

'That house was a home': Qualitative evidence from New Zealand on the connections between rental housing eviction and poor health outcomes

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Abstract

Issue addressed: Eviction, or a forced move from rental housing, is a common experience for New Zealand renters, yet we know very little about its effects. This research investigated how eviction affects people's lives and health.

Methods: We conducted semi-structured interviews with 27 people who had experienced eviction. We coded the transcripts and grouped them into themes using template analysis.

Results: Participant experienced grief at the loss of the home. Moving out and searching for a new home was highly stressful on participants and on their relationships. After being evicted, people became homeless, often staying with family and friends and lived in poor quality or unaffordable housing. They reported health issues as a result of these circumstances.

Conclusions: Eviction harms health through causing stress, grief and a move to a risky living situation. Increasing the supply of housing and funding wide-ranging support services can help minimise the harm caused by eviction.

So what?: Reducing the incidence and impact of eviction should be a priority for health promotion.

KEYWORDS

eviction, grief, housing and health, private rental housing, stress

1 | INTRODUCTION

Housing and health are closely connected. Housing supports physical health by protecting its occupants from the elements and enabling them space to live comfortably: when damp, cold, hazardous or crowded, housing is associated with a range of adverse outcomes, including injury, respiratory illness and cardiovascular disease. Housing supports mental health by providing a sense of identity, a point for social contact and protection from negative social conditions.¹ Eviction, a forced move from rental housing, disrupts this support. Yet it has been argued that the effects of eviction on health have been understudied.² Recent years have

seen much work, especially in the United States, Canada and Sweden, to fill that gap.

In New Zealand, we know little about eviction or its consequences. New Zealanders are highly mobile people – two-thirds of children have moved at least once before age 4.³ Eviction is one of the causes of this high mobility. A representative survey of tenants showed that a quarter of tenants left their last home because their landlord asked them to.⁴ The burgeoning international evidence, which we go on to summarise, shows that eviction is associated with negative health outcomes. Our research aimed to understand the consequences of eviction for New Zealand tenants. We argue that preventing eviction and minimising its adverse effects should be a public health priority in New Zealand.

1.1 | Effects of eviction on mental health

Research on the mental health effects of eviction specifically builds on a large body of research on the effects of housing instability on mental health.⁵ Swedish evidence shows that eviction is linked to suicide, independently of well-known suicidogenic risk factors,⁶ and imminent eviction is significantly associated with subsequent depression, even when adjusting for confounders.⁷ Among Swedish middle-aged people, those who had experienced eviction were one-and-a-half times more likely to die of any cause than those who had not experienced eviction.⁸ US studies have shown that people who have been evicted are more likely to be depressed and report poor mental health.⁹⁻¹¹ Notably, US research showed that having been evicted was not associated with depression or anxiety, after adjustment for individuals' socio-economic profiles and prior health,¹² and a UK study showed no long-term impact of rental eviction on mental illness but did find an increase in mental illness immediately before a rental eviction.¹³ Overall, however, a systematic review concluded that living under the threat of eviction or repossession increased the risk of a number of mental health disorders.¹⁴

1.2 | Effects of eviction on physical health

In Canada, being evicted worsens outcomes for vulnerable groups: among users of illicit drugs, it increases vulnerability to HIV disease progression, exposure to violence and initiation or relapse into methamphetamine usage¹⁵⁻¹⁷; among youth, eviction increases the likelihood that syringes will be shared.¹⁸ In the United States, low-income mothers who have been evicted are more likely to report poor general health.⁹ Pregnant women who experience eviction are more likely to give birth to premature babies and babies with low birth weight.¹⁹ There is an association between high eviction rates and negative paediatric health outcomes, sexually transmitted diseases, drug and alcohol mortality rates and preterm birth rates in census tracts.²⁰⁻²³ In contrast to these studies, US research found that having been evicted was not associated with poorer self-rated health or problematic alcohol use after adjustment for characteristics that sort people into different housing instability experiences.¹²

1.3 | Effects of post-eviction living conditions on health

Eviction is a common precursor to homelessness.²⁴ Homelessness is defined as having no fixed abode or staying with friends or family in temporary or inappropriate housing.²⁵ Homeless people have higher rates of premature mortality than the general population, and an increased prevalence of substance misuse and a number of infectious diseases, mental disorders and noncommunicable diseases.²⁶ Staying with family or friends, as homeless people often do, contributes to crowding, which increases the risk of exposure to infectious diseases.¹

Eviction commonly leads to a downgrade in housing quality and security.²⁷ In the United States, tenants in rent arrears, and under threat of eviction, are unlikely to report issues with housing quality.²⁸ People who have been evicted for breach of contract struggle to find affordable and habitable housing because of their record, creating a downward spiral of poverty and poor health; "eviction begets poor housing conditions, which cause poor health, affecting an individual's ability to work, resulting in outstanding rent [and]...another eviction."^{29(p83)} Poor-quality housing – housing which is impossible or expensive to heat or cool to an adequate temperature, and which exposes people to hazards – is associated with a range of negative health outcomes, including cardiovascular and respiratory problems, developmental delays, cancers, injury and poor mental health.¹

Our research explored whether the detrimental consequences of eviction are experienced in New Zealand as in other countries.

2 | METHODS

This was a qualitative descriptive study to explore the perspectives of people who had experienced eviction. Ethics approval for the study was granted by the the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. We carried out purposeful sampling to obtain research participants. The inclusion criterion was that people had experienced an eviction from a rental home. Interview participants were recruited in two ways. Kaimahi (social workers or advocates) based at Kokiri Marae, Lower Hutt, Wellington approached people in their community that they knew had experienced eviction and asked them to be part of the study; 15 participants were recruited this way. This strategy ensured that Māori were well represented in the study; all of those participants recruited by kaimahi identified as Māori. The remaining 12 participants were self-selected via Facebook posts on the pages of Wellington-based community organisations, asking for people who had experienced eviction and who wished to participate to contact the research team. After interviews with 27 people had been conducted, saturation point was determined to have been reached; the team agreed that the main themes had been clearly established and additional sampling would be unlikely to yield new shared themes.

The first and third authors facilitated semi-structured interviews of an average of 55 min. Some people discussed multiple evictions; two interviews were with two people (a couple and a pair of friends) discussing the same eviction experiences. Eight participants were interviewed by telephone and the others were interviewed in their homes. Participants ranged in age from mid-20s to mid-50s. There were 24 women and 3 men. Fifteen participants were Māori (indigenous ethnicity) and were interviewed by Māori researchers. The other participants were of other ethnic backgrounds. Participants received a \$30 supermarket voucher as thanks for their time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to commencing the interview.

The interview schedule was aimed at exploring how participants perceived their eviction. They were asked to describe their eviction

experience. Prompts were used where necessary to find out about where the participants were living previously, where they moved to and how the eviction affected their mental and physical health and household relationships.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Participants were given pseudonyms and all identifying details were removed. They were then imported into NVivo, a qualitative analysis software programme and read multiple times by team members. The transcripts were subject to template analysis, an approach to thematic analysis that draws on the use of codebooks and is well suited to applied research.³⁰ Interviews were coded by the first author. Following the template analysis process, some codes were defined a priori as they are determined by the interview questions, and others were developed on close reading of the text. Codes were grouped into categories or themes to represent relationships between codes and higher-order themes. The coding incorporated feedback from the research team through regular meetings to code and discuss samples of interview transcripts.

3 | FINDINGS

The three themes discussed in this paper represent three ways in which being evicted leads to poor health outcomes: grieving the loss of home after an eviction, stress caused by eviction and exposure to housing-related health risks in the periods of homelessness and inadequate housing that followed eviction.

3.1 | Grieving for loss of home after eviction

Participants mourned the loss of their homes and spoke about the grief they experienced as a result of eviction. They spoke positively of their former homes despite, in many cases, their homes being cold, damp and hazardous. As Jenny put it, "I loved it, it felt like a home, it was a wreck, but it was a home." Participants felt a deep bond to their home: "I don't know if you have ever done it, but you walk into a place and you just know...it's homely" (Kelly). For Helen, "the favourite thing about that house was just being happy in it." After time spent staying with others and in emergency housing, "we finally settled down" (Helen). Similarly, Jonny explained, "I really found my feet here, you know."

Several participants described how they cried when they heard they were to be evicted. The sense of loss was clear even in interviews that took place months or years after the eviction experience. Living across the valley from her former home, Taya said "I still cannot bear looking in that direction, because...we had such a happy time there." They mourned the loss of their community. Helen's house was special partly because "I had cousins all around me." Giselle talked about how at the house, her children "had so many friends and they would go out and play at night." Nancy's friend lived close by and supported her parenting: "when my oldest boy was really, really new and we were struggling quite a lot she would literally

come to my house at 10 o'clock at night to help me, she'd come over, put him to sleep and say, 'bye I'm going to bed now'." After moving, some participants missed their former home: "I really love [suburb] and I really, me and my husband, really felt like part of a community... We don't do anything now, we just go to work and home" (Diane).

Participants usually knew the reason for their eviction – the landlords' desire to sell or renovate the property, or have family move in, or the increase in their own family size or the deterioration of the relationship with the landlord – but struggled to make sense of what had happened. They emphasised that they had done nothing wrong; "we've looked after [the house] perfectly, kept the grounds tidy" (Penny); "we were there for ages, never ever missed a rent payment ever, we were tidy, there were no issues at all" (Mia). Eviction, as Katrina explained, "makes you feel, basically like a bit of dirt on the bottom of someone's shoe, you know when someone treats you like that." Awhina, separated from her grandchild when she moved in with a friend after her eviction, said "You feel helpless, no control over anything. Everything else that year makes your life look like there's no sun, no ray of hope."

The warm feelings towards their former home, and the feelings of devastation and outrage at the loss of it, speak to the importance of home. Home is a vital source of ontological security, a sense of continuity and constancy in the world³¹; feeling "at home" in one's dwelling connotes a feeling of ease, comfort and control.³² As one of our participants put it, when describing their attachment to their former home, "That house was a home" (Jenny).

3.2 | Stress caused by eviction

Being evicted was a stressful experience. Many people felt overwhelmed and helpless:

I was stunned. I was like, oh my gosh, what am I going to do now? How am I going to get on? Everything just came to mind like, how am I going to move my stuff out? Where am I going to go? Where are my whānau going to go? ...Yeah, so how did I feel? I felt helpless, helpless to say it in a nutshell (Awhina).

I just wanna cry, only cos I have baby, if I was alone I think I would be able to... I'm trying to handle it and I am trying to be strong. I have no choice but to be strong and that's for my babies, but the fear is over-riding everything (Kaia).

One key stressor was the search for a new house. The rental market was highly competitive. Failing to obtain the tenancy was disheartening: "you're waiting, waiting and then, you know, to find out that you didn't get it, that kind of stuff buggers you up a little bit" (Diane). Particular challenges were for people with low incomes, with pets or large families or with poor credit or tenancy histories; "No one takes a chance if you have made one mistake

in life, you get on the 'No' list and it becomes impossible" (Alice). People were anxious to keep on the landlord's good side because of this; 'you have that awful fear that your reputation as a tenant is going to be absolutely ruined because they do that, they tell people' (Katrina). For Rawiri, finding a new place in his community was hard because his former landlord, with whom he had been in dispute over the bond, owned many of the rental properties that came on the market.

The second source of stress was the cost of paying rent in advance and bond at the new place. Bonds were a struggle to pay for some tenants: "We had no bond saved up because we had no intention of moving...Trying to scrounge up bond money alone was stress and that was without even trying to think about moving and trying to even find a house to live in" (Nancy). Some of the participants who found new places were unable to get the end of one tenancy to line up with the start of the next: "I was literally paying rent in two houses, but there was no other way to do it" (Alice). The financial strain was especially difficult for those who had difficulty getting their bond back due to disagreements about who was responsible for damage to the house during the tenancy or the standard of cleanliness. Tenants have access to a government agency¹ for mediation or adjudication on disputes with the landlord, but most chose not to contact the agency. In some cases, this was because the landlord was a family member, or because they were relying on that landlord to give them a reference to secure a new rental; in other cases, as discussed subsequently, participants saw legal action as an additional source of stress.

The costs associated with eviction were the third stressor. People paid for moving trucks, for storing their belongings with family or friends or in commercial storage facilities, and for skip bins to dispose of rubbish or belongings, they could not afford to store. Some participants had to pay additional transport costs when searching for new places and then commuting to work and school from their new housing or temporary housing. For example, Wiremu and Jenny, who were eventually housed in emergency housing on the other side of their city, spent \$150 on petrol per week to drive 45 min to drop their children at their school. Some participants took time off work to search for a house or to move house.

The stress of eviction affected the relationships of some participants. Helen and her son began to argue. Jane found that the eviction was a stressor to her new relationship; she wanted to take legal action whereas "he didn't want to fight it, he was just like 'we have got to find somewhere else.'" Some participants described arguing more with their partners and children as they tried to work out what to do after learning about the eviction. The stress described by some participants had long-term consequences. As Sasha said, "I think after being burnt by that landlord it has made me a bit more concerned about what could come up.... It just made me realise how precarious situations can be."

Stress affected people's health. Participants discussed how anxiety resulted in stomach pains, impaired breastmilk production and made them lose sleep and lose weight. Helen said: "I lost nearly

15 kg and I am not a very... It takes a lot to make me cry but I was very tearful. Very despondent." For some participants, the eviction came at a particularly stressful time and compounded other difficulties in their lives. Amiria had to move just 2 weeks after she brought her newborn baby home from intensive care. Tania was evicted after her partner, who held the tenancy, died. Alice described the feeling of being overwhelmed by coping with pregnancy at the same time as an eviction: "I burst into tears, I honestly burst into tears because I was already having problems with my pregnancy and I wasn't sleeping. It was a really rough time."

The stress also affected children. Diane's children "were worried too, because there were so many of us, and it was hard to get a house." Nancy recalled how it took her son a month before he could sleep properly at the new house, and Polly described how her daughter still called the old house hers. The stress could manifest in poor behaviour: "It got to that point where they were all getting in to trouble at school, they were doing nothing, they didn't want to do anything because they didn't want to move from there. Because they felt that that house was a home" (Jenny).

Government and other social service agencies that could provide help were sometimes another sources of stress. Helen described "all the emotions...running in' as she considered how she did not have enough money and how she would have to call the welfare agency² for help: "Oh my gosh, I've got to face them and what if they say no." For Nancy, "it was hard to know where to look for help." She tried to access a loan from the welfare agency to help with her moving costs but reported that "they weren't even open to discussing it." Katrina only found out long after her eviction that this loan was available; "If you don't know the system, there's not really a lot telling you." Some participants were on the public housing³ waiting list but were well aware that their situation did not make them top priority: "I don't know where I am in the line, but I know one thing- I won't be before, you know, the single parent with kid" (Jonny).

Some participants contacted the government tenancy agency⁴ for advice on their situation. This was useful in some cases, although, as Giselle reflected, "you still feel like you are very much on your own with it." Some participants took legal action against the landlord for issues such as the bond being withheld, retaliatory eviction or insufficient notice. However, the stress involved in doing this put others off: "we did forfeit a couple of hundred dollars just because at that point I was in such a state, I was just like, I can't deal with this anymore" (Awhina); "I was exhausted, I was just too exhausted" (Kelly). These participants thought legal action was not worth the effort: "getting compensation isn't going to get me another home...It's time I don't have" (Kaia); "I'll win and then I'd still be homeless" (Penny). Cairen, who won her case that the landlord gave her retaliatory notice, thought that her compensation was insufficient. She reflected: "it's a hell of a lot of work. I wouldn't do that again."

As noted in the discussion of ontological security, ideally a home is a place to feel safe and protected from the stresses of the world. The myriad of stressors that arise from an eviction help explain the many detrimental mental health impacts observed by international studies.³³

3.3 | Post-eviction housing experiences

Due to the difficulty of finding a new place after eviction, some participants ended up in housing situations that exposed them to further health risks.

A number of participants moved into inappropriate housing after eviction. Diane's rent increased by \$250; "if we had a choice, that wouldn't have been the place we would choose. But we had no choice, we were down to four days [before we had to move]." Other participants described staying in places with faulty wiring or connected to electricity via an extension cord to another house. Linda and her children stayed in a small room at her cousin's house, using blankets and a small heater donated by a charity: "cold, damp, no heating and no alarms, no nothing." Awhina described the garage she moved into:

Had a shower and toilet in it, no insulation. It was cold, concrete floor. You could see the gaps in between the window and the timber and you could see outside, it was visible. So we used paper and whatever else to cover those gaps. It was freezing. We couldn't even lock the door.

Research in the United States has also found that people tend to live in worse housing following an eviction.²⁷

Following evictions, some participants became homeless. They moved in with friends or family or moved into cars or emergency accommodation including camping grounds. Staying with family led to overcrowded living situations. In one of the places Jenny stayed, "there was 12 kids plus three adults living in a two-and-a-half bedroom flat." Living with family and friends had some advantages. Tania was forced to move when her partner, who held the tenancy, died. Staying with her mother gave her the support she needed at a difficult time. However, staying with friends and family could be difficult. Polly and her family went to stay with close friends; with all the time together, and living in close quarters, 'that friendship between the four adults started to get really strained'. After a second eviction, Polly and her daughter moved in with her parents, which was also difficult: "it like I felt like I was 18 years old again." Taya and her children stayed with her children's grandfather, but "after one week grandad said, I think you better go because the children put too much jam on their sandwiches." Awhina and her family were able to stay with her friend for several months, but, "that was long, so come to Christmas, and she basically wanted us out." The experience of these participants reflects international research which shows that eviction is a common precursor to homelessness.⁹

A number of participants reported a number of physical health consequences of becoming homeless or living in poor-quality housing after eviction. They reported taking up unhealthy behaviours, such as drinking alcohol and eating less nutritious food. Amruta, Wiremu and Jenny reported that they relied on takeaways when they were homeless, because they were unable to store food safely, or because there were no functional cooking facilities. One of Wiremu



FIGURE 1 Connections between eviction and poor health outcomes

and Jenny's sons got bad eczema when he stayed with an aunt after being evicted, as a result of the dust in her house. When Polly and her family stayed in a caravan for 2 months, her 2-year-old daughter got sick: "she picked up a really bad cold and we ended up in hospital for one or two nights just because she couldn't breathe properly." Some participants' asthma worsened: "I'd get sick and then I'd just get sicker and then it just gets really hard to breathe and then it's just this cycle" (Amruta). Although the connection between eviction and respiratory health specifically has not been investigated, both homelessness and living in substandard housing are strongly associated with adverse respiratory outcomes.¹

Post-eviction shelter also had consequences for emotional and mental health. Some participants reported that they were separated from members of their family – partners, children, grandchildren – because friends and family could not accommodate them all. This was difficult. For Awhina, being parted from her grandchild was "devastating." When Polly and her partner were separated, life was "tough"; "the communication between us stopped and it was like, I felt like I was a single parent." Jenny was depressed and drunk heavily when she lived in an emergency accommodation at a campground after her eviction. Amruta, and Jenny's son, were suicidal during the period of transience following their evictions; "I was just really down and depressed and having a really hard time... It felt like it was never going to end" (Amruta). Homelessness and housing instability are closely associated with poor mental health.³⁴

4 | DISCUSSION

Eviction ruptures the connection between a person and their home. It is an event that highlights how important housing is to health. Our study is the first to explore the experience of eviction in New Zealand. We found that it is a stressful event that can lead people to grief and mourning for the home they lost and can cause them to move into homelessness or substandard housing conditions, which leads to further stress. As represented in Figure 1, each of these situations – grief, stress and poor housing conditions – can lead to poor health outcomes.

The finding that some participants experienced grief at the loss of their home is a salient one. Grief as a response to the loss of home has previously been investigated only in the context of

mass displacement when entire communities have been removed. Interviews with residents of Boston's demolished West End in the 1950s first showed that "for the majority it seems quite precise to speak of their reactions as expressions of *grief*"^{35, (p359)} They shared a sense of painful loss, of longing for the former home, of helplessness, anger and distress. Subsequent studies on forced displacement as a result of slum clearance, infrastructure development, urban renewal and public housing development echo the descriptions of grief³⁶; a forced move "almost invariably involves loss and bereavement-like symptoms amongst those uprooted and relocated."^{37 (p159)} This may be considered a form of disenfranchised grief, in that a person experiencing the loss of a home is not necessarily socially recognised as having a right to mourn.³⁸ It is eviction, writes Slatter, that "highlights the distinction between 'housing' and 'home'," as the property rights of the owner are prioritised over the rights of the tenant to occupy the home.³⁹ The loss of a home was not just the loss of shelter; it was the loss of a source of ontological security – of that control, constancy and security that is so vital to emotional health.⁴⁰ The experience of a rental housing eviction is different from the experience of relocation after an entire community is destroyed, yet our participants share these feelings of grief. Their home still exists, but they are not allowed inside; this grief caused one participant to avoid even looking at her former home.

Second, eviction led to stress. This was because of the difficulty of finding a new home, of moving, of living through homelessness, of family separation and doubling up and of coping with increased financial pressure as a result of moving and storage, the costs of paying bonds and higher rent and of taking time off work. Parents reported that their children were worried about becoming homeless, confused about where their home was and was playing up at school. Participants chose not to pursue legal action, finding the process stressful and unrewarding. This finding supports other research which has linked eviction and poor mental health^{6-9,33} and the suggestion that eviction is categorised as a stressful life event.⁹ Stressful life events associates events with risks for, and exacerbation of a range of conditions including depression, heart disease, autoimmune diseases, respiratory disease and mortality.⁴¹ It is worth noting that some participants mentioned other eviction experiences but chose not to discuss these. As research conducted with homeless people has made clear, multiple home losses, combined with potentially other types of trauma, are likely to have a cumulative impact.⁴²

Finally, eviction in many cases led to exposure to housing-related health risks. A number of our participants became homeless after their eviction, staying in cars, camping grounds, emergency housing and, most commonly, with family and friends. Some participants moved away from health providers and reported feeling depressed and suicidal and having a problem with respiratory health and eczema as a result of the housing they lived in after their eviction. Health issues have similarly been observed in international studies about the effects of eviction.⁶⁻¹¹ Some participants described taking up unhealthy behaviours and described cold, damp and crowded housing conditions that their desperation for a new home compelled them to accept. International research also shows that eviction often

leads to homelessness or a downgrade in housing,^{24,29,34,43} which have a range of negative health impacts.^{1,26} Some participants reported that staying with family and friends after being evicted harmed relationships, as families were separated or forced to live in close quarters. "Doubling up" has been found to harm social capital, and with it, the potential to draw on those supportive networks in future times of crisis.⁴⁴ Crowding is well-established as harmful to health.^{1,45} Living in housing which was not affordable, as some of our participants had to, can force people to make compromises on spending for food, energy and other necessities.² Living in poor quality, crowded or expensive housing is immensely stressful for people.¹ Posteviction living arrangements compounded the stress initiated by the eviction itself.

Drawing on the experience of our participants, we now discuss potential policies that could mitigate the adverse health effects of eviction.

One way of mitigating eviction's adverse health effects is through preventing evictions from occurring. This can occur through changing tenancy law to make rental housing more secure and through supporting people to sustain their tenancy.⁴⁶ Examples of both types of initiative were implemented in New Zealand recently. In 2020, the government made "no cause" evictions illegal⁵ and extended to private tenants a programme comprising practical support, budgeting and life skills advice to tenants and advocacy to their landlords.⁶ Both initiatives have the potential to help many tenants. However, it is salient to note that neither the legislative change or the social programme would have helped our research participants, who were evicted due to the landlord's desire to use the property for a different purpose, and for reasons that were legal at the time and that remain legal, such as house sale, renovation or the landlord's family moving in. A range of other factors may also decrease the likelihood or frequency of eviction: wage and benefit increases to ensure people can pay their rent, increasing the supply of private rental housing, cooling the property market (eviction commonly occurs as a result of house sale⁴⁷) and enabling more people to access public housing, where tenancies are more secure.

If eviction cannot be avoided, its adverse health effects could be lessened through the prevention and treatment of some of the stress and grief associated with eviction. It would be appropriate to provide counselling to evicted tenants through that grief, and ongoing support that helps tenants find new housing and build connections to new homes. Some of the stress that evicted tenants go through could be reduced by providing evicted tenants with case managers to find secure replacement housing, source funding to cover tenants' costs, advise on affordable moving and storage options and advocate for tenants to former and future landlords and to employers if their employment is affected by the eviction.

Addressing the harm caused by eviction entails ensuring that evictees do not move on to the risky housing situations experienced by our participants: homelessness, crowding and substandard or expensive housing. Such initiatives include programmes to increase the amount of public and other housing, to house people in permanent housing (ie Housing First) and to improve the quality of existing

housing (ie Healthy Housing Initiatives). These type of programmes has been shown to deliver health gains.^{48,49}

There were a number of limitations to our research. Rent arrears are the leading cause of eviction in other countries.^{43,50} Rent arrears may have been a contributing factor to some of the evictions experienced by our participants, but none of the participants disclosed this. People evicted for rent arrears are under many stresses that may have them disconnected to social services and advocacy agencies, through which we recruited participants. A second limitation of our research is that most of our participants were women; men, youth, migrants and disabled people were not well represented in our sample. However, US research indicates that having children is a risk factor for being evicted, as is being a woman and being an ethnic minority.⁹ If this is the case in New Zealand, our research participants, most of whom were women with children, and just over half of whom were Māori, are representative of a group at risk of eviction.

5 | CONCLUSION

Our study demonstrates ways in which eviction results in poor health outcomes. Some of these are direct and are observed by our research participants, such as the poor mental health that results from the grief and stress of being evicted, searching for a new house, and being homeless, and the effects on respiratory health of being poorly housed subsequent to eviction. The participants also described living conditions that followed eviction – high rent relative to income, poor quality or overcrowded housing, and homelessness – are well established as damaging to health. The study showed that the adverse health effects of eviction reported in other countries also occur in New Zealand. Preventing eviction and minimising its adverse effects should be a public health priority. This entails major policy initiatives to increase the supply of housing and to fund wide-ranging support services.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Tenancy Services, part of the Ministry of Business, Employment and Innovation.

² Work and Income New Zealand, part of the Ministry of Social Development.

³ Managed by the Ministry of Social Development.

⁴ Tenancy Services, part of the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment.

⁵ Under the Residential Tenancies Amendment Act 2020, periodic tenancies can only be ended for certain reasons, such as rent arrears, damage, major renovation, assault, house sale or the landlord or a family member moving in.

⁶ "Sustaining Tenancies": <https://www.hud.govt.nz/community-and-public-housing/support-for-people-in-need/our-housing-support-initiatives/sustaining-tenancies/>

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