

Summary of Research Paper

Is Permanent Supportive Housing permanent? Examining tenancy duration and exit patterns at Elizabeth Street Common Ground

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In our recent paper published in *Housing and Society*¹ we examined nine years of tenancy records from Elizabeth Street Common Ground (ESCG), a single-site, mixed-tenure Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) development in Melbourne, that includes both supported and affordable tenancies. Combining survival and hazard analyses with analysis of exit reasons, the paper addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How long do people reside in a single-site, mixed-tenure PSH facility?
- 2) Among those that leave, do they depart in favourable or unfavourable circumstances?
- 3) Are the characteristics of short duration tenancies different from tenancies that last longer?

Our study provides insights into tenancy dynamics in a single-site mixed-tenure PSH facility in Australia over a long observation period. With nine Common Ground facilities across the country and more single-site PSH planned, our results provide policy makers with information they can use to improve housing retention, reduce unfavourable exits, and better understand which groups are more likely to sustain their tenancies in this style of PSH.

Background

Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) provides permanent, affordable housing to people who have experienced chronic homelessness, with few conditional requirements to participate in rehabilitative activities.

Studies consistently report between 70%-85% of PSH participants retain their housing after 12-24 months, typically double the rates reported by standard approaches. However, the high rates of housing retention come mostly from studies of models that house people in units scattered throughout the community.

The alternate spatial configuration, single-site PSH, delivers housing and support services in a single apartment complex. While multiple studies indicate scattered-site PSH produce better housing outcomes than traditional 'staircase' approaches, the evidence for single-site, mixed-tenure PSH is limited.

¹ Taylor, S. & Johnson, G. (2021). Examining tenancy duration and exit patterns in a single-site, mixed-tenure Permanent Supportive Housing setting. *Housing and Society*, ahead-of-print. DOI: 10.1080/08882746.2021.200973

Method

We built our dataset from de-identified tenancy administration data, containing 458 tenancy records from nine years of ESCG operations. We used two established survival analysis techniques to address our research questions:

- The Kaplan-Meier estimator of the survival function is used to estimate overall probabilities of tenancy sustainment at ESCG for supported and affordable tenancies, respectively; and
- A Cox proportional hazards regression model to identify whether any tenant or tenancy attributes are significantly and proportionally associated with longer or shorter tenancies.

We categorised the exit reasons into two categories:

- We classified exits as *favourable* where the exit reason primarily indicated a long-term housing opportunity elsewhere (for example, 'offered social housing').
- We classified exits as *unfavourable* where the exit reason indicated a problem in the tenancy. This included evictions, or cases where conflict, property abandonment, or incarceration were included in the exit reason.

In survival and hazard analyses, we utilised two different events of interest, each defining a different type of 'survival'. Where the event of interest is *exit for any reason*, survival refers to *tenancy sustainment*: meaning, longer avoidance of tenancy exit. Where the event of interest is *exit for unfavourable reasons*, survival refers to longer *avoidance of exit for unfavourable reasons*.

Results

The following section summarises some key findings, but for those interested in the full set of findings we encourage you to read the published paper. Table 1 presents tenancy duration patterns but distinguishes between current tenancies and exited tenancies. This table highlights the importance of including both ongoing and exited tenancies when assessing tenancy dynamics.

Among current tenancies, over half have been housed for four years or more. However, when we look at exited tenancies, the pattern is very different, with less than 10% of tenancies lasting four years or more, and the majority lasting for less than 1 year.

Table 1: Tenancy duration by tenancy status and type, %

| | Supported tenancies | | Affordable tenancies | |
|------------------|---------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| | Current (n=68) | Exited (n=157) | Current (n=61) | Exited (n=172) |
| 0 - 11 months | 10.3 | 50.3 | 11.5 | 40.7 |
| 12 - 23 months | 10.3 | 17.8 | 16.4 | 29.7 |
| 24 – 35 months | 13.2 | 12.1 | 8.2 | 12.8 |
| 36 – 47 months | 5.9 | 10.8 | 11.5 | 12.8 |
| 4 years or more | 60.3 | 8.9 | 52.5 | 4.1 |
| TOTAL (%) | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Using more sophisticated statistical techniques, the paper examines the cumulative probabilities of tenancy sustainment, for both supported and affordable tenancies. The results indicate that one year after tenancy commencement, the cumulative probability of sustaining a supported tenancy (64%) is 5 percentage points lower than for an affordable tenancy (69%). For both types, the probability of tenancy sustainment declines steeply in the first 12 months, and thereafter continues to decline but at slower rate. By two years, the cumulative probability of sustaining a supported tenancy is 50%, and for an affordable tenancy it is 46%. By four years, approximately one quarter of both supported and affordable tenancies remain.

The paper uses a Cox Proportional Hazard model to identify characteristics associated with longer and shorter tenancies at ESCG. For supported tenancies, older tenant age when starting a tenancy is a significant predictor of longer tenancy sustainment, as is the tenant reporting a psychiatric disability. However, Indigenous females are more than twice as likely to exit a supported tenancy at any given time, compared to other supported tenants, and if a tenancy started within two years of ESCG opening they were approximately 96% more likely to exit at any time in their tenancy, compared to a similar tenancy started later in the operations of ESCG.

The paper also examines the cumulative probabilities of tenancy sustainment before they exit for favourable or unfavourable reasons, respectively. Unfavourable exits from supported tenancies occur earlier than favourable exits. Among supported tenancies that exit for unfavourable reasons, there is a 50% probability that this will occur within the first 9 months. By contrast, among supported tenancies that exit for favourable reasons it is 13 months before we reach a 50% probability of exit. The pattern is similar but not as pronounced among affordable tenancies that exit ESCG: reaching a 50% probability of exit by 12 months, compared to 18 months for favourable reasons.

The paper also uses a Cox Proportional Hazard model to identify tenancy groups most and least at risk of unfavourable exits from ESCG. For supported tenancies, once again tenant age is a highly significant predictor of longer avoidance of exit for unfavourable reasons, with a decrease in risk of unfavourable exit of approximately 4% for every year increase in tenant age at tenancy commencement. Similarly, supported tenancies that started in the first year of ESCG site operation were approximately 2.8 times more likely to exit for unfavourable reasons compared to supported tenancies that started after this time. And finally, tenant psychiatric disability is a marginally significant predictor of longer avoidance of unfavourable exit.

Discussion

Tenancy sustainment patterns for both tenancy types at Elizabeth Street Common Ground (ESCG) are characterised by a mix of early exits and long-term stayers, with tenants more likely to have exited after two years than to still be at the site.

On one hand, this can potentially present a sobering statistic to policy makers – that permanent housing is, more often than not, less than two years in duration. On the other hand, while the probabilities of tenancy exit are high in the first year, they are less dramatic thereafter. Having sustained their housing for a year, tenants have successively lower and lower probabilities of exiting. This is particularly true of tenants in supported tenancies.

The results suggest that efforts to improve housing retention, particularly among supported tenancies, should focus on reducing early exits, with an understanding that unfavourable exits are especially likely in the first year of tenancy. One way to do this would be to offer more intensive, housing-focused support during the settling in phase of a tenancy.

While there are compelling reasons to focus on reducing early exits, it is equally clear that ESCG suits some people as a site for long-term housing. One tenant characteristic that outweighed all variables as a predictor of longer tenancy sustainment is tenant age. Older tenant age at tenancy start is very strongly associated with longer tenancy sustainment. The differences associated with tenant age cut across both tenancy types, and, by implication, across different preceding experiences of chronic homelessness. The significance of tenant age as a predictor of tenancy duration is well established in existing literature from varied housing programs. A practical take on this result is that age-adjusted tenancy sustainment should be considered when assessing PSH models.

Individuals with a known psychiatric disability have a good chance of sustaining a tenancy at ESCG (but not an affordable tenancy). This reflects well on the effectiveness of the support model. But the results are patchier for women and for Indigenous tenants. One possibility that these results suggest is that the site itself may be unwelcoming or unappealing to both female and to Indigenous tenants. Another possibility is that the support model is not sufficiently tailored to these tenants. Either way, it should be acknowledged that a mixed-tenure, single-site PSH setting may be unwelcoming to some tenants for the same reasons it is appealing to others.

In addition to associations with tenant characteristics, we found that tenancies that commenced in the early years of the ESCG site's operation had a significantly and substantially lower probability of sustaining a tenancy than tenancies that started after this, and a higher probability of exiting in unfavourable circumstances. Housing programs face different challenges as they move through implementation stages, and this shows dramatically in ESCG tenancy records.

To better understand tenancy dynamics in single-site PSH, it is instructive to examine tenancy durations at a single-site, and to incorporate as many tenancies as practicable, both current and exited. Tenancy duration information should be augmented with information on *why* people leave: whether this largely is because of problems in the tenancy, or because of better opportunities elsewhere. Our approach is replicable with commonly collected tenancy administration data.

Although the goal of PSH should be to keep people housed, particularly if they have experienced homelessness, it is vital to acknowledge that people do exit PSH. In turn, this acknowledgement should be incorporated into practicable assessments of its different configurations. It should also inform a practice focus on reducing unfavourable exits and supporting those that do exit, to move into appropriate accommodation. This will ensure that single-site, mixed-tenure PSH contributes to breaking the cycle of chronic homelessness, even if it is not permanent for everyone.

The full article is available here: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08882746.2021.2009734>