

Prospect

The great housing disaster: an interview with Danny Dorling

by [Jonathan Derbyshire](#)

/ MARCH 5, 2014 /



Everyone agrees that there is a housing crisis in this country. Most people think this is a crisis of supply and many trace the origins of the crisis back to the 1980s. For example, the journalist James Meek, in a much-discussed [essay](#) on the subject in the London Review of Books, argues that the Thatcher government “artificially raised market rents by choking off supply—by making it impossible for councils to replace [the houses sold off under the “Right to Buy” scheme].” We’re paying for those policy choices today, Meek suggests.

Danny Dorling, a professor of geography at Oxford and the author of several books on social inequality, tells a rather different story of what he calls the “great housing disaster” in his new book [“All That Is Solid”](#). I spoke to Dorling about the book last week.

DD: I look at the number of rooms in houses rather than the actual number of buildings. I should say, though, that I’d be very happy with building upwards in London and in expanding out in to the Green Belt in parts of the south-east of England. Where there’s inordinate demand, I think you should try to meet that demand. So I’m not against building. But I do think we could house ourselves much better given what we’ve already got. Increasingly, our problem is that we’re using housing less and less efficiently. And that’s a great waste of resources.

JD: So under-use and under-occupation is, in your view, a very significant part of the problem here?

Yes. After the 2011 census, which was the first one to count bedrooms, the problem becomes really stark. Our ratio of people to rooms has never been lower. Yet we’ve built an awful number of extra rooms—we’ve built into attics, we’ve built on to garages. This has been people trying to solve the housing problem themselves. They build these extensions on their property when their family is getting to its maximum size, and that’s part of the reason why we now have so much unused housing. The kids do actually leave—they don’t all stay at home.

For you, then, whilst the problem of supply is real, it's actually a tributary of a much deeper problem—namely, inequality?

The housing crisis is one of the repercussions of growing income inequality. Income inequality begins to grow at the start of the 1980s. There's a big lag before wealth inequality starts growing, but eventually you get wide wealth inequalities too. Take one example I didn't give in the book: if you just allowed people to build now, to build anywhere, given how little money the bottom half of the population now has, you'd have shanty towns being built across Hyde Park. That's all people could afford to build.

So unless you begin to address income inequalities you'll be patching up, trying to solve the problem when the underlying problem is that people simply don't have enough money to pay for their housing. There's been a stagnation of wages at the bottom, benefits have fallen in real terms compared to where they were in the Seventies and so on. At the other end, in the top 10 per cent of society, people have never had so much money. And where on earth does that money go? The temptation to buy a second home or flat is quite high. You'll often find a couple, each of whom has a flat in London, say. They get together but they never sell the extra flat. They become a two-home owning couple by accident.

You take in quite a wide sweep of history in this book. And one of the interesting observations you make is that, despite the temptation to assume that the two periods are analogous, there are important differences between today's housing crisis and the one that Britain suffered in 1930s. Why did you think it important to draw that distinction?

Our peak year of inequality was 1913. After that, we became much more equal until the end of the 1970s. The majority of that gain occurred before 1939 and that is something that is not well understood in Britain. In the States, in contrast, it didn't happen that way. There it was all about the Second World War. So the 1930s housing boom was happening at a time when people's incomes were coming closer together. We're on the opposite trajectory today. The other thing I do say in the book is that there's quite a lot of evidence that the Thirties housing boom may not have been sustainable and could have ended in a crash but for the war. The regulations that came in with the war were quite incredible—they almost nationalised housing, so people couldn't get evicted and so on.

The other thing to remember about the Thirties, Forties and Fifties is that people had safe and steady jobs, which is what you need to pay off a 25-year mortgage. Today, people are using the same model as their grandparents [and taking out 25-year mortgages], but not in comparable conditions of economic security.

Indeed. At one point you write that what we're seeing today is the formation of a home-owning "precariat".

Yes. This is another form of precarity, and it stretches way up the social scale. People who lose sleep over a half a per cent or one per cent interest rate rise are included in it. There's also a precariat in social housing—look at the way that, until the age of 30, you're treated like a child in terms of what kind of housing you can have. I don't think enough work has been done looking into how housing is where precariousness in our lives is experienced most viscerally. A lot of it has to do with worry. The actual number of evictions is pretty low. It's the fear and anxiety that are the biggest costs.

There are obvious legislative landmarks in the historical account you're giving in this book—the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947, for example, the Housing Act of 1980 and the policy of "Right to Buy" which someone like James Meek emphasises. These are often invoked in the current debate around housing. But you place as much emphasis on the effective repeal, in the 1980s, of the Fair Rent Act. Do you think that was as consequential as the sell-off of council houses?

Yes, because it encouraged people to become landlords for speculative gain on the property. This is the most contentious issue: what do we do about rents? On the left, you have people wanting much stricter rent controls. On the right, you have people who seem to think that rent controls create slums. The degree of disagreement is so massive that it's very hard to come up with plausible suggestions. At the moment, it makes sense for a fairly affluent couple to become landlords if they can and then to use high rents to buy, buy and buy, and outbid people trying to buy homes for their families. I don't think that's a very healthy situation. We want an efficient private rented sector for people who are mobile—young professionals, students—but also for the elderly who are likely to want to move between various types of housing as their health deteriorates. But what we've ended up with is a private rented sector that is housing one in four families with kids.

As far as the social rented sector is concerned, my big break with people like James Meek is that I'm not in favour of a mass council house-building programme. I think the left has a problem in that it often looks back to solutions that worked fifty or sixty years ago. Council housing was a brilliant solution for the last century. Slum clearance was a great solution for the century before. The best solutions are always a little bit new; they always fit into people's current aspirations. Another example is comprehensive schools. The left keeps doing this: picking something from our parents' or grandparents' generation and saying, "Why can't we have that again?" They forget that what the left did in the past was to be imaginative.

Danny Dorling's "All That Is Solid: The Great Housing Disaster" is published by Allen Lane (£20).

