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HOUSING CRISIS LARGELY IGNORED BY GOVERNMENT

A major new housing report shows that while the current property boom may be good news for homeowners, one in five New Zealand families is facing housing-related problems, such as unaffordable rents, overcrowding and poor quality housing.

Meanwhile, the government is hiding its indifference to their plight behind misleading Housing New Zealand statistics.

Until society gets housing right, other attempts to address child poverty, poor health and educational achievement will be only a temporary band-aid.

This is a main theme in the timely report *Room for Improvement: Current New Zealand housing policies and their implications for our children*, written by housing commentator Alan Johnson and published by the Child Poverty Action Group in September.

Every year, the number of people needing government assistance to pay for housing grows by an estimated 2,500 households. But Housing New Zealand stock increased by fewer than 600 houses in the last financial year – a number even more modest than it sounds, as only 180 of those houses are new.

The majority of Housing New Zealand's acquisitions are bought, not built.

"This merely changes the landlord," writes Johnson, a Counties/ Manukau District Health Board member and former Manukau city councillor who lectures at UNITEC in social policy, community development and economics.

"The purchase of existing housing for state rentals actually reduces the housing opportunities for the three-quarters of poor families who do not qualify for or have a state house.

"The poorest New Zealand households are now not state tenants but the 150,000 private sector tenant households dependent on inadequate state rental subsidies for their housing.

"Their needs have been almost completely ignored amid the publicity of a better deal through income-related rents for 50,000 state tenant households.

"The Government is arguing that setting aside public money to fund the retirement incomes of the baby boomers is an investment while funding adequate housing for the baby boomers' grandchildren is relatively unimportant."

Other worrying statistics highlighted in the report are:

- About 50,000 children in New Zealand – including one out of every three Pacific children in New Zealand – are living in overcrowded conditions.
- Every year, one third of all pupils at decile one primary schools in south Auckland are likely to change schools, mostly because stable accommodation is beyond the reach of their families.
- The cost of the Accommodation Supplement to the taxpayer has grown rapidly and is set to double in the next 20 years, but the subsidy is not effective in solving the housing problems of the poorest families.

But statistics alone don't show the whole picture, and so *Room for Improvement* includes a number of case examples provided by Waipareira Trust GP Dr Nikki Turner, like the one below:

“I had a family of five come to my clinic because the children had recurrent skin infections. On the day I saw them there were 19 residents living in the house and garage, and on a regular basis the amount of people in the house changed as people were moving around within Auckland (due to difficulties with costs of housing) and in and out of Auckland as family came to Auckland looking for work. We have endless stories of families moving houses constantly as they can't pay the bills, and moving in with relatives putting strain on everyone.”

***Room for Improvement* is to be launched at the Mangere People's Centre Hall, 366 Massey Rd, Mangere (beside the Mangere East Library), at 2pm Sunday September 14.**

Speakers include Pasifika hip hop poet Rev Mua Strickson-Pua, Manurewa community board chair Sister Anne Hurley and Otara community worker Joanna Fuimaono.

For more information about *Room for Improvement*, contact Alan Johnson:
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For more stories about the consequences of poor housing on children's health, contact Dr Nikki Turner: 3737999, 021 790 693, n.turner@auckland.ac.nz

For more information about the launch of *Room for Improvement* contact Janet McAllister: ph 363-5503 janetmcallister@slingshot.co.nz