Everyone deserves a safe place to live, and social housing plays an important role in achieving this goal, providing secure, affordable housing to those who need it most.

Social housing is especially critical for people with complex needs, such as those living with mental illness or substance abuse issues, who may otherwise have limited accommodation options due to barriers such as low income, discrimination in the private rental market, and behavioural problems resulting from their complex needs.

This is particularly apparent in Queensland, where, due to a range of government policies, the proportion of social housing tenancies allocated to special and priority-needs households is much higher than in other states and territories.

While social housing is often the only accommodation option left for people with complex needs, a policy introduced by the Queensland Government in 2013 meant that those same needs could have led to the tenants being evicted from their homes.

Under the Anti-Social Behaviour Management Policy, otherwise known as the ‘three strikes’ policy, social housing tenants could be issued with strikes for certain behaviours, such as excessive noise, not keeping their property clean and tidy, deliberate minor damage to their property, and other actions that could threaten the safety of their neighbours or other tenants. If a household received three strikes within a 12-month period, or one strike for dangerous or severe activity, their tenancy could be terminated.

Concerned about the possible implications of the policy on tenants with complex needs, the Queensland Mental Health Commission engaged UQ’s Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) in early 2014 to review the systemic issues faced by these tenants, examine the potential and actual effects of the three strikes policy for these tenants, and explore what other approaches may be available.

The findings and recommendations from ISSR’s research were illuminating, resulting in significant policy reform with positive implications not only for social housing tenants in Queensland but also for their neighbours and the broader community.

The research found that while only 2.5 per cent of social housing households (1341 households) received a strike between 1 July 2013 and 1 July 2014, and while the number of social housing tenants whose tenancy was terminated under the three strikes policy was relatively small, the actual and potential impacts on these households and the broader community were significant.

For example, in addition to the impact on the individuals’ social and emotional wellbeing, the termination of a tenancy can lead to an increased demand for acute mental health services and hospitals, and increased risk of homelessness and involvement in the child protection and criminal justice systems.

The case studies highlighted the significant barriers that exist for social housing tenants with complex needs to sustain their tenancies, including communication and comprehension problems, limited access to adequate services and support, and an inability to change their behaviour.

“We really wanted to understand whether this was the most effective response and, if it wasn’t, what better solutions the government could develop and implement to meet the needs not only of social housing tenants with mental illness and addictions, but also their neighbours and the broader community whom the policy was intended to assist.”

Assisted by Clinical Masters students from the School of Psychology, the interviews were conducted with eight families in Brisbane, as well as four Indigenous families in Rockhampton.

The research found that while only 2.5 per cent of social housing households (1341 households) received a strike between 1 July 2013 and 1 July 2014, and while the number of social housing tenants whose tenancy was terminated under the three strikes policy was relatively small, the actual and potential impacts on these households and the broader community were significant.

For example, in addition to the impact on the individuals’ social and emotional wellbeing, the termination of a tenancy can lead to an increased demand for acute mental health services and hospitals, and increased risk of homelessness and involvement in the child protection and criminal justice systems.

The case studies highlighted the significant barriers that exist for social housing tenants with complex needs to sustain their tenancies, including communication and comprehension problems, limited access to adequate services and support, and an inability to change their behaviour.
Importantly, the research found that many tenants with complex needs either misunderstood or were not capable of understanding the three strikes policy.

The research also found that there was no process built into the three strikes policy to monitor outcomes for tenants with complex needs, and few tenants had access to adequate services that could support them to maintain their tenancies.

Dr Parsell says the research highlighted that the three strikes policy was counterproductive to the government’s primary objective – to provide safe and affordable housing to those in need.

“While the department would allocate housing to people because they had mental illnesses and addictions, they would then issue strikes and proceed to evict those same tenants when their mental illness or addiction were manifest,” he explains.

“Our research showed that in order to meet vulnerable tenants’ needs, they needed to provide housing in a way that was integrated with support, and housing in a way that understood the nature of the problems people experienced – the problems for which they were provided housing with in the first place.”

As a result of ISSR’s findings and recommendations, which were used as the evidence base for the Queensland Mental Health Commission’s first ordinary report into social housing in Queensland, the Anti-Social Behaviour Management Policy was replaced earlier this year with the Fair Expectation of Behaviour Policy, which aims to balance the rights of tenants, neighbours, service partners, department staff and the community while offering additional support to social housing tenants with complex needs or mental health issues.

Under the new policy, tenants receive warnings rather than strikes for disruptive behaviour, and are contacted following each warning to ensure they understand the consequences of their behaviour, their obligations under their tenancy agreement, and how they can reduce the risk to their tenancy. They are also offered support to help them meet their tenancy responsibilities.

While repeated incidents of disruptive behaviour or severe or dangerous behaviour may still lead to tenancy agreements being terminated, Dr Parsell says that under the new policy, tenants with complex needs are much more likely to be provided with support to sustain their tenancy.

“We really want to understand how tenants can be supported in the absence of formal support systems, and how wellbeing and positive life trajectory can be realised for people who are vulnerable in a way where social service provision isn’t the dominant force in their lives.”

uq.edu.au/research/impact

(Photo credit: iStock/onceawitkin)