

Covid-19 and Media Constructions of Housing and Home in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Executive Summary

Aotearoa New Zealand responded to the Covid 19 pandemic by adopting an elimination rather than a suppression strategy, which involved using traditional public health techniques of rapid tracking and tracing, isolation and quarantine. In the first instance this involved breaking chains of transmission through the use of a hierarchy of increasingly stringent lockdowns in which at the two highest levels, levels 3 and 4, all households, apart from those with members designated as essential workers, were required to isolate at home¹. The home, therefore, became the central mechanism of defence in national public health measures to manage the pandemic. The use of the home as a key tool in the Covid 19 management strategy has occurred within the context of a housing affordability crisis for those on low incomes and associated problems of housing precarity. This immediately highlighted Aotearoa's persistent problems with unaffordable and insecure housing, as well as homelessness. The interplay between the housing crisis and Covid-19, and the way in which it was dealt with in the media discourse surfaces and reproduces the meaning of housing and home in Aotearoa NZ.

The analysis presented here examines representations of the home in the media through the first six months of the Covid 19 management strategy through a systematic review and analysis of articles which reference Covid-19 and housing from January 1 – June 25 2020. That analysis reveals:

- A media discourse that reduces housing to the notion of housing as property investment and the housing stock as a commodity for trade.
- That despite housing being critical to isolation at home, or 'bubble' strategy for Covid-19 elimination, media portrayals of housing have continued to emphasise housing as a financial asset, commodity and wealth generator (White and Nandedkar, 2019).
- Most media articles continue to focus on and promote home ownership and housing investor perspectives. There are fewer articles which support or are written from a renter's/tenant's perspective.
- Emergent references to housing as a human right were identified, but these were marginal and were not articulated in a way that challenge the dominant frame.
- There is a pronounced difference between mainstream media and Māori media. Māori media narratives focused very specifically on the connections between Covid-19 and housing. In it, narratives typically portrayed Covid-19 not as creating a housing crisis, but the housing crisis increasing vulnerabilities to Covid-19. The lack of adequate, safe, and secure housing was presented as meaning:
 - many were unable to 'shelter in place' in order to protect themselves and their families.

¹ <https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-levels-and-updates/>

- Covid-19 revealed existing inequities in the housing sector, and in particular, revealed differentiated experiences during the period of lockdown as one shaped by notions of or lack of home, healthy food, access to resources and digital connectivity.
- Pacific communities remained on the periphery of media interest.

Mainstream media rarely made connections between public health strategies to manage Covid-19 and the state of housing, and persistently treated housing as primarily an aspect of the property market. Māori media made more direct connections between Covid-19 and housing and framed those connections through its focus on whānau and wellbeing. These throw into sharp relief a media discourse treating housing as a vehicle for investment and wealth accumulation and a more marginalised media discourse that focuses on the use value of housing and the rights of people to secure wellbeing through decent housing. In a pandemic response in which housing is a critical tool in maintaining a first line of defence against Covid 19, the lack of secure and decent housing for many reflects a disconnect in health policy response and the reality of housing unaffordability and precarity.

1 Introduction

Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa NZ) responded to the Covid 19 pandemic by adopting an elimination rather than a suppression strategy. This involved using public health techniques of rapid tracking and tracing, isolation and quarantine aligned to a series of alert levels (see Infobox 1).

Infobox 1: Alert Levels in Aotearoa New Zealand to eliminate COVID-19²

Alert Level 1	Prepare	The disease is contained in New Zealand	COVID-19 is uncontrolled overseas. There could be sporadic imported cases. There could be isolated local transmission in New Zealand.
Alert Level 2	Reduce	Low risk of community transmission within applied area	There could be limited community transmission. There are active clusters in more than one region.
Alert Level 3	Restrict	Medium risk of community transmission – active but managed clusters	There are multiple cases of community transmission. There are multiple active clusters in multiple regions.
Alert Level 4	Lockdown	Likely the disease is not contained	There is sustained and intensive community transmission. Outbreaks are widespread.

These alert levels were, in the first instance, used to break chains of transmission through the increasingly stringent hierarchy of movement and contact limitations. At the two highest levels, levels 3 and 4, all households, apart from those with members designated as essential workers, were required to isolate in at home.

The home, therefore, became the central mechanism of defence in national public health measures to manage the pandemic. The use of the home as a key tool in the Covid 19 management strategy has occurred within the context of a housing affordability crisis and associated problems of housing precarity. This immediately highlighted Aotearoa's persistent problems with unaffordable and insecure housing, as well as homelessness. In a pandemic

² Source <https://covid19.govt.nz/assets/resources/tables/COVID-19-Alert-Levels-summary-table.pdf>;

response in which housing is a critical tool in maintaining a first line of defence against Covid 19, the lack of secure and decent housing for many reflects a disconnect in health policy response and the reality of housing unaffordability and precarity. The interplay between the housing crisis and Covid-19, and the way in which it was dealt with in the media discourse surfaces and reproduces the meaning of housing and home in Aotearoa NZ.

A number of commentators (Power and Rogers, 2020; Power, Rogers and Kadi, 2020) have noted the need for more research on the intersection between housing and Covid-19 as experienced in countries around the world. This paper examines how public health measures used to manage the Covid 19 pandemic centred on the home intersect with wider discourses on the meaning of home as articulated through the news media in Aotearoa NZ. The analysis reveals problematic tensions between notions of home as a place of refuge and safety, as implied in the public health strategies, and dominant articulations of home as a form of wealth generating equity in a financialised housing context. The study involved a critical analysis of how the news media reported on Covid-19 and housing, identifying different discourses that variously emphasise meanings of home as financial assets and a commodity, as a source of shelter and safety, and of home as a human right. The study demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of media reports on the housing sector during the first half of 2020 were focussed on financial and economic aspects of housing.

The paper begins with an overview of the research approach, including critical discourse analysis, before presenting an analysis of the primary themes and sub-themes that were found. It concludes with a discussion of the implications for the development of housing policy in Aotearoa NZ.

2 Methodology

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) in housing research is increasingly important in understanding how a particular discourse gains traction in the media. Qualitative methods of data collection such as document analysis offer an opportunity to unpack and target understandings of housing and home, providing a deeper, richer analysis embedded in social, political and cultural frameworks (Marston 2002; Hastings 2000). CDA as a methodological tool allows researchers to understand words and their meanings most importantly within a specific context. In this report, unpacking the language of house and home in media articles provides a cultural understanding of how the New Zealand mainstream media shape notions of home, and in particular, broader notions of wealth, safety and financial security. This in turn influences government policy in the housing sector. Additionally, it highlights whose power and agency are voiced and silenced. As Hastings notes, CDA, 'can help to reveal how policy is made and whose ends it serves' (Hastings 2000, p. 138).

Critical discourse analysis is not one particular method as it may be used across a number of disciplines (Marston 2000, p.351). In this research it is deployed as a tool to illuminate connections between and ‘critically link language, ideology and social change’ (Marston 2000, p. 351). This form of CDA finds its epistemological beginnings in the works of Fairclough (1992, 1995) and Fairclough and Wodak (1997) who link ‘text’, ‘discursive practice’ and ‘social practice’ (Marston 2000) to uncover hidden meanings in language. This is particularly important in recognising how language is used emotively to elicit and engage positive or negative responses by readers (Iyengar, 1990; Iyengar & McGrady, 2007).

In carrying out this news media analysis, the search engine for mainstream media in New Zealand, Newztext, was used to identify and retrieve media articles published from January 1 – June 25, 2020. Newztext captures daily media publications and news outlets, including New Zealand Herald, Business Herald, Radio New Zealand, Dominion Post, Otago Daily Times, Waikato Times, Southland Times, Hawke’s Bay Today, Manawatu Standard, Bay of Plenty Times, Gisborne Herald, Northern Advocate, Nelson Mail, Oamaru Mail, Taranaki Daily News, Wanganui Chronicle, Timaru Herald, Sunday Times, Sunday Star Times, and Press. These represent a range of publications up and down the country. This captured the pre-lockdown, lockdown, and immediate post-lockdown period. The New Zealand government at the time of research was a coalition government made up of Labour Party (Prime Minister), New Zealand First (Deputy Prime Minister), and Green Party (Cabinet positions)³.

The search used five categories in the key word search. All of the categories were chosen as relevant to capture any mention of Covid-19 and Housing and used adjacent search terms, such as Infectious Disease. Climate Change was used to understand if and how the media report climate change and its affects on infectious disease and housing.

1. Covid-19 and Housing (253 out of 485 articles);
2. Covid-19 and Climate Change and Housing (8 out of 107 articles);
3. Climate, Infectious Disease and Housing (7 out of 14 articles);
4. Infectious Disease and Housing (13 out of 123 articles);
5. Infectious Disease, Climate Change and Housing (0 out of 9 articles).

In the first category, Covid-19 and Housing, a general search was used to capture any and all relevant articles around the search topic (485) before selecting the most relevant (253). This initial category was used to determine what type of news media coverage existed with the general intersection of Covid-19 and Housing without any specific categorisations. This intersection of themes comprised the bulk of news articles.

The second search category, Covid-19 and Climate Change and Housing, aimed to seek news articles with a connection among the three themes. There were fewer relevant articles in this category, although there was a higher number of general intersecting themes (107).

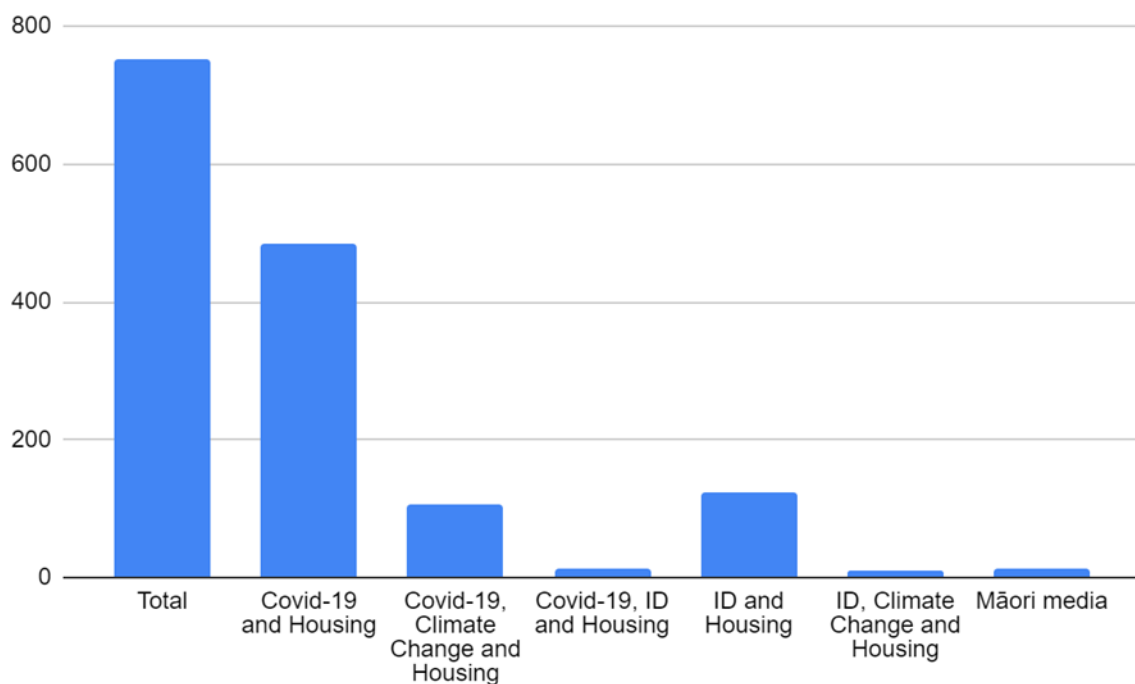
³ https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/hansard-debates/rhr/combined/HansD_20200325_20200325

The third search category, Climate and Infectious Disease and Housing, was used to capture broad themes of infectious disease in relation to Climate and Housing. The number of overall articles (14) was small but interestingly half of those (7) were relevant to the overall topic of this report.

The fourth search category, Infectious Disease and Housing, produced the second highest number of overall news articles for a category (123). However, the number of relevant articles was significantly smaller in this category (13).

The fifth and final search category, Infectious Disease and Climate Change and Housing, generated a small number of general articles (9) with no topic-relevant articles (0).

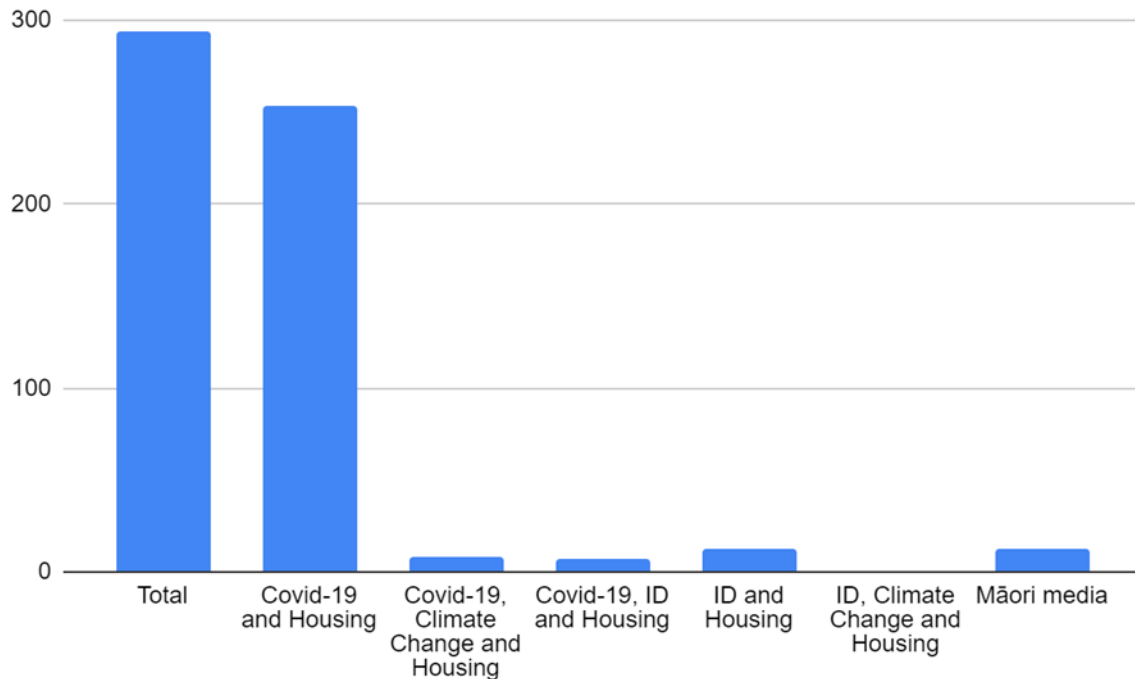
Figure 1: Media Articles 2020 Data Collection



Mainstream media (print and electronic) in Aotearoa NZ is English-language. There are, however, Māori-language media and Pasifika media in dedicated Pacific languages. There is also English-language Māori media in both print and electronic media. These are relevant and important news sources for Māori, Pasifika and other communities in Aotearoa NZ. Because Newztext does not capture Māori/Māori-language media, a separate search was initiated on the E-Tangata website which generated 13 articles. In addition to Newztext, a search was initiated on other news-type platforms, including The Spinoff, The Conversation, and property blogs. These did not produce any relevant research material. A search in Google Scholar produced academic articles on nursing homes and Covid-19 which immediately fell outside the search criteria and were thus discarded. Further, a key word search was undertaken of New Zealand’s Epidemic Response Committee meeting minutes from 25-26 May. No relevant research data was found.

Overall, out of a total of 751 articles with relevant key words, the final analysis was undertaken on 293 articles.

Figure 2: Media Articles 2020 Data Analysis



3 Meanings of housing and home in Aotearoa New Zealand

While there was no one media discourse on meanings of housing and home in Aotearoa NZ, the public health crisis produced by the spread of Covid-19 illuminated discourses centred on house and home. Despite a continued housing crisis in New Zealand in which significant proportions of people find that their access to and use of housing is precarious, and despite housing being critical to the ‘bubble strategy’ for Covid-19 elimination, media portrayals of housing focused on housing as asset, commodity and wealth generator (White and Nandedkar, 2019). Housing is reduced to the notion of housing as property investment and the housing stock as a commodity for trade. It is a discourse which promotes a property investment system in which property consumption is the driver for ownership in New Zealand instead of a housing system in which the population is affordably and adequately housed. As such most media articles focus on and, often, promote investor perspectives. There are fewer articles which support or are written from a renter’s/tenant’s perspective and which give voice to those who choose to rent as well as those who are forced to rent.

Housing as a human right is touched upon but not explored in any depth. Deploying a narrative of housing as a human right lays a foundation to actively engage government, interrogate housing policy, and hold government institutions accountable to provide adequate and appropriate shelter to the population. In this vein, we observe a pronounced difference between mainstream media and Māori media. Māori media narratives focused very specifically on the connections between Covid-19 and housing. In it, narratives typically portrayed Covid-19 not as creating a housing crisis, but the housing crisis increasing vulnerabilities to Covid-19. The lack of adequate, safe, and secure housing was presented as meaning:

- many were unable to ‘shelter in place’ in order to protect themselves and their families.
- Covid-19 revealed existing inequities in the housing sector, and in particular, revealed differentiated experiences during the period of lockdown as one shaped by notions of or lack of home, healthy food, access to resources and digital connectivity.

Pacific communities remained on the periphery of media interest.

Property investment vs housing as home

Of the 253 articles in the key word search category ‘Covid-19 and Housing’, 102 discussed housing as a commodity with a preoccupation on house values and the implications not only for first home buyers (first-time owner-occupiers) but property investors.

The first time that Covid-19 is mentioned in the context of housing was on 4 March 2020 – three weeks before the country went into a 4-week lockdown. At the time, there was no indication of how the spread of Covid-19 would or could potentially affect the housing market. According to media reports, Aotearoa NZ continued to experience a rise in house prices.

[...]the market was being driven equally by first home buyers and property investors, and the upward pressure on prices was likely to continue even as the summer peak eases. However, [...]the emergence of the Covid-19 virus may have varying impacts on the market’ (RNZ newswire, House values continue to rise in 16 cities across New Zealand 4 March 2020).⁴

In a word search in this category, for example, the primary themes focussed on terms like *mortgage, rent, mortgage/rent freezes* as sub-categories of ‘Covid-19 and Housing.’ Often a phrase like ‘property ladder’ was found as well, however the number of findings was not significant enough to warrant a separate category. With the focus on the financial impact of Covid-19 on landlords, property investors and the housing market generally, the spotlight continued to focus on financial and economic factors of the Covid-19 outbreak. In this category there was no mention of the social impact of Covid-19 on families, communities or neighbourhoods.

⁴ See also Business Desk, Covid-19-Where does the housing market go from here? 1 Apr 2020 which discusses how the property market continues to rise in New Zealand’s 16 major cities.

In the early part of 2020, the housing market was presented by media as one that was robust and seeming to accommodate first-time buyers/owner-occupiers. Indeed, the notion of purchasing a property in Auckland, Aotearoa's largest city, became more tangible for many looking to purchase their first home. It appeared at the start of 2020 that properties in areas not previously considered by young families were becoming more attractive:

New Lynn and Glen Innes may be the Goldilocks zones for young Auckland families because they're not too far from the city and not too expensive, new research shows. [...] said it showed young buyers didn't necessarily have to move to the city's edge to get a foot on the property ladder (NZ Herald Saturday, Homes are 'just right' at the end of the line 18 January 2020).

This media report, unlike others, sought to make a connection to local infrastructure as well. This was made clear in the title which noted that finding the right homes might be at the 'end of the line' referring to rail and bus lines from the periphery of Auckland into the centre of the city. Although the above quote refers to affordability, another media article comments that the situation around housing costs would not change in the near future. For example, according to one media report, the number of properties collectively owned by sitting parliamentarians meant that changes to the financialisation of housing⁵ were not likely to occur in the foreseeable future.

And with our parliamentarians eager players in the tax-free, easy-money game - between them, our 120 MPs admit to ownership of 307 houses, apartments, farms and commercial properties - sanity is unlikely to return any time soon (NZ Herald, NZ Housing Gravy Train 15 Jan 2020).

Indeed by the end of January 2020, the housing market was once again being touted as providing security and stability for those wanting to reap a higher investment return:

Across the country, views of own home as providing the best return rose from 19% to 22%. This was driven by improved confidence in Auckland [...] where best return on investments rose from 14% to 23%' (Business Desk, Love Affair with housing boosts overall investor confidence, 29 January 2020)⁶.

Confidence in the housing market continued through the period of the lockdown with media reporting a continued rise in the value of homes:

The average value nationally increased 6.1% year on year and the average value is currently sitting at \$728, 276 (Business Desk, Covid-19-Where does the housing market go from here? 01 Apr 2020).

⁵ For a discussion of financialization of housing see Aalbers & Haila (2018); Cook & Ruming (2020).

⁶ Echoed in Hawkes Bay Today article from 31 January 2020.

The increase in value, however, presented difficulties in potentially purchasing homes due to overpricing as addressed in a January 2020 media article:

House prices have risen faster still, of course, three times faster than rents over the same period. That is one of the reasons why New Zealand is seen as having among the most over-priced housing in the world (NZ Herald, NZ in 2020: A nation divided by housing 31 January 2020).

As New Zealand moved toward an imminent lockdown, however, there was initial concern about the effects of a lockdown on the property market. An initial reaction from the property investment sector as documented in a media article on 9 April 2020 was the fear of house prices falling due to Covid-19. The commentator wrote: *As we try to ride out the severe shockwaves from Covid-19, you won't be surprised to learn the current situation is also a game changer for housing (NZC C edition, House prices likely to fall in reaction to virus shockwaves 09 April 2020).*

Despite widespread media anxiety, Covid-19 was not a game-changer in the residential property market. There were challenges for property investors and real estate agents. One of the key issues was difficulties in actually sighting dwellings for potential purchase. Quickly the media observed that the potential inhibition in property market activity could be addressed with the use of digital technology already in use prior to the lockdown. As one media article noted: *[...]What is different this time is that the use of technology may have a significant part to play in how the housing market can try and continue in a 'normal' fashion (Business Desk, REINZ: Potential impacts of Covid-19 on the housing market 18 March 2020).* A series of features such as virtual floor plans and drone footage were identified as helping buyers and sellers navigate the housing market.

By mid-May 2020 Aotearoa NZ had moved out of strict lockdown at the highest alert level (4) to a lower alert level (3).⁷ Media started to refer to the way in which Covid-19 exposed unmet housing needs. Reports appeared that reflected on those who were most affected by the lockdown, in part because of housing circumstances. Discussion of financial products like 'rent-to-buy' and 'shared equity products' made an appearance in the mainstream media. For example, a Scoop media report from 12 May 2020 called on the government to address the housing situation in Aotearoa NZ: *[...]the level of housing need across New Zealand remains wide-ranging and significant. The government needs to deal with homelessness, insecure and unaffordable rentals and declining homeownership rates (More important than ever for government budget to help families into home ownership Scoop 12 May 2020).* Typically the media still focused on the implications of different housing products to keep the property market buoyant. By June 2020 media reports were documenting the resilience of the housing market. It appeared the pandemic did not coax what was referred to as a 'game-changer' for the New Zealand housing market.

⁷ <https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-levels-and-updates/about-the-alert-system/>

New research indicates that New Zealand's real estate market is demonstrating considerable resilience to the Coronavirus pandemic, despite expert economists' predictions of significant declines in prices and demand (Business Desk, Housing market contradicts expert economists' pandemic predictions 04 June 2020).

Rental availability and affordability

The media also noted the 'resilience' of the rental market for property investors. Just as there was an increase in house prices, the rise in rental prices was observed in the early part of 2020. For example, a media report from mid-February 2020, roughly five weeks prior to full lockdown in New Zealand, documented an unprecedented increase in rental prices: *Tenants around the country started the New Year with record-breaking rents after the national median weekly rent rose 4 percent on January 2019, to a new high of \$515 per week, according to the latest Trade Me Rental Price Index (Business Desk 18 February 2020).*

The media also reported rent setting over the period of the Covid-19 lockdown. The media reported that the then National Party leader, Simon Bridges, stated the party was unwilling to offer rent freezes to tenants. *Among the first regulations National would scrap, if elected, would be Labour's proposed rental regulations and the newly introduced heating standards, leader Simon Bridges says (RNZ newswire, Rental regulations among first National would scrap, Bridges says 09 March 2020).* Bridges was followed by Todd Mueller as National Party leader and ultimately replaced by Judith Collins who became the National Party candidate for Prime Minister during the November 2020 elections. The National Party lost to Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party, resulting in Labour's landslide victory and majority win of parliamentary seats⁸.

One of the themes in the media was an alleged lack of clarity around rent setting and claims that these exacerbated the financial stress and mental health issues suffered by tenants (Rental increase freeze not a rent freeze, Business Desk 30 March 2020). Media also gave considerable attention to the way in which rent freezes during lockdown would both change the rental market but also expose tenants to future and possibly larger rent increases: *The impact of Covid-19 and the government's move on March 26th to freeze residential rent increases for the next six months is likely to change the New Zealand rental market, according to the latest Trade Me Rental Price Index (Business Desk, Rent freeze set to change NZ Rental market 19 May 2020).*

⁸ <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/politics/election-results-2020-world-reacts-to-huge-labour-jacinda-ardern-victory/ELJKMDWKYRJPYI34TF4ZDF5M4/>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/17/jacinda-arderns-labour-party-set-for-victory-in-new-zealand-election>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54519628>

Tenants were encouraged to communicate with landlords or property managers to find suitable arrangements so as not to fall into arrears with rental payments.

A nationwide property management company is actively discouraging landlords from offering rent holidays to struggling tenants during the Covid-19 shutdown. On its website and in emails to landlords, [...]says tenants should instead be encouraged to seek government help or offered grocery vouchers or assistance with utilities bills' (RNZ Newswire, Property brokers tell landlords not to offer rent holidays 30 March 2020).

Typically the media supported a narrative in which tenant hardship was balanced by claims of extensive hardship among landlords. The media quoted property managers, brokers and investment companies on the effects that lack of rental payments would have on landlords, often referring to these as 'mom and pop' investors (<https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/BU1911/S00501/mom-and-pop-consortiums-making-shift.htm>), there was little discussion in the media on the effects of precarious employment on tenants and how it affected their ability to pay rent.⁹ The government, however, in recognising material hardship experienced by some tenants and exacerbated by Covid-19 chose to continue its work on reforming the Residential Tenancies Act despite pushback from the opposition party (Scoop, Rental reforms should remain on hold 14 April 2020).

Housing, Covid-19 and inequalities

Much of the media commentary and rhetoric during the height of the awareness of the pandemic as New Zealanders experienced a lockdown unlike any other in modern history, was to urge government, consumers and everyday people to reimagine a 'new normal.' Tangible, visible and audible consequences of the lockdown such as an increase in air quality (due to lack of/limited commuter traffic), lack of noise and airline congestion in the skies (due to lack of/limited air travel) and the return of blue skies without a brown tinge of smog were some of the positive consequences of the lockdown as documented in Auckland and around the world (Chauhan, 2021).

Many households experienced a reconnection of family members living under one roof and, using digital technology, with extended family members in other geographic locations. A government-imposed lockdown meant for some a rekindling of culinary interests (baking and cooking), self-care, (walking and other forms of physical activity), and DIY home upgrade projects (gardening, painting, etc.) For example, a Stuff article from 25 April 2020 reflects on the lockdown:

Over the past weeks, there have been lots of good news stories about those who are comfortable in their bubble, receiving home deliveries, noticing the birds singing, and enjoying more family time.

⁹ <https://www.tenancy.govt.nz/rent-bond-and-bills/rent/overdue-rent/>

Another example of post-lockdown reflection from the Herald On Sunday from 14 June 2020 explains exactly what many New Zealanders experienced during lockdown:

We baked, and baked some more. We talked to each other and cared for each other, as best we could. We went for walks. We slowed down, unleashed our kids to kick through those leaf-filled streets, or took to it ourselves. [...] In our bubbles and on the internet, we laughed and we waited.

Commentators were hopeful that this time for reflection would reveal a 'new normal', that Aotearoa NZ would not return to 'business as usual', and that society as a whole would rethink its economic and social structures moving forward and out of the pandemic. However, for many 'business as usual' has continued. The reset that many commentators, reporters and editors seemed to be awaiting never took place, and a reconnection or 'slow down' appeared only available to those who were financially secure. A closer interrogation of the media reports demonstrates that the ability to experience a relatively calm, re-acquaintance with family, routines and self was a luxury that for many in Aotearoa was out of reach.

An article from Herald on Sunday on 14 June 2020 articulated the inequalities that Covid-19 exposed in New Zealand's economic and social systems:

Lockdown reinforced everyone's economic, emotional and social status. Which was fine if your home was large enough to get away from each other, warm and dry enough not to get sick in, well-appointed enough to offer broadband. Most people with a desk job could keep working [...]. There's no other way to look at this. From who's at risk to how well we get treated, the pandemic confronts us with issues of class, race and gender...

Covid-19 and Māori and Pacific communities

Issues of connectivity and employment were addressed by Māori media. Although a 90-95 percent rate of connectivity nationwide was reported by the Department of Internal Affairs, the true issues of connectivity, digital literacy and digital skills demonstrate a 'digital divide' and inequities (E-Tangata, 5 April 2020). According to a Motu research paper published in 2019¹⁰, Māori and Pacific communities, those living in social housing, those living with disabilities, the unemployed, seniors and those in rural communities were the most disadvantaged. This has implications for access to reliable health and Covid-19-related information, education for children unable to attend school, and employment opportunities (E-Tangata, 3 May 2020).

Prior to Aotearoa's four-week lockdown, reports of Covid-19 transmission from across the globe warned of high rates of infection among those living in close quarters, suffering from pre-existing health conditions and those working in precarious employment (Maroto,

¹⁰<https://www.motu.nz/assets/Documents/our-work/wellbeing-and-macroeconomics/well-being-and-sustainability-measures/Digital-inclusion-and-wellbeing-in-NZ.pdf>

Pettinicchio & Lukk, 2021)¹¹. The media reported an imbalance of safe and secure housing one week prior to the lockdown and noted the potential for contracting Covid-19 was much higher among Māori and Pacific communities due to material deprivation and living conditions. For many in these communities, warm, dry and stable housing was not a given.

Māori and Pacific communities are more likely to live in overcrowded homes, houses that are cold and damp or in temporary accommodation. In those crowded places the ability to transmit is going to be very high (Stuff, 18 March 2020).

When interviewed for a media article, a spokesperson for a charity in West Auckland reported that they had ‘seen increased demand for [...] housing and financial support’ and that many families were unable ‘to stock up [as it] is a luxury for people already on the breadline’ (Stuff, 18 March 2020). Similarly, an article published in Stuff on 22 February 2020 warned that ‘we need to treat our cold, damp housing like the public health emergency it is to prevent the deaths we know are coming.’ This was in reference to the staggering number of deaths in the Northern Hemisphere winter due to the corona virus, particularly as reported in parts of Europe and North America.

It was likewise an indictment of the state of housing for many families in New Zealand who live in cold, damp conditions, contributing to long-term health issues and an increased rate of death over the southern hemisphere winter months (Howden-Chapman et al., 2007; Howden-Chapman et al., 2008). In response to the increasing number of Covid-19 cases and with the desire of keeping their communities safe and Covid-free, iwi organised checkpoints in the far North (E-Tangata, 14 April 2020). This was seen as a contentious move with some questioning the authority of local iwi to undertake such action. An *E-Tangata* reporter described the situation:

Whether you’re in the North, or on the East Coast of the North Island, or in other parts of Aotearoa where hapu and iwi hold the balance of power, the leaders in those communities will exercise their own authority to make decisions in the best interests of their community (E-Tangata, 19 April 2020).

Housing as a human right

In February 2020 Leilani Farha, the UN Special Rapporteur on Housing at the time, visited New Zealand to encourage understanding housing as a human right.¹² This was prior to the New Zealand government’s imposing a full lockdown with the aim of preventing and containing the spread of Covid-19. Farha’s visit highlighted the ongoing work in the housing sector, including government, community and others active in the housing space, but also illustrated

¹¹ <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/06/887046279/we-need-help-people-at-higher-coronavirus-risk-fear-losing-federal-unemployment>;

¹² <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25528&LangID=E>;
<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/409900/un-special-rapporteur-calls-on-nz-for-bold-human-rights-approach-to-housing-crisis>

much of the lack in progress on housing, particularly as it affects Māori and Pacific communities. Farha commented:

When I meet a family of six with their belongings piled up, without a stove, with a teeny little bathroom, when I meet people who are afraid their rent will increase [...] they won't be able to stay in their place, when I meet Māori who've been dispossessed of their lands and resources I know that what's happening here is not actually a housing crisis – it's a human rights crisis (RNZ newswire, 19 February 2020).

As the media reported, Farha was addressing the issue of affordable housing and social housing not as a measure of supply but rather as a violation of human rights. She noted:

a human rights crisis demands a human rights response. The government (of New Zealand) must recognise in national law that housing is a fundamental human right requiring legal protection. In my view New Zealand must also adopt a comprehensive rights-based housing strategy that focuses on structural changes [...] (Scoop, 21 February 2020).

The issue of housing as a human right was a topic that Farha had championed in other countries around the world. In particular, those meeting with the UN Special Rapporteur were looking to understand 'how a rights-based national housing strategy had worked in other countries' and how New Zealand might learn from those strategies (Scoop, 7 February 2020). Canada, for example, has recognised housing as a human right in its legal system¹³. The Special Rapporteur, according to media reports, was hopeful that Te Tiriti o Waitangi could serve as a document to establish housing as a human right informed by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Scoop, 21 February 2020). The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by 144 nations in September 2007, 4 against and 11 abstentions.¹⁴ The four nations to reject the Declaration were four settler-colonial nations – New Zealand, Australia, United States and Canada. In New Zealand, the Human Rights Commission provides documentation on the right to adequate housing¹⁵ as an aspirational document to guide the provision of housing. The seven pillars of the right to adequate housing include security of tenure, habitability, accessibility, affordability, availability of services (medical, infrastructure, etc.), location and cultural adequacy¹⁶. Many of these seven pillars are not met for marginalised communities. While some community organisations recognise this document as the foundation for thinking of housing as human right, the NZ government has made no movement to officially recognise this as such.

¹³ <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/right-home-report-consultation-human-rights-and-rental-housing-ontario/housing-human-right>

¹⁴ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>

¹⁵ https://www.hrc.co.nz/files/4215/1363/5639/2017_07_25_-_Right_to_housing_flyer_-_updated.pdf

¹⁶ https://www.hrc.co.nz/files/4215/1363/5639/2017_07_25_-_Right_to_housing_flyer_-_updated.pdf

4 Conclusion

The housing market in Aotearoa New Zealand remains, as in most countries around the world, a contentious space. The conflict takes many shapes and forms and often consolidates around one type of ‘solution’ to providing homes for New Zealanders. As noted above, these solutions to ‘fix the housing crisis’ are primarily located in the financial, economic and land allocation spheres – a regulatory space. The argument tends to find itself lodged between land supply, housing supply and demand, and the best way to increase the financial and economic benefits of not just owning a home but moving up the property ladder. Therefore, it reinforces a binary argument that housing is either a tool for property investors to gain wealth or a dwelling for those seeking adequate housing as shelter. The nuances in argument, however, demonstrate that it is much more far-reaching than that.

Indeed, fundamental questions of what a housing ‘market’ should look like or rather reflect are being posed. Is Aotearoa NZ content with providing housing as a consumable product which is traded and used as an investment tool? This perspective would reduce housing to a traded commodity which is only accessible to those either already on the property ladder or those with the means to gain access to the property ladder, and therefore, continue the ‘product-oriented’ use of housing as a wealth-amassing tool. The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown have demonstrated that New Zealanders’ appetites for purchasing and selling property has not waned. Indeed, for those able to digitally connect to realtor and other seller websites and platforms, attractive and added features, such as digital floor plans and drone footage of properties, allowed for virtual house viewings, resulting in an upward trend of house sales. This would leave a large portion of the population out of the property-investment market and thus outside of products and services that leverage housing as a wealth asset. Based on the evidence provided in the media articles, the primary target for a property-investment led housing market would be urban- and suburban dwelling families who are employed, have access to healthy food, warm and dry homes, resources and infrastructure, and digital connectivity.

Conversely, would Aotearoa NZ benefit from having a housing system that provides affordable, warm, dry homes to all its population. This would enhance the argument of housing as a human right. As Farha commented, in a country like Aotearoa NZ this type of housing framework should be informed by Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Housing as a human right would most likely contribute to the debate of moving the notion of housing and home away from a property-investment model to a more equitable and rights-based housing system – for buyers and renters. While availability and affordability of rental properties remained a concern in many media reports, those who rented and continue to reside in properties with insecure or dubious tenancy agreements, risked having to move, and, thus experience housing insecurity. There is no clear respite for renters in sight.

The precarity of tenants' experiences highlights the third finding in this report. The content of media reports illustrates that Covid-19 did not create disparities but rather exposed existing and ever-widening inequalities. Housing and material deprivation were reported primarily in Māori and Pacific communities. In the context of Aotearoa NZ, this is especially important. Advocates for housing reform note that any type of action taken to alleviate housing stress, address existing and growing inequalities and get more people into warm, dry homes in a safe and secure tenancy must be positioned in agreements which honour a commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi) and offer full and authentic cooperation with iwi and hapu. Additionally, a human-rights based approach to housing with clear, understandable accountability measures and mechanisms for government are key to making informed and long-term, effective change.

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