many municipal social housing providers recently reported shortages (Osnes & Sørvoll, 2023).

One of the limitations of the study is that it only covers the fifteen largest municipalities. The interview sample provides us with valuable perspectives from representatives of the largest urban centers in Norway but provides limited information about municipal variations regarding perspectives on social mix, spatial localization and social housing. Future research regarding these questions may, however, draw on a survey covering almost half of the over 350 municipalities in Norway (Osnes & Sørvoll, 2023).

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