

Healthy housing: Proposing an inspection system for rental properties in New Zealand

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Background:

Public health interventions are critical for the prevention of disease and reducing inequities. A significant public health issue facing New Zealand is non-cystic fibrosis bronchiectasis amongst children, a lifelong condition disproportionately experienced by Pasifika children and tamariki Māori, contravening te Tiriti o Waitangi.¹ Cold, damp and mouldy homes predispose individuals to developing respiratory infections and bronchiectasis. Rental homes in New Zealand are particularly damp and cold with at least 21.5% of rental homes reporting significant dampness in 2018.²

While landlords of private rental properties within New Zealand must comply with the Residential Tenancies Act (1986) and Healthy Homes Standards, there is no formal check that landlords are adhering to these policies. Tenants can go to the tenancy tribunal if they are concerned their landlord is not complying with legislation. However, many tenants put up with inadequate housing because of the effort, time and cost to go through this process. There is a need for policy change to ensure that rental properties are healthy and of reasonable standards.

Aim:

The aim is to develop policy recommendations to decrease the incidence of bronchiectasis and respiratory conditions associated with poor quality housing.

Methods:

Analysis of current policies was done through searching New Zealand literature and government websites to understand the current policies which are in place to support healthy housing and how effective these policies are in New Zealand. Developing a policy proposal then involved gathering and analysing international evidence about policy interventions to improve housing quality. Finally, the potential risks and benefits a policy interventions were analysed.

Results:

From the review of policy and literature, it was found that New Zealand's existing healthy homes standards were appropriate. However, the issue was that they are not being adhered to, and the most effective policy solution would therefore be to strengthen the current regulations. The evidence suggested an effective rental inspection system could improve the housing quality of New Zealand rental properties because it creates a greater amount of accountability for landlords to comply with legislation addressing a recognised risk to children's health. An inspection system of landlords and their rental properties was found to be effective in the UK and the United States of America and resulted in decreased rates of pneumonia and respiratory infections after this system was implemented.^{3,4} A similar inspection system could therefore be effective in New Zealand.

The policy recommendation from this literature and policy review is to require by law an inspection of a landlord's rental property, and complete remedial actions if the property is substandard, initiated when:

- Tenants make a complaint or,
- The local council believes the house may be hazardous, or
- A doctor believes that the house is severely affecting the patient's health.

Conclusion

This project examined possible policy interventions to improve housing quality and decrease the rates of respiratory conditions which disproportionately affect tamariki Māori and Pasifika children in New Zealand. Strengthening existing law by introducing an inspection system for rental properties appears a promising approach and merits further investigation.

References:

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