Targeting Social Housing Allocations According to Greatest Need: 
The Example of Parisians Living in Substandard Housing

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Abstract

Drawing on an ethnographic study and a quantitative survey of more than 500 poorly housed people, this article probes the attitudes of Parisians living in substandard accommodation towards the policy of allocating social housing on the basis of most urgent need. This particular population yearns for social housing not just because of its low rentals and decent living conditions, but also because it represents a form of social recognition. Due to the scarcity of this commodity, however, the present needs-based allocation procedure has given rise to a great deal of tension. Some tenants resort to desperate measures in a bid to be rehoused and may end up openly defying the institutions or reacting with hostility towards their rivals in the “race for a council flat”. Whether or not the rehousing policy arouses feelings of injustice depends on the position of the applicant on the housing register and his or her social situation.

Introduction

For most people living in French cities, housing has become a key concern. Spiralling urban property prices mean that access to good quality housing is now difficult not just for the unemployed or the working classes but for the majority of the population. People who have no financial wherewithal, who are undocumented or who are stigmatized because of their ethnic origins sometimes have to fall back on unsuitable solutions, such as living in insanitary flats, staying with friends or camping all year round. The situation is particularly critical in Paris. Rents in the private sector are so high that the most socially excluded have no hope whatsoever of finding decent accommodation other than in the social housing sector. The problem is that demand massively outstrips supply. In the French capital, there are more than 100,000 people on the register, with 40,000 new applications each year, and approximately only 8,000 units are allocated annually. Competition in the "race" for rent-controlled housing is therefore fierce and the institutional players are forced to classify applicants according to the urgency of their need. The policy of eliminating substandard housing in Paris, introduced in 2002, stipulates that top priority should be given to people on welfare and medical grounds (see Box 1). This institutional stance is, however, far from popular. When the material conditions required for self-

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1 According to the figures published by the Observatoire des loyers de l’agglomération parisienne (Paris urban agglomeration rent monitoring centre, OLAP), rents in the private sector in Paris rose by an average of 5.2% in 2002, 4.2% in 2003 and 4.4% in 2004. Over the last five years, there has been a cumulative rise of 22.2% in the French capital, even though inflation for the same period was just 8.9%. A property bought in 2000 is now worth at least twice as much as it was then.
fulfilment are in short supply, we tend to see an increase in hostile reactions, feelings of injustice and conflicts. Just as Jon Elster showed that the allocation of kidneys to patients gives rise to disputes because of their rarity (Elster & Herpin, 1992), so the way in which social housing is now allocated sparks conflicts between applicants and institutions and sets competing groups against each other.

This article studies the attitudes of people living in substandard housing towards the targeting of social housing to those with the most urgent need. It shows how the difficulty of obtaining something to which we are all entitled, both legally and theoretically, has led to a deterioration in social relations. We begin by explaining that this particular population aspires to social housing not just on account of its low rentals and guarantee of decent living conditions, but also because it represents a form of social recognition. We then set out the problems linked to the procedure that is currently used to allocate social housing. What strategies do people resort to in order to gain access to decent housing – a basic human necessity? What tensions does this create, not just between the poorly housed and the institutions but also among the poorly housed themselves? Drawing on the results of my field research (see Box 2), I demonstrate that the policy that is currently being implemented in Paris can force people to take desperate measures and may well trigger feelings of injustice, depending on their position in relation to the rehousing policy and their social situation.

Box 1. The scheme to eliminate substandard housing

In 2002, the City of Paris introduced a scheme to eliminate substandard housing and charged the Société Immobilière d'Économie Mixte de la Ville de Paris (City of Paris public-private real estate partnership, SIEMP) with implementing it. The aim was to rehouse the occupants of buildings declared unfit for human habitation and to give subsidies to the owners of buildings that were in a slightly better state of repair, so that these could be upgraded. In reality, responsibilities are shared between several different institutional entities (see Table A in the Appendix). It is the Sous-DIRECTION de l’Aménagement (renovation sub-department, SDA) of the SIEMP that processes condemned buildings, many of them home to squatters, which either belong to the city council or have been purchased by the SIEMP. As a block of flats managed by the SDA has to be emptied before being either demolished or renovated, it may come to be regarded as a "rehousing springboard". The SIEMP’s Sous-DIRECTION de la Copropriété (joint ownership sub-department, SDC) looks after privately-owned buildings that are in a slightly better state of repair, in which some of the flats are owned by the SIEMP (either awaiting renovation or available as rent-controlled accommodation). The aim is to help private owners upgrade the block of flats in joint ownership by improving the fabric of the building with money from the public purse. Privately-owned buildings that are in an insanitary condition but do not fall within the ambit of an Opération Programmée pour l’Amélioration de l’Habitat (programmed housing improvement operation, OPAH) are covered by an Opération d’Amélioration de l’Habitat Dégradé (substandard housing improvement operation, OAHD). As with the substandard blocks of flats handled by the SDC, action here is mainly limited to improvements to the fabric of the buildings.

Box 2. The survey

The survey covered dwellings labelled as "substandard" by the institutions and, more specifically, blocks of flats covered by the scheme to eliminate substandard housing. Under an Industrial Contract for Training through Research (CIFRE), I carried out the research for my PhD whilst working for the SIEMP. In the course of these three-and-a-half years, I took part in numerous field visits and gained an insider’s view of how Parisian institutions tackle insanitary housing conditions. I also conducted 48 semistructured interviews with institutional players, a further thirty or so with the occupants of substandard housing and five with campaigners.

2 Urban housing improvement operations conducted in specific sectors for a fixed period, OPAHs enable owners to obtain generous subsidies for upgrading their housing units.
The second stage in the survey consisted in administering a questionnaire in a face-to-face setting with 520 particularly poorly housed individuals. One objective was to ensure that the apartment buildings included in the sample were truly representative of the different institutional systems, all the while avoiding ones that were – relatively speaking – in "too good a state of repair", as their occupants would not have felt sufficiently concerned by the problem of insanitary conditions. As a result, buildings managed by the SDC, the SIEMP or an OAHD, and thus presenting major difficulties, were over-represented, while those which only had problems in the communal areas were excluded. I carried out this selection process with the help of institutional players, on the basis of descriptions of each building. A variety of criteria were taken into account, including the building’s level of deterioration, its size, its occupancy status, its geographical location and the origins (social and geographical) of its occupants. The interviewers were instructed to survey the occupants of the first apartment on the left at the top of the stairs on each floor. However, given the difficulties inherent to working in the field, interviews sometimes had to be conducted as and when the opportunities presented themselves. For the same reason, the interviewers were not given any particular instructions about how to select the people they chose to interview within each household. At the end of the day, although the sample we surveyed may not have been representative in the statistical sense of the term, it nonetheless reflected the population living in substandard housing in Paris.

Social housing: the objective

People end up in insanitary housing in Paris because they have social issues barring their access to decent housing in the private rented sector. More than 80% of the people we interviewed were of immigrant origin, and nearly a third of these were undocumented. Largely unskilled (a mere 23% had had some form of higher education), they were also economically insecure, in that a quarter of households had less than 600 euros to live on each month and belonged to the poorest 10% of the French population (see Table 1). Given the soaring rents, the demands made by landlords in terms of guarantees and the discrimination that prevails in the property market, these people are effectively excluded from the race for housing.

Table 1. Distribution of monthly household incomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantiles</th>
<th>Monthly income of households occupying substandard housing in Paris (in euros)</th>
<th>Monthly disposable income of French households (in euros)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100% have less than</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>99%</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95%</td>
<td>2,300</td>
<td>5,175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75% (Q3)</td>
<td>1,400</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50% median</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>2,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25% (Q1)</td>
<td>600</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>956</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source 2: 2004 Insee-DGI survey of tax revenue.
Reference population 1: households living in substandard housing in Paris; N = 493.
Reference population 2: French households whose declared income is above or equal to zero and where the reference person is not a student.
Note: A household’s disposable income is defined as gross income from work, assets, transfers from other households and social security benefits (including retirement pensions and unemployment benefit), minus direct taxes. The following direct taxes are generally taken into account: income tax, council tax, the generalized social contribution (CSG) and the social debt repayment contribution (CRDS). As it would have been difficult to delve into this level of complexity in our survey of the poorly housed, we therefore took the total income of the interviewee and his or her partner (where relevant) into account, including welfare payments.
When we worked out the amount of money that these households might have to pay for a decent flat with enough living space for each family member in the private rented sector\(^3\), we soon realized just what a dead end they find themselves in. Fifty percent of households would have to devote more than 60% of their income to accommodation, while 25% would be in the impossible situation of having to pay more than 140% and only 25% would have to spend less than 37% (Table 2). With the exception of this last fraction of the population, access to this type of housing is therefore totally out of the question, either because the household has insufficient means or because there would not be enough left over to cover other basic needs. As we did not take service charges into account, the situation would be even more difficult in real life.

Table 2. Proportion of household income that would have to go on renting a suitably sized flat in the private rented sector in Paris

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantiles</th>
<th>Proportion of household income that would have to go on renting a suitably sized flat in Paris in the private rented sector (in %)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>75% would devote less than x% of their income to accommodation (Q3)</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50% Median</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25% (Q1)</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0% (Minimum)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2005 SIEMP/ERIS survey.
Reference population: occupants of buildings covered by the scheme to eliminate substandard housing in Paris; \(N = 493\).

**Interpretation:** 75% of the households included in the survey would spend less than 140% of their income on a suitably sized flat in Paris in the private rented sector. Of these, 25% would spend more than their total current income and 25% less than 37% of their income.

In addition, even those people who could afford to spend more on rent in order to improve their residential situation are loathe to make such a sacrifice, as it would require them to make drastic cuts in their consumption expenditure. The "amount left to live on", that is, the money left over to spend on items other than housing, might well become the amount "left to survive on" (Vanoni & Robert, 2007). According to M. C., people in this situation enter a downward spiral of deprivation tantamount to "proletarization":

"I’d really like my son to have his own room, with all his toys. Just like everyone else. I’ve got enough money to buy him toys and to kit out his bedroom and all that, but unfortunately I don’t have the means to pay 1,300 euros a month, OK? If I did do that, it’d become a vicious circle. I’d no longer be able to buy food or a little toy for my son, and I’d end up as one of the socially disadvantaged." (Interview 77)

This squatter made the same observation:

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\(^3\) I based my calculation of the amount of living space required by each household on the standards set out in the social housing allocation regulations for the Paris **département**. Put simply, a household is deemed to require at least 14 m\(^2\) per person to feel comfortable. By multiplying this area by the average rent per square metre, we arrived at the price that households would have to pay to enjoy decent accommodation in the private sector. According to the OLAP, on 1\(^{st}\) January 2006, the average monthly rent (excluding service charges) was 17 euros per square metre. If we set this potential rent against the households’ actual income (including social security benefits), we can work out the proportion of income that would have to be spent in order to enjoy suitable accommodation.
"Supposing I earned 1,200 euros. A private landlord would charge me 600 euros and that wouldn’t suit me - half my wages would go on accommodation. That’s too much. I prefer a little council flat, no hassle, at 400 euros. With 150 euros in housing benefit, or whatever. I end up paying 250, I’ve got enough left over to eat, buy clothes, save a bit for holidays. I get to live my life. [...] What’s destroying people is the cost of housing, rents. Sometimes people pay 800, 700 euros a month. He works, his wife doesn’t, she’s a housewife or on the dole. So he doesn’t have any leisure, never goes on holiday, always in a bad way, never happy. He’s got problems, he looks at other people and says, ‘So that’s that’. He doesn’t even have enough to buy a drink with his friends or to pay for something, a round. So he’s not happy. He says, ‘OK, I live in Paris, but….. Bah!’" (Interview 78)

Excessively high rents condemn low-income tenants to a life of deprivation (Coing, 1973). What is the point of having adequate housing if you are constantly having to tighten your belt? Some of these occupants therefore find themselves caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, forced to choose between living a life and being decently housed. Whatever their social situation, few poorly housed people think that their future lies in private rented accommodation and pin all their hopes on social housing, as this guarantees them decent living conditions without demanding excessive deprivation in return4. Apart from its attractively low rents, social housing is also coveted for its security of tenure (open-ended rental agreements), which is regarded as a safety net and particularly appreciated by poorly housed people:

"-Frankly, I’d prefer to live in an OPAC5 flat, and that’s the truth. Honestly, an OPAC or SAGI6 flat... a rent-controlled flat.
-Why? Because...
-Why? Because I think it’s safer.
-I see. You’re afraid that...
-What am I afraid of? Tomorrow, if it’s a privately owned flat, the landlord can say to me, ‘I want to sell my property’. [...] If he says to the court, ‘My son’s going to move in’ and if his son doesn’t have anywhere else to live, the court will tell me to ‘look for somewhere else, please’.
And there you are.
-I see. So it’s for the security?
-Yes, security. Frankly, the security. You have to look for security... As foreigners, we have to make security our priority.” (Interview 76)

Social housing offers people in the most insecure situations and those who encounter discrimination a number of important guarantees. For many interviewees with uncertain employment prospects, rent-controlled housing brings much-needed stability and peace of mind. This coincides with Bourdieu’s observation that individuals bereft of education, occupational training and capital aspire to "secure" employment, sometimes attaching greater importance to the regularity of their wage packet than to its contents (Bourdieu et al., 1963). Social housing therefore represents a means of stabilizing one’s social position over the long term. For all these reasons, poorly housed people in Paris have a unique relationship to social housing. “Council tenant” usually comes bottom in the residential status league table and has some stigma attached to it. However, the opposite is true for this population, especially for people of immigrant origin, who often compare themselves with acquaintances who have managed to obtain a rent-controlled flat, presenting it as a form of success and social integration:

"Because in our society, I can tell you, frankly, if you know other people in the African community, when you have a council flat, pardon me if I’ve got this wrong, but you’re a bit

4 In Ile-de-France, social rents are twice as low on average as those in the private sector and up to four times lower in Paris itself. Source: Union Sociale pour l’Habitat d’Ile-de-France (Social Union for Housing in Ile de France, AORIF), Chiffres clés - le logement social en Ile-de-France, January 2006.
5 Office Public d’Aménagement et de Construction (public office for development and construction, OPAC).
6 Société Anonyme de Gestion Immobilière (private real estate operator, SAGI).
privileged. [...] So much so that there are people here, when they get a council flat, it’s like a… It’s a consecration!” (Interview 76)

In the eyes of the African immigrant population, insanitary accommodation is therefore a sign of inferiority, whereas a rent-controlled flat is a form of social recognition. Accordingly, rehousing is not just about comfort, but also about gaining respectability in the eyes of fellow members of the community:

"Because tomorrow, those guys [the other members of the community] will criticize you. Tomorrow, they’ll say, ‘He’s been in France for thirty years, that guy…. But he’s still living in a squat, he’s near the dustbins.’ It’s total humiliation, so you just have to shut your ears and keep on looking for a council flat until you find one, and then you can hold your head up high and say to all those people, ‘Well, look at me now, I’ve got my flat. Come on, then, you can talk, but I can talk, too.’ That’s what it’s like with Africans, that’s my experience of it, anyway.” (Interview 76)

It is easy to understand why these populations strive so hard to obtain a rent-controlled flat. With the most economically vulnerable being pushed out beyond the city’s boundaries, living in inner Paris has become a privilege. In this context, badly housed people regard social housing as a first – and not a last - resort. As well as being highly coveted for its reasonable rents and security of tenure, it is also seen as a positive social marker (insofar as it offers decent accommodation in Paris itself). These aspects explain why social housing allocation procedures are such a burning issue. For it is not just about gaining access to better living conditions, but also about validating a change in social status that people have often been waiting for years.

**Attitudes towards the social housing allocation policy**

Obtaining a rent-controlled flat is an end in itself for the occupants of substandard housing. They are extremely well informed about allocation procedures and sometimes adopt desperate strategies to improve their chances of being rehoused. They are quick to criticize institutional choices and to denounce the resulting injustices.

**A policy that runs counter to the classic principles of social housing allocation**

If we are to understand attitudes to the current social housing allocation policy, we need to remember that it relies on a hierarchy of criteria, giving top priority to serious health risks (insanitary conditions, lead poisoning, etc.) and relegating all other problems, including overcrowding. As Didier Fassin demonstrated with regard to the regularization of foreign nationals, procedures giving people rights are increasingly dominated by physical and health concerns (Fassin, 2001). This explains the adoption of a needs-based housing allocation system, where protection takes the form of rehousing in a rent-controlled flat, emergency accommodation, subsidies, and so forth. More generally, this trend can be viewed as part of a shift away from a "social state" and towards a "human rights state", where the community sees it as its duty to put an end to the most shocking situations by maintaining a survival threshold. In the process, they move from an overall vision to an increasingly closely targeted one, where the emphasis is on reparation (Bec, 2007).

The prioritization of urgent need, an integral part of the drive to eliminate insanitary housing, has several implications, linked to the fact that buildings posing a risk to human health are inhabited by people with less economic and cultural capital, and who are also generally either undocumented immigrants or squatters (see Table 2). Most importantly, it undermines the notions of social order and what Serge Paugam refers to as the "status logic", whereby "the most deprived people are assisted in the name of social justice and the community’s duty towards those in need, without any substantial modification of the existing structure" (Paugam, 2002: XVI-XVII). The defining feature of the current allocation policy is that it runs counter to the principle of less eligibility, which is based on the belief that the recipients of aid should never receive as much as the lowest-paid workers, so as to deter the latter from claiming welfare. Many Parisians have considerable difficulty finding somewhere to live
and often have to put up with poorer living conditions than people in social housing, which is governed by extremely strict regulations. As a result individuals rehoused on the grounds of insanitary conditions may well end up in flats that are "superior" to those occupied by people who have not benefited from institutional assistance. The needs-based approach therefore overturns the de facto hierarchy of poorly housed people that prevails in the property market. It disrupts the gradual course of upward residential mobility whereby an improvement in a person’s social situation is supposedly reflected in access to better quality housing. Daniel Béhar’s image of the housing applicant queue therefore has to be completely turned on its head:

"We picture households in urgent need of housing being lined up in single file. The most socially excluded start out at the end of the queue and gradually climb the steps leading to the top, where the only reason why the council flat’s door then stays shut in their face is their lack of solvency." (Béhar, 1997: 2)

According to Béhar, housing applicants can only reach the top step if they have successfully negotiated all the previous ones. Poorly housed Parisians, on the other hand, need to stay as far away as possible from that top step if their applications are to be considered. Thus, instead of running parallel, the "road to integration" and "the road to housing" diverge.

Table 2. Systems responsible for substandard dwellings according to occupants’ characteristics (in %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SDA (priority rehousing)</th>
<th>SDC (no priority rehousing)</th>
<th>OAHD (no priority rehousing)</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Born in France</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal immigrant</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undocumented immigrant</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very poor (less than € 300 per month per person)</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor (€ 300-800)</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less poor (more than € 800)</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled occupation</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle-level occupation</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled occupation</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never been in employment</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never attended school, or primary education only</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary education</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor French comprehension</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good French comprehension</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner-occupier</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenant</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>67.0</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In hotel accommodation</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Squatter</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2005 SIEMP/ERIS survey.

Reference population: occupants of substandard housing in Paris.

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7 The regulations governing the allocation of social housing in Paris (Article 12), stipulate that there must be a minimum floor area and volume of 14 m² and 33 m³ per inhabitant for the first four inhabitants and 10 m² and 23 m³ per occupant thereafter. These flats are therefore not only in a good state of repair but above all match the size of the household – something which is becoming a luxury for low-income families living in the French capital.
Moreover, a needs-based allocation policy driven by compassion subverts the notion of "rational-legal authority" (Weber, 1995), which owes its legitimacy to law and impersonal regulations. In every other walk of life, irregularity is relentlessly hunted down and undocumented immigrants have no rights, but in the housing sector, red tape is swept aside in the name of health needs. Similarly, although allocations are meant to be made partly on a “first come first served” basis, as recently arrived immigrants often occupy the most insanitary flats or have very young children, their rehousing is given priority.

This system of allocating social housing can easily engender hostile reactions and arguments over legitimacy. When an economic crisis dramatically increases the number of people seeking institutional assistance, poorly housed individuals in the least insecure situation lose all hope of being helped. As a result, the policy of eliminating substandard housing is causing these people to resort to desperate strategies and to reject the institutions’ rules, especially if they are excluded from rehousing despite their arguments of "statutory legitimacy" (essentially employment and legal status).

When only the worst will do

The prioritizing of need has given rise to a philosophy of "worst is best". In other words, people have to put themselves in the most insecure situation possible if an institution is to take an interest in them and improve their lot. Through word of mouth, information passed on by campaigning groups such as Droit au Logement (Right to housing, DAL) and the Abbé Pierre Foundation, and the applications that they make to the institutions, occupants end up with a pretty clear picture of the best roads to rehousing. Aware of the priority given to health needs, they sometimes conclude that it is best to live in the direst of conditions with the hope of being rehoused sometime in the future than to live in a flat that is in a good state of repair but simply does not meet their needs, and remain at the bottom of the waiting list. A squatter explains:

"You know, I can tell you that it’s better to be living in a squat with the hope of being rehoused by the OPAC than to live in a tiny flat in reasonable nick, because then the council comes along and says, 'This flat’s not too bad, a bit small but not too bad, no problem of insanitary conditions.' Because when conditions are really bad, you get rehoused.” (Interview 76)

According to him, people find it easy to choose between spending the rest of their lives in unsuitable private rented accommodation and enduring a few years of hardship if it means obtaining a rent-controlled flat. Even though none of our interviewees would admit to adopting this type of strategy themselves, many of them claimed to know a friend or family member who had done so. According to one official at the Direction de l’Urbanisme, du Logement et de l’Équipement (Department of Town Planning, Housing and Public Works, DULE), as soon as a building is condemned, "places" there sell like hotcakes, despite the deplorable living conditions, as they entitle their occupants to rehousing. One interviewee, for instance, paid 1,000 euros to buy out an occupant in a squat. Prices vary widely, depending mainly on the relations between buyer and seller (lower prices if they are friends or relatives), but the prospect of rehousing certainly raises the stakes. This underground market is a major concern for institutions, which take a range of precautions to counter it (e.g., carrying out numerous inventories and inspections, brickling up the empty units and "recruiting" other occupants to ensure that nobody moves into them). It goes without saying that the vast majority of poorly housed people live in substandard accommodation out of necessity, not choice. If they do happen to be aware of the institutions’ priorities, this usually results in nothing more than opportunistic inertia when they find out that their flat is covered by a rehousing measure. Nonetheless, some individuals would be quite prepared to move into a block of flats however insanitary, providing the SIEMP had decided to treat it as a priority, in order to take advantage of the wholesale rehousing of its occupants.

Because they have to sink “as low as possible” in order to earn entitlement, some people end up hoping for a lowering of their residential status. Given that homelessness is one of the criteria taken into account by the institutions, a man living in a residential hotel with his wife and children may long to be evicted. Some institutional players have even come across instances of flats being deliberately

8 Office Public d’Aménagement et de Construction (public office for development and construction, OPAC).
damaged. Campaigners, too, may espouse the notion that “worst is best”. By opening up condemned buildings, above and beyond its political objective and a genuine desire to help families, the DAL knows that the dangerous state of these buildings will be an added argument in favour of rehousing. This policy of tackling problems on the basis of the most urgent need have given rise to considerable tension between poorly housed people and the institutions. One particularly striking example is that of childhood lead poisoning, a disease directly linked to buildings in poor repair, which is taken extremely seriously by the institutions (Dietrich-Ragon, 2009). Many parents of children exposed to lead are angered by the fact that they have to wait for their children to be “sufficiently” poisoned for them to be entitled to social housing. Some even refuse offers of remedial work as it does nothing to alleviate their poor housing situation and, by reducing the urgency of their need, relegates their bid. One member of Propagande et Action Contre les Taudis de Paris (Propaganda and action against slums in Paris, PACTE de Paris)9 neatly sums up the paradox whereby people are unwilling to accept remedial work or to take the necessary precautionary measures:

“The paradox with lead is that it is almost worth ensuring that the children continue to be poisoned. If you give rehousing priority to people whose children have lead poisoning, what happens to people who are exposed to the same risk but who do everything they can to avoid their children being poisoned? […] Because they’re not stupid. They can see that people whose children have lead poisoning are rehoused. So when people whose children have been poisoned do everything they can, carrying their children up and downstairs, taking loads of precautions, and the lead levels go down, they’re told, ‘Well, you’re no longer a priority as your child’s no longer poisoned.’” (Interview 14)

Once again, despite what some people have insinuated, this does not mean that people deliberately expose themselves to a health risk. However, once they are confronted with this type of emergency, they may well attempt to take advantage of a situation that at long last corresponds to institutional priorities. This is also the logic behind refusals of institutional funding for work to upgrade their dwelling, in order to remain competitive in the “worst-is-best” stakes. This jockeying for position in the urgency stakes therefore results in an attitude whereby occupants are constantly playing up the health risk in their contacts with institutions and are extremely reluctant to accept anything that might improve their living conditions without leading to rehousing and thus push them further down the queue. Alongside this attitude, which can be explained by the desire to obtain a rent-controlled flat, some poorly housed individuals feel a deep sense of injustice about the allocation procedure and this can lead to hostile reactions and racism.

Hostile reactions and feelings of injustice

It is easy to see how aspects of the current social housing allocation policy, adopted as part of the scheme to eliminate substandard housing, could prompt feelings of injustice. However, people’s attitudes to it vary widely, depending on the likelihood of their application being considered and whether or not they have any social handicaps. The poorly housed people with the best chance of being rehoused on the basis of most critical need are those who live in the very worst conditions. For them, substandard housing can be viewed as the “logical follow-on” of a whole series of self-reinforcing social handicaps (e.g., undocumented status, exclusion from the job market, poor skills). They may even start to rationalize their situation, regarding it as temporary or as being in the nature of things. Undocumented immigrants, for instance, are reasonably accepting of this “rite-of-passage purgatory”. One squatter explained that before he was regularized, he had to be satisfied with his living conditions because his status prevented him from improving his lot. At that time, he did not feel particularly outraged:

“If I hadn’t been regularized, I would have contented myself with what I had. Because in this country, we’ve learned that if you’re undocumented, you’re entitled to next to nothing. But I was regularized four years ago, so I didn’t see why I’m still here. I ought to be housed. It was

9 PACTE de Paris is a not-for-profit organization set up in 1952 to improve the comfort and sanitary conditions of decrepit flats and buildings in the private rented sector in Paris. It helps to implement housing improvement schemes.
when I got my papers, when I started to work, have an income, that I started to feel ill at ease here. If I hadn’t been regularized, I wouldn’t have expected anything better..." (Interview 67)

M. Y. is still waiting to be regularized. "As a whole, [I’m satisfied with my living conditions], I will be until I get my papers. To live my life more, right. Otherwise, I’m happy …" (Interview 53)

Similarly, people who are unemployed or who work illegally tend to see their residential situation as reflecting their temporary inability to find a proper job and believe that it will improve when they finally get one.

Individuals who are more socially integrated, however, regard their failure to find a decent place to live as an injustice and a lowering of their social status. By rights, they should be regarded as respectable and integral members of society, as they “tick all the right boxes” (job, legal status, etc.), but the fact that they live in a slum discredits them and casts a dark shadow over what is otherwise a relatively coherent picture. M. C. is a good example of the discrepancy between her living conditions and her view of her place in society:

"Do you feel you are part of the most underprivileged class in Paris?
-Well, underprivileged... No, not underprivileged. No, not that. I wouldn’t say that because for me, someone who’s underprivileged is someone who’s got nothing, OK? That’s how I see things. A homeless person with nothing, that’s it. But I’ve got a job. A really good one! And look, I’ve got a mobile phone. I just went to Auchan and spent twenty euros on shopping. OK? I’m not underprivileged. [...] I just want a [decent place to live], And that’s something I haven’t got. And I say to myself, ‘That’s strange, I’ve got money, but I can’t get what I want.’"

(M. C., Interview 77)

Mme P. is painfully aware of a similar "mismatch":

"When I see people in the street, they say to me, ‘A lady like you can’t possible live in a place like that!’ People say, ‘What’s that respectable looking lady doing in that building?’" (Interview 80)

This same feeling of discrepancy lies at the heart of the revolt by second-generation North Africans who have enjoyed far greater social mobility than their parents but have not seen any corresponding improvement in their residential situation. Their bitterness stems from the fact that despite their qualifications and their struggle for integration, they still find themselves living in slums, like their manual labourer fathers. These individuals suffer what we could call a "status crisis", arising from the mismatch between their social status or "value" and their objective living conditions. Like some of the underpaid managers studied by Dubet who felt as though they had been fobbed off with a "pseudo-status" and were only "pretend managers" (Dubet, 2006), they regard substandard housing as proof of their "third-rate" status in French society. They see themselves as the victims of a fool’s bargain, for while they are urged to work hard and become socially integrated, the work/housing equation no longer applies and may even be turned on its head. They feel let down, taken for a ride by the very institutions in which they had placed their hopes.

Moreover, these are the people who are least likely to benefit from rehousing. The fact is that their living conditions are not as dire as those endured by individuals with the greatest number of social handicaps and their needs are therefore less urgent. This situation often leads them to express hostility towards their rivals in the council flat race. The policy of allocating housing according to the most urgent need means that instead of holding down a job, it is now social exclusion and a situation of extreme insecurity that guarantee access to decent housing. This paradox has prompted the descendants of immigrants to demand the restoration of the "social contract" whereby people who work and have an income are assured of decent housing. Most of them take the view that members of the mainstream population and legal immigrants, and more generally those who have been in France the longest, should be rehoused before undocumented immigrants. The comments of M. D., a Frenchman of Algerian origin who works as a lorry driver and delivery man, and lives in a relatively decent squat, are typical in this respect:

"Prestige symbols can be contrasted to stigma symbols, namely, signs which are particularly effective in drawing attention to a debasing identity discrepancy, breaking up what would otherwise be a coherent overall picture, with a consequent reduction in our valuation of the individual.” (Goffman, 1975, p. 57)
"I’ve had an identity card since 1966. I’m French. But what does that mean? I’m either homeless or in a squat, while they [African immigrants] are given flats as soon as they get here, just because they’ve got children. But that’s not logical. The authorities should do something to help the people who are already here, French people, people who work, who’ve got enough money for the rent, so that way they pay and everything... And after that, they can see to the foreigners.” (Interview 78)

These people are also outraged by the display of institutional compassion and the resulting prioritization of child protection. M. D. lives alone and does not think it fair that people with a child should be able to jump the queue:

"Even if a child’s living in a squat, it’s still a child, it arrived not long ago, just like its parents. They’ve made their application, they don’t work, so they should wait their turn. Well, that’s how it should be. It’s not up to the State to do anything. Just wait. Everyone should wait their turn. If I’m queuing at the bread shop, I don’t hold a child up and say ‘Look, I’ve got a child, so I’m going first!’ No, I wait. I wait my turn, even if the child’s tired.” (Interview 78)

As they are the least disadvantaged of all the poorly housed, they will only ever be considered for housing if the institutions abandon their wholly humanitarian approach. This is why they are in favour of a firmer policy that is less sensitive to human misery and more attentive to status:

“No children, no stories, no nothing... France is too humane and too stupid. […] They’ve found they can get benefits, and it works a treat. If I tried to get welfare, they’d say, ‘You’ve got papers and you’ve got a job, so you can take care of yourself’. So if someone’s undocumented and hasn’t got a job, hasn’t got anything at all, he’ll get plenty of help: housing, universal healthcare coverage….” (Interview 78)

Here, the old refrain about French working people being in a less favourable position than foreign nationals on benefits (Taguieff, 1991) is taken up by legal immigrants with reference to their undocumented peers and people who are unemployed. As Dubet observed, socially excluded individuals are suspected of being undeserving and of taking advantage of the welfare state, and their most virulent critics are precisely those people who live at the brink of exclusion and fear that they may be the ones to fall over the edge next (Dubet, 2007). At the same time, those poorly housed individuals who contest the policy of prioritizing need implement strategies designed to set themselves apart socially from the "scroungers", layabouts, "bad tenants" and so on who are supposedly unworthy of welfare and benefit illegitimately from rehousing. In a bid to show that they have a more legitimate claim to rehousing, they caricature the people they are seeking to distance themselves from ("scum", cheats and good-for-nothings), all the while stressing their own exemplary behaviour and values (integrity, rectitude and honesty). Their main argument is that they should not need to endure extreme situations in order to be decently housed. As M. A. puts it,

"Why should we need to go through extreme suffering to get a bloody flat? When you meet all the criteria and you’ve even got enough dosh. When you’ve got a job, you’ve got everything, your papers, You’re… you’re… you’ve got everything, right.” (Interview 67)

For people who enjoy a certain status, there is something profoundly unjust about having to go through this sort of purgatory.

The social housing allocation policy that is currently applied in Paris has therefore generated considerable tension and brought about widespread disillusionment with the institutions. Some poorly housed people resort to desperate measures, display racist reactions and openly oppose the institutions, sometimes ending up in court as either plaintiff or defendant[1]. They often start out with an understanding attitude, but as time goes by and their social status improves, this changes to a far more hostile and conflictual one.

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[1] Just as the institutions have already taken residents who refuse emergency solutions to court, in order to avert the risk of lead poisoning, so occupants exposed to health risks can take the institutions to court for failing in their duty to rescue.
Parishons living in substandard housing therefore come up against a “double dead end” in the housing market. Various social factors put them out of the running for decent accommodation in the private rented sector. At the same time, the doors of social housing remain firmly shut, unless they can demonstrate that they are facing a serious health risk. In this situation of deadlock, weary of being virtually consigned to “house arrest”, some of them decide to oppose the institutions and look for ways of joining the urgent need queue in order to get a rent-controlled flat. At the same time, there is an upsurge in social resentment and many individuals display hostility towards their rivals on the housing register. Despite its aim of preserving health – the new “greater good” – and human dignity, the policy to eliminate substandard housing in Paris has aroused considerable tension in the way it is implemented. For a start, it has ignored other notions that are just as firmly rooted in society, such as status and respect for the law. Furthermore, it gives people access to a rare and greatly sought-after commodity. By allocating social housing to individuals with more urgent needs but less statutory legitimacy, it therefore arouses extremely intense feelings of injustice. Focusing exclusively on urgency would thus seem counterproductive in terms of social cohesion. As the institutions no longer positively reinforce the process of integration, individuals caught in the trap of social disadvantage gradually start to rebel against the institutions and display hostility towards other people. Accordingly, the difficulty of finding somewhere to live, coupled with the lack of solutions offered by the institutions, which often restrict themselves to "making the best of a bad job", has given rise to considerable social malaise. If we are to guarantee the right to housing and introduce a genuine housing policy for the disadvantaged, institutional assistance must no longer be targeted solely at the most marginal individuals and allocations no longer based solely on need.
References


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APPENDICES

Table A. Systems for tackling substandard housing in Paris

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building characteristics</th>
<th>Convention Publique d’Aménagement (urban development agreement, CPA)</th>
<th>Joint ownership sub-department of the SIEMP (SDA)</th>
<th>Substandard housing improvement operation (OAHD)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-Buildings that already belong either to the City of Paris or to the SIEMP</td>
<td>-Buildings that already belong either to the City of Paris or to the SIEMP</td>
<td>-Privately or jointly owned (semipublic) properties</td>
<td>-Privately-owned buildings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-The most insanitary privately-owned buildings that have been condemned or declared unfit for human habitation and are due to be purchased</td>
<td>-The most insanitary privately-owned buildings that have been condemned or declared unfit for human habitation and are due to be purchased</td>
<td>-The SIEMP may own individual units inside the building, purchased as a result of the owner’s failure to carry out required work</td>
<td>-No notice of unfitness</td>
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<tr>
<th>Associated rights</th>
<th>-Mainstream population and legal immigrants with proof of legal occupancy are given three choices of flats</th>
<th>-No rehousing</th>
<th>-No rehousing</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- A single rehousing offer is made to squatters (providing they are not undocumented immigrants)</td>
<td>-Temporary rehousing for undocumented immigrants with children suffering from lead poisoning</td>
<td>-Subsidies paid to owners to carry out improvements</td>
<td>-Subsidies paid to owners to carry out improvements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Quoted interviews**

14 - Mme U: PACTE de Paris, OAHD coordinator, 37 years old.

53 - M. Y.: squatter, married, 1 child, illegal immigrant from Côte d’Ivoire, undocumented worker, 30 years old.


76 - M. E.: squatter, divorced, 1 child, legal immigrant from Côte d’Ivoire, plumber, 49 years old.

77 - M. C.: tenant, married, 1 child, French citizen of Moroccan origin, manager, 29 years old.

78 - M. D.: squatter, married, no children, French citizen of Algerian origin, lorry driver and delivery man, 40 years old.

80 - Mme P.: tenant, divorced, 2 children, French, retired, 75 years old.