

Statistical Representations of the Housing Problem in Briefings to Incoming Ministers, 2008–2020: The Politics of Housing Numbers

Ngā Whakaaturanga ā-Tauanga o te Raruraru Whare Noho i ngā Kupu Whakamārama ki ngā Minita Hou, 2008–2020: Ngā Take Tōrangapū mō te Maha o ngā Whare Noho

PATRICK BARRETT*
REUBEN GARRETT-WALKER†

Abstract

An interpretive policy studies perspective on what is understood to be the ‘facts’ about the housing problem in New Zealand has potential to uncover the way statistical representations of problems are embedded in larger normative narratives, and the consequential implications for housing policy and governance. This paper analyses such representations as they are evident in policy briefings to incoming Ministers of Housing between 2008 and 2020 by Housing New Zealand (HNZ) and its successor Kāinga Ora, and the way these reflect and reinforce a neoliberal political rationality and an agenda to residualise and marketise state housing support. The briefings represent authoritative accounts by a key bureaucratic advisory agency of the significant issues and priorities in the housing portfolio. The period prior to 2017 saw the emergence of new articulations of housing problems relating to affordability, declining rates of home ownership, an increasing rental population, and increasing homelessness. In the briefings to ministers, these problems were routinely framed as issues of supply and demand and market adjustment, and this has continued following the change of government in 2017. The focus of the paper is on identifying statistical representations within the discursive context that give weight to particular policy choices.

* Dr Patrick Barrett is a senior lecturer at the University of Waikato. He pūkenga matua a Tākuta Patrick Barrett i Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato.

Email/Īmēra pbarrett@waikato.ac.nz

† Reuben Garrett-Walker is a research assistant at the University of Waikato. He kaiāwhina rangahau a Reuben Garrett-Walker i Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato.

Email/Īmēra: reuben.gw@gmail.com

The analysis traces developments in problem framing and the links with varying policy responses, including the 2013 Housing Accord Special Housing Areas Act and the 2017 KiwiBuild proposal. The overarching aim is to encourage critical scrutiny of what are seemingly objective quantitative portrayals of housing facts and the socially consequential implications in terms of housing policy decisions and the management of HNZ tenants.

Keywords: statistical representations, housing, problem narratives, policy

Whakarāpopotonga

Kei tētahi tirohanga rangahau kaupapahere e whakamāori ana i ērā mea e mōhio whānuitia ana ko ngā 'meka' mō te tūnga o ngā whare noho i Aotearoa te āhei ki te hura i te āhua e tāmautia ai ngā whakaaturanga taunga o ngā raruraru i roto i ngā kōrero whakahāngai paearu whānui ake, me ngā pāpātanga ka whai ake mō ngā kaupapahere whare noho me te mana whakahaere. E tātari ana tēnei pepa i aua whakaaturanga i kitea i ngā kupu whakamārama ā-kaupapahere ki ngā Minita Take Whare hōu i waenga i te 2008 ki te 2020 nā te Kaporeihana Whare o Aotearoa, me tōna tari whakakapi a Kāinga Ora, me te āhua e whakaata ai, e whakakaha ai ēnei i ngā whakaaro tōrangapū tango here hou, me tētahi rārangi take ki te whakatenatena i ērā ka taea ki te wehe i ngā whare kāwanatanga me te whakarite kia noho tuwhera aua whare ki ngā tōpana māketē. E whakaatu ana ngā kupu whakamārama i ngā kōrero whaimana a tētahi umanga tohutohu matua mō ngā take hira me ngā whakaarotau i te kōpaki take whare. I ngā tau i mua i te 2017 i puea ake ētahi kōrero hou mō ngā raruraru whare noho e pā ana ki te whaiutu, ngā pāpānga heke o te pupuri whare hei rangatira, me te taupori rēti whare e piki ana, me te nui ake o te kāinga koretanga. I ngā kupu whakamārama ki ngā minita, he mea whakapūaho aua raruraru hei take putunga me te hiahia me te whakatikatanga o te māketē, ā, e pērā tonu aua whakamārama i te huringa o te kāwanatanga i te 2017. E arotahi ana tēnei pepa ki te tautohu whakaaturanga tauanga i roto i te horopaki o aua kōrero tērā ka hoatu mana ki ētahi kōwhiringa kaupapahere. Ka whai haere te tātāritanga i ngā whanaketanga i te whakataitapa i ngā raruraru, me ngā hononga ki ngā urupare rerekē, tae atu ki te Housing Accord Special Housing Areas Act o te tau 2013, me te marohi Kiwibuild o 2017. Ko te tino whāinga ko te whakatītina i te kaha whakatātaretanga o ngā whakaaturanga o ngā meka whare noho he tōkeke te āhua me ngā whakahīrautanga ka whai ake mō ngā whakatau whare noho me te whakahaere i ngā kairēti Kāinga Ora.

Ngā kupumatua: whakaaturanga tauanga, whare noho, kōrero rauraru, kaupapahere

Writing about New Zealand housing politics and policy in 1984, Elizabeth McLeay (1984) observed that, “The way in which housing has been politicized ... and treated by the administrative and political process has created ... an emphasis upon solving housing problems through numbers” (p. 96). Housing politics, she observed, was a numbers game, one in which the choices about what counts, and the way counts are deployed in housing policy governance, powerfully influenced decisions and outcomes. Statistical representations of the housing problem are routinely expressed as counts about market indicators, house price trends, affordability and housing need (Johnson, Howden Chapman, & Eaqub, 2018; Ministry of Housing and Urban Development 2020).

This paper reflects on the housing numbers game and the way statistical representations are embedded in larger narratives that drive the governance of housing by examining the briefings to incoming ministers by Housing New Zealand (HNZ) and its successor Kāinga Ora over the period 2008 to 2020. The paper asks what are the counts in the housing portfolio that have predominated in these briefings, how these are embedded in policy narratives that reflect institutionalised public values, and how these might be challenged through critical reflection (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).

Recent critical housing policy scholarship has begun to draw attention to the use of statistical artefacts and practices of calculation that contribute to framing the understanding of housing problems and shaping of government responses (Jacobs & Manzi, 2013, 2020a). Murphy (2014, 2016, 2020b), for example, has drawn attention to statistical representations in the identification of the housing crisis, the evidentiary case for the establishment of the Housing Accord Special Housing Areas Act (HASHA Act), and the role of calculative practices in the construction of housing markets.

The analysis of statistical representations in the briefings to ministers has potential to reveal the rationalities that inform public sector diagnoses of the significant issues and priorities in the housing

portfolio. As a crown agent, HNZ and its successor Kāinga Ora are required to give effect to the priorities of elected governments and comply with the directives of ministers. Given that, the purpose of briefings to ministers is to provide with “an account of major outstanding policy issues and the implementation of current programmes; and set out details of pending decisions or action that will be required of the Minister” (DPMC, 2020). An analysis of briefings over time enables the history of problem framing to be traced along with the links to policy responses, ranging from the Housing Accord Special Housing Areas Act 2013, the purpose of which was to “to enhance housing affordability by facilitating an increase in land and housing supply in certain regions or districts” (HASHAA, 2013, s. 4), to the 2017 KiwiBuild proposal and its aftermath.

While HNZ is just one of several government agencies with a bearing on housing policy (others include the Treasury, Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) and the Productivity Commission), HNZ’s briefings provide a snapshot of the way statistical representations of the housing problem, and the narratives within which they are embedded, powerfully frame the production of the facts in New Zealand housing policy discourse. The focus of the paper is on identifying the statistical representations that have carried discursive weight at different times, and the way these are implicated in specific policy agendas. The overarching aim is to encourage critical scrutiny of what are seemingly objective quantitative portrayals of housing facts and the socially consequential implications in terms of housing policy decisions and outcomes.

We begin the paper with a brief introduction to interpretive policy studies approaches which emphasise the role of narrative in giving meaning to statistics, the role that statistics play within the larger narrative of government and governmentality, and the implications for policy. This is followed by a description of the research approach before we present an analysis of the Briefing to

Incoming Ministers over the years 2008 to 2020. The article makes a contribution to understanding housing policy issues by drawing attention to the way claims about the facts in the housing portfolio through statistical argumentation are deeply embedded in institutionalised market discourses, with the attendant problems of reinforcing financialised approaches to housing, the residualisation of government in housing provision, the portrayal of systemic failures as the problems of individuals, and of driving ever-greater inequality in housing.

Analytical approach

The paper adopts an interpretive policy studies approach which focuses on the meanings that shape policies and institutions and the role of narrative within that process (see also Bacchi, 2012; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016; Bevir & Rhodes, 2015; Stone, 2012; Wagenaar, 2011). From this perspective, supposedly objective statistical facts and the conclusions of numerical analysis, “only make sense when embedded in a larger and frequently normative narrative” (Bever & Rhodes, 2015, p. 24). Stone (2015) argues that words and statistics appear to be two different languages – two entirely distinctive approaches to interpreting and giving meaning to the world. She collapses the distinction, however, and argues that statistical analysis “gets its meaning – and all of its meaning – from narrative” (Stone, 2015 p. 169). For example, the numeric representation of housing problems in terms of prices, and measures of supply and demand involves choosing to count specific aspects of the housing sector, narrating that count, and through that process imposing a moral logic that implies what is the good and right course of action to address problems.

When we count something, Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) assert, we give it status “as a kind of entity” (p. 92). The argument by Stone (201, p. 169) is that, first, the elemental act of counting and categorising that comes before quantitative analysis is an act of “metaphor making”, making a connection between entities that,

although different, share something in common. When we count, we are selecting one shared feature between items and ignoring all others in the same way as when we analogise in metaphors. Counting involves categorising things and making judgements that some things are in some ways like others, just as we do when we use a metaphor.

Second, given that statistics do not speak for themselves, if quantitative analysis is to have any impact beyond the page, it needs to be narrated by analysts, and that process of narration involves the use of language and other literary devices. Numbers and statistics, for example, are a central part of storylines in policy debates when they are invoked to indicate a problem is getting worse, or vice versa, and justifying a response. These types of portrayals are pre-eminent in evidence-based approaches to decision making even though they are presented as hard evidence that speaks for itself.

Third, quantitative analysis, the act of counting and giving meaning to counts, is an act of power, “an act that imposes a certain order on the world and implies correct ways of categorising people and things and treating them differently according to different categories” (Stone, 2015, p. 169).

The argument echoes that of Porter (1993, 2020), the historian of public statistics who has traced how the collection of statistics from the nineteenth century has been an essential tool of governing power, both in creating entities that can then be examined through their measurement and quantification and in controlling subjects through the creation of subjectivities. He traced the historical development and maintenance of statistical entities and the collection and processing of statistical data through standardised tools and showed how these replicable processes of quantification contributed to both claims to impartiality and justifications for policy actions. Importantly, in tracing the evolution, standardisation and use of statistical methods by governments, Porter (1993) revealed the disciplinary effects of representing the social world in this way, indicating how such measurements:

...provide legitimacy for administrative actions, which rarely depend on brute force, but instead on their ability to create standards against which people judge themselves. (p. 96)

Stone (2015) explains this more clearly, observing that numbers and statistical artefacts are “embedded in moral narratives about good and bad and right and wrong” (p. 163), and these moral narratives, including the statistics upon which they based, drive the governance of public problems and populations. In Bacchi and Goodwin’s (2016) terms, such apparent neutral “technologies tend to reflect specific political rationalities” (p. 44).

Statistical representations and the moral narratives that support them, then, are a tool of government that contributes to the shaping of conduct, encouraging certain desired behaviours and averting others –“governing takes place through numbers and comparison” (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 91). The statistician, sociologist and historian of science Alain Desrosières (2008, 2014) put it in the following terms: “Statistics has imposed itself as both an evidentiary tool in the empirical sciences and a tool of government, in accordance with the intuition [of] Foucault ... under the name of ‘governmentality’.” Foucault’s (1975, 2004) insight was that the collection of statistics contributed to the governing process by imposing frames of reference and the setting of standards, resulting social norms and social comparisons, and this describes the disciplinary power by which populations are controlled. By representing problems through statistical norms, measuring and making comparisons against those norms, and then rewarding or punishing populations in terms of adherence to the norms, political elites were said to exercise control over populations and, moreover, populations would actually control or discipline themselves. The bases of that disciplinary power are the implicit narratives and associated normative structures inherent in the statistical measures. The implication is that the act of governing is less evident in the form of direct administration or intervention, but more diffuse, being

exercised in Dodson's (2006) terms through "distanced calibration" (p. 235).

We distinguish, therefore, two roles of calculative practices and the statistics they produce in these processes. The first is the way in which they are embedded in political rationalities, or assemblages of causal ideas and narratives, which act as carriers of problem definitions and implied solutions. This role is evident in the work of Murphy (2014, 2016) who, reflecting Stone's insights, identifies the way statistical components are embedded in wider narratives about the cause of housing supply problems, with implications for how the government should respond. In his analysis of the formation of the Housing Accords and Special Housing Areas Act 2013, for example, Murphy identified the way the Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) referred to measures of affordability in terms of income to house price ratios to establish the basis for the change. These were the Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey metric which deemed housing to be "severely unaffordable" when the price to income ratio exceeded 5:1, and the Roost Home Loan Affordability series which measured the capacity of households to service mortgages. Murphy (2014) writes that in the development of the Housing Accords and Special Housing Areas Act, MBIE's advice restated the Demographia explanation about the seriousness of the affordability problems within New Zealand and, importantly, it repeated Demographia's narration of the causes of the problem as being in local government land-use restrictions. MBIE (2013) argued, using data from the Demographia reports, that:

The results of the 2013 Demographia International Housing Survey ... show a strong correlation between restrictive land supply regulation and housing affordability, with housing affordability being lowest in countries and regions characterised by restrictive regulation. (p. 8)

The Demographia affordability metrics can be seen as curating and representing this housing data in a way that conveyed the constructed problem definition as land availability and barriers to supply, as well as pointing to the solutions of deregulation and the

reform of land supply. The strong correlation between housing unaffordability and local government land use regulations was also identified by Murphy (2016) when he referred to how through “certain readings of mainstream economics, central government policy-makers are increasingly positioning land supply at the centre of housing affordability debates” (p. 2533)

The second role of calculative practices and the statistics they produce is evident in housing policy scholarship concerned with the emergence of neoliberal governmentality and the creation of market identities of the rational consumer exercising housing choice within the context of commercial disciplines (Dodson, 2006; Marsh, 2004). The notion of governmentality here refers to the way neoliberal modes of governing involve less direct governmental intervention in favour of markets, or at least commercially informed market-like disciplines, and the creation of liberal identities and subjectivities which lead to individuals taking responsibility to regulate their conduct and meet their own housing needs, preferably through markets (Dodson, 2006). The key insight here is that particular statistical artefacts are deeply implicated in the governing process that has involved the imposition of the market imaginary and the production of neoliberal subjectivities (Dufty-Jones, 2016).

Calculative practices, then – the way we choose to count, the way we narrate the count, and through that, the way we impose a moral logic on the situation – are, from this perspective, an important means by which the housing sector is governed. These practices, in Bacchi and Goodwin’s (2016, p. 103) terms, “firm up” a particular reality, emphasising some aspects and silencing or rendering invisible others, and they impose a moral logic that directs the appropriate way to act. These insights have led us to ask the following three questions: (1) How has statistical argumentation contributed to the establishment of the ‘facts’ about the significant issues and policy priorities in the housing portfolio? (2) What are the narratives that give these statistical representations meaning? and (3) How are they implicated in legitimising housing policy settings? In asking these

questions, our purpose is to promote critical reflection on the objects of analysis and the realities they construct and insist that these are contingent and very much open to challenge.

An analysis of Briefings to Incoming Ministers (BIMs), 2008–2020

We examine these questions through an analysis of Briefings to Incoming Ministers of Housing over the past 12 years. Briefings are provided following elections or the appointment of a new minister and represent the policy advice of the core public service to the government of the day. The briefings from 2008 to 2020 were accessed through the Beehive website and identify HNZ's and, later, Kāinga Ora's positions on the major issues in the housing portfolio. They comment on current programmes and policy proposals and provide advice on imminent decisions. Briefings are typically drafted before the outcome of elections are known, and draft briefings are typically reviewed and adjusted to take account of stated priorities of the incoming government. They are drafted in ways that are tailored to the agendas of the government of the day, in line with the principle of political neutrality. Briefings are confidential to ministers and redactions can be made consistent with provisions of the Official Information Act 1982 (State Services Commission, 2020).

We analysed briefings prepared by Housing New Zealand (HNZ) in 2008, 2014 and 2017, and by Kāinga Ora in 2020. We also analysed the 2016 briefing to the new Minister of Housing, and the 2017 briefing by MBIE. Housing policy over this period can be seen as a continuation of the neoliberal restructuring that began in the early 1990s when the state began to divest itself from the housing sector, although the period between 1999 and 2008 involved a recommitment to state rental accommodation and income-related rents (Murphy, 2004). Housing affordability emerged as a growing concern in the early 2000s with a housing price bubble between 2003 and 2008 (Greenaway-McGrevy & Phillips, 2016). The Global Financial Crisis of 2007/2008 contributed to a brief decline in prices, but following further price increases in 2010, the National-led

Government requested an inquiry by the Productivity Commission. The Commission reported in 2012, and its recommendations informed the Housing Accords and Special Housing Areas Act 2013, with its focus on reducing regulatory impediments to land supply for housing developments (Murphy, 2016). Despite this initiative, housing affordability problems continued to grow, and Labour went into the 2017 election campaign with a policy to be more directly involved in the delivery of affordable housing. Its policy to deliver 100,000 affordable houses over a 10-year period was to be overseen by HNZ, which would partner with local government, the private sector and iwi to create major projects of urban redevelopment. The ambitious targets in the first two years of the programme were not realised and the policy was widely deemed a failure. In mid-2019, there was a KiwiBuild reset, with less focus on the flagship 100,000 affordable houses target and more on increasing the mix of home ownership products in terms of rent-to-buy and shared equity, with the aim of increasing access to home ownership (Kāinga Ora, 2020).

Our analysis proceeded in the following steps. We carried out a systematic review of the scholarship addressing the politics of housing policy, identifying key questions relating to political argumentation and the role of allegedly objective statistical references. Having identified the questions that emerged, we proceeded to consider the briefings from 2008 onwards, subjecting the briefings to a systematic content analysis that focused on identifying statistical representations relating to: 1) housing supply and demand, prices and affordability, 2) HNZ/Kāinga Ora and its activities relating to state houses and social housing, and 3) HNZ/Kāinga Ora's performance in administering the housing portfolio. We independently analysed the documents manually in order to obtain a high degree of sensitivity to identify the main statistical artefacts and the meaning they were given within the context of the briefings.

The briefings for 2008, 2011 and 2014 were provided to National-led governments, and over these briefings there was an emergent norm that government housing support be a temporary

rather than permanent form of assistance. There was also emphasis on ‘right-sizing’ the houses provided with the specific needs of tenants, managing tenant transitions through housing support into non-state forms of housing, and, in this regard, there was a new focus on developing a social housing market. The 2017 briefing for the incoming Labour-led government was provided within the context of the KiwiBuild policy, and while a focus on asset and tenant management remained, there was a new emphasis on the delivery of affordable homes. The 2020 briefing was provided by the new agency Kāinga Ora, which was established in late 2019 and combined HNZ and the KiwiBuild Unit from the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. The expanded remit of Kāinga Ora included affordability and homelessness issues and working with the private sector on large-scale urban development projects. This briefing was also provided in the context of the KiwiBuild reset. The following accounts are summaries, and the focus is on key statistical representations and the narratives within which they were embedded.

In the 2008 briefing, HNZ addressed concerns regarding the wider housing market. It noted that while house prices had almost doubled between 2001 and 2007, a reduced volume of house sales as part of a market downturn associated with the Global Financial Crisis was understood as having eased affordability problems. The fall in prices was not seen, however, as altering the downward trajectory of home-ownership rates due to an under-supply of affordable homes and greenfield land for developing. Increasing demand in the rental market was described as a concern given the implications for demand for the accommodation supplement and income-related rental subsidies.

Increased expectations of government spending were positioned alongside references to the third sector and not-for-profit organisations, and their potential to play a greater role and reduce the burden on government. The small size of the third sector in social housing was described as reducing options for those experiencing

housing difficulties, and that there was benefit in an expanded role for community group housing. HNZ described its programme of work as ramping up its modernisation and maintenance programmes, increasing investment in the supply of not-for-profit housing and, in the longer-term, ramping up developments where there was demonstrable need such as in the Auckland developments of Hobsonville and Tāmaki.

Table 1: Overarching themes in briefings to incoming Ministers (BIM), 2008 – 2020

	Supply and demand, prices and affordability	HNZ/Kāinga Ora activities in providing housing (incl supporting the emergent social housing sector)	HNZ/Kāinga Ora costs and performance
2008 BIM: HNZ	References to trends in house prices, price to income ratios, and declining rates of ownership.	Focus on mismatches in available state and social housing, and housing need. Reference to the small proportion of not-for-profit housing agencies in social housing sector, and the relative sizes of the HNZ, local government and private rental sectors.	Focus on HNZ costs and need for enhanced performance measures to improve tenancy management and asset management.
2011 BIM: HNZ	Little reference to housing market 'fundamentals', except for the number of people receiving support via the accommodation supplement.	Focus on asset management and configuration of state house assets to ensure returns to government. Counts of HNZ occupants with high and complex needs and managing priority applicants on waiting list. Focus on social housing by local government and	Report on supply and demand forecasting to ensure the provision of information to plan the reconfiguration of the HNZ portfolio and meet changing housing needs of 'customers'. Focus on value for money, operating efficiency, cost control, and increasing rates of

	Supply and demand, prices and affordability	HNZ/Kāinga Ora activities in providing housing (incl supporting the emergent social housing sector)	HNZ/Kāinga Ora costs and performance
		third sector organisations, and government spend on the third sector.	return on HNZ's asset base, with forecast operating surpluses and distributions to Crown.
2014 BIM: HNZ	Reference to high demand in Auckland and potential of the proposed Auckland Unitary Plan to reduce regulatory constraints and increase supply. Analysis of factors leading to under-provision of affordable houses.	Focus on asset management and configuration of state house assets to ensure return to government. Counts of complex needs of HNZ occupants (drug and alcohol abuse, anti-social behaviour, mental health issues). Focus on social housing by local government and third sector organisations, and government spend on third sector.	Report on increases in asset portfolio utilisation rate (from 95% to 96%) and related generation of additional rental income. Report on HNZ income and expenditure and dividend to the Crown. Report on the increase in the number of families housed and reduction in turnaround times between tenancies.
2017 BIM: HNZ 2017 BIM: MBIE	Reference to market fundamentals – increasing demand, low interest rates, constrained land supply, and rapid growth in housing prices. Affordability pressures increasing demand for state and emergency housing.	References to improvements to HNZ stock and estimates for renovation/rebuild costs as part of the asset management strategy. Measurements of the number of vulnerable, at-risk HNZ occupants and applicants in serious housing need. Measurements of HNZ's role in providing emergency	Report on growth in the number of homes available through HNZ, and asset portfolio utilisation rate of over 98%. Report on reduction in average turnaround time for vacated homes.

	Supply and demand, prices and affordability	HNZ/Kāinga Ora activities in providing housing (incl supporting the emergent social housing sector)	HNZ/Kāinga Ora costs and performance
	Reference to fall in nationwide share of new dwellings in the lower price quartile.	and transitional housing.	
2020 BIM: Kāinga Ora	<p>Reference to supply constraints in housing market and growth in demand for public housing.</p> <p>Reporting of house price and rent increases over previous 5 years and 12 months.</p> <p>Reporting of housing cost and deprivation figures.</p> <p>Reporting of families provided with home ownership assistance, including first home grants.</p>	<p>Focus on numbers of public, affordable/KiwiBuild and market houses built as part of Government build programme.</p> <p>References to community housing portfolio and additional transitional houses.</p> <p>Report on state house tenant demographics, noting lack of reliable count of tenants with disabilities.</p> <p>Report on asset renewal programme, including right-sizing portfolio and ensuring warm, dry housing.</p>	<p>Report response to COVID-19 and contribution to economic recovery.</p> <p>Reporting of changes to borrowing programme to support renewal programme.</p> <p>Reporting of maintenance figures, including costs.</p>

There was substantially less focus on the wider housing market and a much greater focus on responding “to the changing needs of New Zealanders” in the 2011 briefing. As a result, many statistical references describe the shortcomings of HNZ’s stock (e.g. a third being in the wrong place or of the wrong size). This briefing framed HNZ and its role as “moving away from the perception that a

state home is for life to one based on housing for the duration of need” (HNZ 2011, p. 3), in line with new approaches such as reviewable tenancies and the Social Allocation System which ensured that those most in need are at the top of the waiting list. The briefing emphasised managing demand through new allocation systems and new advisory services to “provide customers with information about their housing options” (HNZ, 2011, p. 18) – which in many cases, meant the private rental sector. Tenancy services included an “assistance to housing independence” (HNZ, 2011, p. 22) programme, and references to stronger responses to the abuse of the state housing system. The briefing also introduced a much clearer statement about HNZ as a provider of social housing alongside local government and the third sector, defining the relative contribution of each. Related to this was a greater focus on defining the characteristics and needs of HNZ tenants, in line with reconfiguring the portfolio to promote “the right homes in the right places” (HNZ, 2011, p. 9). This briefing also introduced the focus on “operating in a business-like manner” (HNZ, 2011, p. 23) by improving value for money, operational efficiency, cost control and providing a higher rate of return. There was, therefore, a strong focus on the asset size of HNZ and its financial performance.

In 2014, in line with the 2011 focus, the core business of HNZ was portrayed as asset and tenancy management. The briefing pays significant attention to measuring the performance of HNZ in terms of tenancy turnarounds and utilisation rates, and again there was limited attention given to the wider question of the supply of affordable housing. Instead, HNZ is positioned as a competing housing supplier in the social housing sector and aiming to be the social housing provider of choice by offering most value in a wider social housing market (HNZ, 2014, p. 17). HNZ makes a strong statement, in line with the policy of the National Government, that it would be pursuing a “shift in emphasis from government ownership of provision to purchasing services, a larger percentage of social housing delivered by non-government providers, and a less dominant role for Housing New Zealand” (HNZ, 2014, p. 17). Tenancy

management activities, again, emphasised placing eligible applicants in available properties, greater assessment of need, and management of anti-social behaviour. References to affordability were made in the context of housing pressures in Auckland and these were in terms of HNZ development projects in partnership with the private and community housing sector. There was reference to the proposed Auckland Unitary Plan which, if accepted, would reduce the constraints and allow for additional land to be developed by HNZ. These arguments again echoed the Productivity Commission's (2012) argument that there were strong links between planning, land supply and housing affordability. The Productivity Commission had made a host of recommendations regarding freeing up land for housing in order to address affordability options, and these were reflected in the recommendations by the National-led Government as evidence supporting the Special Housing Areas policy.

The two briefings to the incoming minister in 2017 by HNZ and MBIE are read here together. While the HNZ briefing maintained the strong focus in the preceding years' briefings on reviewing HNZ's stock and performance, there is greater emphasis on quantity in terms of gross and net builds rather than the focus on the number of unsuitable HNZ houses in the stock, and this can be seen as a response to statements by the incoming government to adopt a more active approach to addressing wider issues of housing supply. The treatment of affordability in the 2017 HNZ briefing is also broader than in the previous briefings, although there is still a focus on the fundamentals of the market and the focus is on how to contribute to the provision of affordable houses through the market. The MBIE briefing addresses the wider housing market in some detail, representing the problem in terms of demand outstripping supply and the resulting shortfall driving up house prices, and the wider effects this has had. The MBIE briefing emphasised the need to understand the market if responses aiming to increase supply are to be successful, and that falling house prices (at the time) may in fact reduce housing supply through reduced commercial confidence

in development, suggesting some ambivalence as to the appropriate response.

While generally similar to the 2017 HNZ briefing, the 2020 Kāinga Ora briefing reflects the expanded remit of the new agency. Gross and net build figures remain a major focus but here these include affordable/KiwiBuild and market builds as well as state houses. The briefing emphasises the ongoing scaling up of the state housing supply in line with Government targets, as well as the right-sizing of the state housing portfolio necessary due to too many being three-bedroom houses and/or houses approaching the end of their economic and/or functional life which do not meet the ‘customer’ base’s needs. However, in a section that discussed housing affordability, the briefing notes the build programme goes beyond increasing the supply of public housing, with another key element being “to deliver more affordable housing and to make affordable housing more widely available through additional support to households”, observing the importance of supporting people and whānau to “transition to greater housing independence” (Kāinga Ora, 2020, p. 5). There was a renewed commitment to building state houses in places of need. This echoes a Cabinet paper (Office of the Minister of Housing, 2019) from the previous year, in which the new minister sought to reset KiwiBuild, disestablishing the 100,000 target and instead favouring a dashboard to track progress across the Government Build Programme, in line with the observation that simply building homes is not enough and focus needs to be placed on where homes are built and what they look like (e.g. number of bedrooms). The significance of the new measures represented in the dashboard approach are not analysed here, but they have potential to provide more nuanced information about housing problems and the government’s response.

Discussion

What can be said, then, about the ‘facts’ in the housing portfolio as they have been portrayed through statistical representations in the briefings to incoming governments? In the following discussion, we reflect on the counts that have predominated in this advice to governments, the narratives within which they were embedded and that reflect specific political rationalities, and the implications for the governance of housing over the period 2008 to 2020, both in terms of problem framing and in the way they have contributed to the imposition of a market imaginary and the promotion by HNZ of market subjectivities.

Changes in the focus of counts reflect changes in the role of HNZ/Kāinga Ora in successive briefings, which in turn reflect the political agendas of the government of the day. In 2008, it was to provide “housing and related services and ... advice that contributes to improved housing outcomes” (HNZ, 2008, p. 5); in 2011, HNZ’s role had a somewhat narrower focus on providing “safe, warm and dry homes for people in greatest need ... [and] more tightly managing state homes and tenancies in a financially constrained environment” (HNZ, 2011, p. 3); and in 2014, again, it was to provide “warm, dry homes to New Zealanders most in need ... [as] the social housing provider of choice as other providers start to play a greater part” (HNZ, 2014, p. 4). In 2017, there is a less explicit reference to the role of HNZ, but the briefing refers to a broader responsibility for the performance of the housing system as a whole, and its ability to ensure access to housing for all New Zealanders (HNZ, 2017), while the 2020 briefing explicitly refers to an expanded role of the new entity, Kāinga Ora (2020, p. 3), to transform “housing choices and outcomes and the entire housing sector”. Over the 2008 to 2014 briefings, HNZ’s advice aligned with governmental priorities that it play, increasingly, a residual role in housing provision with a narrower focus on the management of state house tenants, while supporting growth in civil society organisations and the third sector

in a social housing market. The advice in the 2017 and 2020 briefings addressed housing policy more broadly, reflecting HNZ/Kāinga Ora's expanded role as a social housing landlord, as providing transitional and emergency housing, and also in contributing to affordability and accessibility through the wider housing market (HNZ, 2017, p. 7).

The analysis of the briefings revealed the naturalisation of markets as the key instrument to fulfil housing need for the majority of the population. Each of the briefings we considered was informed by a neoliberal ideational frame which defined housing problems in terms of market concepts of supply and demand, and which advanced sustainable and cost-effective solutions as possible only through the private market. HNZ was to play a supporting role, particularly between 2008 and 2017, in meeting the needs of those who were unable to have their needs met through the market. Rising house prices and associated affordability and other problems were explained primarily as a result of a poorly performing market, particularly in terms of the responsiveness (or lack of it) of supply to demand (MBIE, 2017, p. 8). For example, statistical references to affordability problems in the 2008 briefing were narrated as stemming from supply issues relating to the “costs of developing and building a new dwelling” (HNZ, 2008, p. 16), particularly costs of regulatory compliance. The 2017 briefing explained problems as a result of “complex interactions between supply and demand factors (particularly unresponsive supply)” (MBIE, 2017, p. 8). The focus on local government planning regulations and development costs, particularly in relation to land, reflected and reinforced the narrative that housing unaffordability was primarily grounded in planning constraints and consenting processes. Addressing affordability and related issues was described by MBIE (2017) as likely to take some time, and the long-run solution was asserted to only be achievable through the market.

The 2011 and 2014 briefings reveal the National-led government's political agenda to ‘marketise’ the provision of state housing by developing a hybrid system of housing support across the

public and private sector, one in which civil society groups and local government providers played a greater role. The specific legislation for this was the 2013 Social Housing Reform (Housing Restructuring and Tenancy Matters Amendment) Act which provided a basis for community providers to apply for government funding or income-related rents for eligible tenants. The briefings reveal an intent to increase both the size and share of the social housing sector, and by implication a more residual and marginal role for the state in providing housing support. There were specific counts of the relative contribution of each sector, and these were narrated in a way that positioned HNZ as just one of a number of providers of housing support. It was, in Murphy's (2020a, p. 231) terms, an exercise by the state in 'market making' in social housing that involved promoting a greater role for new social housing providers in a way that would replace state provision with supposedly more innovative and responsive services. While HNZ was by far the largest provider of non-market or market-subsidised housing, be that through HNZ houses or through the accommodation supplement or income-related rent subsidies, it embraced its positioning as just another market participant, stating that it aimed to "be the social housing provider of choice" (HNZ, 2014, p. 4). The statement, thus, reveals the political agenda to introduce commercial disciplines and a semblance of competition among social housing providers, although given the dominant position of HNZ this was more theoretical than real.

Taken together, the briefings also reveal the changing role of HNZ over the 2008 to 2020 period from a general concern with the provision of affordable housing, even if it was unable to effect this, to one focused on the efficient management of the government's housing asset base. In these statements, HNZ positioned itself as a responsible asset manager, and steward of the state's investment in its housing stock. As a property manager, it described itself as "investing on rental return, rather than a property investor investing for capital return, or a developer looking to realise cash from their developments" (HNZ, 2017, p. 22). Priority was given to economic

efficiency in the use of resources and a cost-benefit analytical approach for making decisions was evident in a variety of ways, not least the focus on right-sizing houses to tenants' needs. The focus was on generating value from the asset, with the definition of value being understood in economic efficiency terms. The briefings, therefore, reveal an increasingly economic understanding of the housing landscape, and within this logic, there is little room for considering what were previously the non-commercial and social purposes of state housing. These developments in HNZ reflect wider processes of 'financialisation' in housing, and the way decisions about housing in both the private and public sectors are increasingly driven by what Marsh (2018, in Jacobs and Manzi, 2020b) refers to as "the 'remorseless and transactional logic of finance'" (p. 16).

The activities of HNZ and their contribution to the governing of housing in a governmentality sense, through tenancy management, were also evident in the briefings, particularly in 2011 and 2014. In these briefings, HNZ emphasised its role as an active manager of state housing tenants, and an overt policy of moving them into the private market, be it rental or ownership. State or social housing support was to be provided on the assumption that it was only temporary and a tenure of last resort, and there was a much stronger agenda to no longer provide state housing support in a way that implied security of tenure. The briefings in 2011 and 2014 are marked by the way they focus on statistically representing characteristics of the tenant population, the effect being a much clearer representation of the housing problem as a problem of individuals. There was a greater focus on problematic characteristics of tenants in references to mental health, alcoholism and anti-social behaviours, and these reinforced a narrative that HNZ tenants were in some way deficient and in need of rehabilitation. The references to HNZ's active tenancy management role, providing "support for tenants with multiple and complex needs", "exiting tenants when required", "undertaking debt collection activities", and "intensive tenancy management to avoid tenants falling into debt and

minimising anti-social behaviour” illustrate this (HNZ, 2014, p. 19). The briefings also refer to greater use of sanctions and penalties, with the aim of addressing the alleged perverse incentives of state housing. New measures of HNZ’s performance in managing tenancy transitions into and out of HNZ properties reinforced a moral narrative that a state house was not to be a house for life but a temporary form of support that was to be delivered in a way that would assist people back into the private sector, or into a complementary and growing social housing sector. From a governmentality perspective, this type of tenancy management, and the use of penalties and sanctions to nudge tenants towards financial independence in the marketplace, imposed a particular morality in housing and can be seen as a tool to produce neoliberal subjectivities (Dufty-Jones, 2016).

Conclusion

Argument based on statistical artefact, then, is a crucial tool of government, but one in which a wider and more complex, multi-faceted social experience, as in the case of housing, is obscured. The complex interaction of multiple variables that influence gaining access to a home, which include a mix of life stage, family circumstances, employment, location and ethnicity, is systematically concealed through the application of such calculations that are neither designed nor able to capture the totality of the human experiences.

Instead, the quantification of features of the housing sector in New Zealand have been shown to be profoundly informed and narrated by neoliberal assumptions that underpin the operation of the state today with the central focus on a business approach to public sector management and accountability. That is, the use of statistics in housing policy advice can be seen as a technique of government, a political practice embedded in neoliberal rationality. The analysis of the briefings reveals bureaucratic housing policy advice as a domain

of statistics and calculations through which problems and priorities are constructed (see Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016, p. 99). A key insight is that statistical representations transform how we engage in housing, reducing what is a complex social and cultural practice into a list of general statistics and introducing a fundamental economic code. Housing problem definitions are made up of a complex mix of empirical information, interpretations of that information, and ideological opinions that influence the way problems are identified and defined, and the way information about problems is interpreted and given meaning. The goal of the paper has not been to suggest intentions to reinforce particular policy agendas in the selective use of numeric data, although this is certainly an effect. Rather it has been to show that statistical representations are both carriers of problem definitions and implied solutions, and tend to be embedded in political rationalities that contribute to governmentality processes in the governing of the housing sector. With regard to the former point, the analysis shows how metrics in housing problem definitions curate and represent data in ways that construct specific problem definitions that point towards their 'natural' solutions. With regard to the latter point, the briefings indicate how references to numeric data and comparison, as part of the justification for the active management of HNZ tenants, are a key tool of government in shaping conduct and encouraging certain forms of housing citizenship. The analysis, therefore, contributes to outlining how such representations are a part of the story of the neoliberalisation of housing policy in New Zealand, the evidence in this case coming from the analysis of HNZ briefings, and the way these are profoundly linked to the exacerbation of housing inequality.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the reviewers for the way their helpful comments clarified the focus of the paper.

References

- Bacchi, C. (2012). Why study problematizations? Making politics visible. *Open Journal of Political Science*, 2(01), 1–8.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2012.21001>
- Bacchi, C., & Goodwin, S. (2016). *Poststructural policy analysis: A guide to practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bevir, M., & Rhodes, R. A. (Eds.). (2015). *Routledge handbook of interpretive political science*. Routledge.
- Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC). (2020). *Ministers and the public service*. <https://dpmc.govt.nz/our-business-units/cabinet-office/supporting-work-cabinet/cabinet-manual/3-ministers-crown-and-2>
- Desrosières, A. (2008). *Gouverner par les nombres (Vol. 2), L'argument statistique*. Les Presses des Mines Paris-tech, Sciences sociaux collection.
- . (2014). Statistics and social critique. *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 7(2), 348–359. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v7i2p348>
- Dodson, J. (2006). The “roll” of the State: Government, neoliberalism and housing assistance in four advanced economies. *Housing, Theory and Society*, 23(4), 224–243. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14036090601043540>
- Dufty-Jones, R. (2016). Housing and home: Objects and technologies of neoliberal governmentalities. In S. Springer, K. Birch, & J. MacLeavy (Eds), *The handbook of neoliberalism*. Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1975; English translation 1977). *Discipline and punish: The Birth of the prison*. Vintage Books.
- . (2004; English translation 2008). *The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–79*. Picador.
- Greenaway-McGrevy, R., & Phillips, P. C. (2016). Hot property in New Zealand: Empirical evidence of housing bubbles in the metropolitan centres. *New Zealand Economic Papers*, 50(1), 88–113.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00779954.2015.1065903>
- Housing Accords and Special Housing Areas Act, No. 72. (2013).
<http://www.legislation.govt.nz/>
- Housing New Zealand (HNZ). (2008). *Briefing to the Incoming Minister of Housing*. Housing New Zealand.
https://www.beehive.govt.nz/sites/default/files/HNZC_BIM.pdf
- . (2011). *Briefing for the Minister of Housing*. Housing New Zealand.
<https://Kāingaora.govt.nz/assets/Publications/Briefing-to-the-Incoming-Minister/briefing-to-the-incoming-minister-2011.pdf>
- . (2014). *Briefing to the Incoming Minister Responsible for Housing New Zealand*. Housing New Zealand.
<https://Kāingaora.govt.nz/assets/Publications/Briefing-to-the-Incoming-Minister/briefing-for-the-incoming-minister-2014.pdf>
- . (2017). *Briefing to the Incoming Minister of Housing and Urban Development*. Housing New Zealand.
<https://Kāingaora.govt.nz/assets/Publications/Briefing-to-the-Incoming-Minister/briefing-for-the-incoming-minister-2017.pdf>

- Jacobs, K., & Manzi, T. (2013). Modernisation, marketisation and housing reform: The use of evidence-based policy as a rationality discourse. *People, Place & Policy Online*, 7(1), 1–13. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3351/ppp.0007.0001.0001>
- . (2020a). Conceptualising ‘financialisation’: Governance, organisational behaviour and social interaction in UK housing. *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 20(2), 184–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19491247.2018.1540737>
- . (2020b). Neoliberalism as entrepreneurial governmentality: contradictions and dissonance within contemporary English housing associations. *Housing Studies*, 35(4), 573–588. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2019.1617411>
- Johnson, A., Howden-Chapman, P., & Eaquad, S. (2018). *A stocktake of New Zealand’s housing*. Ministry of Housing and Urban Development.
- Kāinga Ora (2020). *Briefing to the Incoming Minister*. Kāinga Ora – Homes and Communities. <https://kaingaora.govt.nz/assets/Publications/Briefing-to-the-Incoming-Minister/Kainga-Ora-Briefing-for-the-incoming-Minister-2020.pdf>
- Marsh, A. 2004. The inexorable rise of the rational consumer? The Blair government and the reshaping of social housing. *European Journal of Housing Policy*, 4(2), 185–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461671042000269029>
- McLeay, E. M. (1984). Housing as a political issue: A comparative study. *Comparative Politics*, 17(1), 85–105. <https://doi.org/10.2307/421739>
- Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE). (2013). *Regulatory Impact Statement: Creating Special Housing Areas*. <https://www.treasury.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2013-05/ris-mbie-cspa-may13.pdf>
- . (2017). *Briefing to the Incoming Minister of Housing and Urban Development*. <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2017-12/Housing%20and%20Urban%20Development.pdf>
- Ministry of Housing and Urban Development 2020. *Statistics and Research*. <https://www.hud.govt.nz/news-and-resources/statistics-and-research/housing-market-indicators/>
- Murphy, L. (2004). To the market and back: Housing policy and state housing in New Zealand. *GeoJournal*, 59(2), 119–126. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:GEJO.0000019970.40488.d5>
- . ‘Houston, we’ve got a problem’: The political construction of a housing affordability metric in New Zealand. *Housing Studies*, 29(7), 893–909. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2014.915291>
- . (2016). The politics of land supply and affordable housing: Auckland’s Housing Accord and Special Housing Areas. *Urban Studies*, 53(12), 2530–2547. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0042098015594574>
- . (2020a). Neoliberal social housing policies, market logics and social rented housing reforms in New Zealand. *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 20(2), 229–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19491247.2019.1638134>

- . (2020b). Performing calculative practices: Residual valuation, the residential development process and affordable housing. *Housing Studies*, 35(9), 1501–1517. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2019.1594713>
- Office of the Minister of Housing. (2019). *Resetting the Government Build Programme*. Cabinet Paper.
- Porter, T. M. (1993). Statistics and the politics of objectivity. *Revue de synthèse*, 114(1), 87–101. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/BF03181156.pdf>
- . (2020). *Trust in numbers: The pursuit of objectivity in science and public life* (first published 1995). Princeton University Press.
- New Zealand Productivity Commission. (2012). *Housing affordability inquiry*. <https://www.productivity.govt.nz/assets/Documents/9c8ef07dc3/Final-report-v5.pdf>
- Slater, T. (2016). The housing crisis in neoliberal Britain: Free market think tanks and the production of ignorance. In S. Springer, K. Birch, & J. MacLeavy (Eds), *The handbook of neoliberalism* (pp. 370–383). Routledge.
- State Services Commission (2020). *Briefings for incoming ministers*, <https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/our-work/parliamentary-election-2020/general-election-guidance-2020/?e5995=6251-briefings-for-incoming-ministers>
- Stone, D. (2012). *Policy paradox: The art of political decision making* (3rd ed.). W W Norton.
- . Quantitative analysis as narrative. In *Routledge handbook of interpretive political science* (pp. 169–182). Routledge.
- Wagenaar, H. (2011). *Meaning in action: Interpretation and dialogue in policy analysis*. ME Sharpe.