



^{*}**CITYFUTUREs**

**Children in the Compact City:
Fairfield as a suburban case
study**

**Paper Commissioned by the Australian
Research Alliance for Children and Youth**

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Alliance for Children and Youth**

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Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth
Working together to enhance the wellbeing and life chances of children and young people.



Children in the Compact City: Fairfield as a suburban case study¹

1 Introduction

This paper tackles one of the three case studies commissioned for the 2nd *Creating Child Friendly Cities Conference*, that of the position of children in higher density lower income middle suburban locations. It is exploratory and speculative in nature and aims to identify areas for further research, rather than presenting a fully formed and researched study. It is also Sydney-centric. This is unavoidable as its focus comes from research primarily conducted in the Sydney by the author in the last several years. It also proved impossible to follow the brief for the paper in time, given the stringent requirements for university ethics approval, which precluded the direct involvement of children in the research, especially those from non-English speaking background.

Nevertheless, the paper aims to begin the process of thinking through how a particular urban design and socio-spatial context might influence childhood outcomes for those families who find themselves constrained to one of the least favourable housing sub-markets.

But while the empirical focus of the paper is a case study of a specific urban environment, the paper also has a more general function in that it raises questions about broader aspects of contemporary metropolitan development that are on a potential collision course: the push to higher density cities and the future position of families and children in the higher density city.

The context for this stems from the metropolitan strategic planning policies that now form the basis for future city growth management in most Australian for the next quarter of a century. These plans all adopt variants of the dominant planning orthodoxy based on the notion that higher density cities deliver much more sustainable social, economic and environmental outcomes compared to the lower density suburban growth that has been a principal characteristic of Australian cities.

However, the relationship between children and higher density housing remains under researched and largely ignored in planning circles. But, as this paper attempts to show, high density living is already a reality for many children in Sydney. It will become the reality for many more in the next few decades. How we plan for the use of higher density housing by families will critically determine how well the future high density city performs in terms of its social sustainability and, to use that much abused term, liveability – for the whole community. To date, there is little evidence that the idea that children might be part of the higher density city being planned for Sydney, Melbourne and other Australian cities has been understood by urban planners and developers. If it is not understood, then the kinds of problems we can see in some

¹ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Thanks are due to Kristian Ruming for the 2001 Census analysis, Dr Bruce Judd for the photographs for Figures 13 to 17 and Dr Raymond Bunker for comments on the draft paper. All mistakes and errors are the responsibility of the author.

of the earlier attempts at higher density housing in the most disadvantaged suburbs of Sydney will become more widely spread.

2 Children and the Compact City

Two specific aspects of contemporary metropolitan development form the twin foci of the paper:

- Middle suburban higher density neighbourhoods
- Higher density urban futures

The first, and most direct, is the position of children in a particular, and at present, minority housing sub-market – the higher density and predominantly rental sub-markets of middle suburban areas in Sydney. The paper will focus on the position of families who are dependent on high density rental housing as the only affordable and accessible housing option in high cost city. In doing so, it will highlight the issues facing children and their parents in what are arguably some of the most disadvantaged communities in our largest city.

The second concerns the implications of the future currently being planned for our cities under the rubric of higher density and compact city planning. In particular, while the compact city plans do not explicitly exclude children, the logic of what is being planned will, under current settings, effectively result in a polarised city, one newly built in town centres and transport corridors for childless households, where the great growth in urban population is expected to come from, and the other, a suburban population in low density housing where families will be catered for. While this may be an over-simplification, the current trends in development certainly point us in that direction.

Indeed, what the example of the middle suburban higher density market shows is that this strict social demarcation is unlikely, but that failing to plan for families in the new high density city will inevitably lead to the kinds of problems revealing themselves in our disadvantaged middle suburbs, themselves the product of planning decision made 30 years ago to create neighbourhoods that promoted higher density without consideration of who might actually end up living there.

The paper starts with a discussion of the likely urban outcomes from the higher density planning that is driving urban management and the evidence as to the social outcomes of the higher density housing we already have. This is followed by a review of a data on where children currently fit into the higher density housing stock in Sydney and some of their characteristics. The focus then narrows down to the lower income and lower rental value higher density stock, which is largely located in a number of town centres and strips in the older middle suburban areas. Fairfield and Cabramatta town centres in the City of Fairfield in suburban western Sydney are taken as case study areas to exemplify the issues facing children in these kinds of urban environments.

While the analysis is largely descriptive, connections are strongly drawn between the role of the higher density rental housing sub-markets in providing a relatively accessible housing market for families who cannot afford to buy or to rent in higher

value areas. The connection between higher density and rental is important. The principal driver for higher density housing demand has traditionally come from rental investors, at least to the present time. This form of housing has a very obvious impact on those living in it, which are especially important for children. We will discuss these later in the paper where the impact this type of housing on children's early years experiences will be drawn out, based on discussion in the case study areas with those involved in children's development, planners and other local professionals. The paper ends with a brief discussion of some of the implications of these findings for future research on the impacts of the roll out of higher density housing in our cities for those children who are likely to increasingly call this kind of housing their home.

3 The outcomes of the higher density revolution

Australian cities are moving to a new higher density future. Many of our major metropolitan areas now have plans that strongly promote higher density housing in centres across the city in order to create more compact cities². These new higher density and mixed use town and neighbourhood centres will account for the majority of new housing development in the next 20 to 30 years (Table 1). In Sydney between 60% and 70% of new development will take the form of infill and urban renewal development in medium and higher density forms, accounting for some 440,000 new dwellings in all.

The main logic for this, apart from the assumed environmental sustainability benefits and infrastructure economies of a compact city, are demographic projections that predict families becoming an ever smaller component of the population structure. Planners are planning for cities to accommodate singles, couples and the elderly. As far as the planners are concerned, family housing is already over supplied in this new ageing city and needs little encouragement. As a consequence, contemporary strategic planning has almost become child-blind, with the new higher density centres being built essentially for the childless in mind. The talk is of 'vibrant' and 'liveable' mixed use town centres, characterised by pavement cafes, restaurant and entertainment precincts, shopping and office jobs. These are a long way from the traditional family-centric suburbs of the past. In the process, the new Australian compact city will be developed into distinctive zones based on age, life style and household composition. Town centres for the childless, the suburbs remaining for the minority with children.

This process has been proceeding for some time, promoted by both planners and developers. While higher density housing in the form of flats and town houses has been around for many years, the rate of building has accelerated in the last two decades (Table 2)³. In Sydney, more higher density dwellings were built between 1981 and 2001 than separate houses. The rate of development has also accelerated in Brisbane and Melbourne. Traditionally, higher density housing has been an inner city

² New South Wales Department of Planning (2005) *City of Cities: a Plan for Sydney's Future*, Department of Planning, Sydney.

Queensland Office of Urban Management (2004) *Draft South East Queensland Regional Plan*.

Queensland Government Office of Urban Management, Brisbane.

Victoria Department of Infrastructure (2003) *Melbourne 2030*, Melbourne, Government of Victoria.

³ Randolph, B. (2006 forthcoming) *Delivering the Compact City in Australia: Current trends and future implications*, *Urban Policy and Research*, 24, 4.

phenomenon (Figure 1). But the new city plans envisage higher density as a feature of suburban town and neighbourhood areas in an unprecedented manner. In particular, the middle suburbs will become the focus of much new higher density renewal. The plans for Sydney envisage a fifth of new urban development will be located in the middle suburbs of western Sydney and another third in the already more densified inner eastern suburbs and inner city (Figure 2).

There are two aspects of this new compact world that need better understanding. The first is the fact that the new plans are being rolled out across our cities that have inherent fault lines of status, income and household structure. Certainly in the case of Sydney, the largest and most extensive of Australian cities, these social fault lines have been all but ignored in the metropolitan planning process. Yet they will have significant impacts in terms of the social outcomes of this densification process. A block of apartments built in Bankstown will house a very different community to one built in Bondi. Most importantly, in relation to this paper, the profile of households occupying higher density housing varied dramatically. Far from being a child free housing type, flats house significant numbers of children. The question is, how far is the high density city a child friendly city? The problem for children in the higher density city is that they are largely drawn from among our poorest and most disadvantaged communities. Whether this will change is the key question that we need to consider.

Recent research has shown a close correlation between higher density housing in middle and outer suburbs of Sydney and high levels of disadvantage⁴. These are not public housing estates, but areas of low income private housing, dominated by private rental and characterised by high proportions of flats in concentrations around town centres and transport corridors previously zoned for this kind of housing. Essentially, this is the bottom of the Sydney housing market. Importantly, the proportion of children and families is higher in these areas than the Sydney average. These places are the focus of this paper.

Evidence as to the differential social outcomes of higher density development at the local scale is shown in Figures 3 and 4 which present the findings of a statistical analysis of the social characteristics of the 2001 Census Collector Districts (CDs) with high proportions of flats.⁵ This revealed a number of dominant sub-markets. The most significant was a low income market strongly associated with private rental and recent immigration in clusters of low value walk up flats in the older suburban town centres and along suburban rail lines (Figure 3). Most significantly, CDs that scored highly on this factor were characterised by high proportion flats with families: 38% of all households. While below the Sydney average of 47% of all households, this is substantially higher than other parts of the flat sector⁶.

The second most prominent cluster were CDs in inner city and waterside locations associated with higher income professional workers, child-free households and a mix of home ownership and rental (Figure 4). Households with children accounted for

⁴ Randolph, B. and Holloway, D. (2005) *Social disadvantage, tenure and location: An analysis of Sydney and Melbourne*, *Urban Policy and Research*, 23, 2, pp 173-202.

⁵ Bunker, R., Holloway, D. and Randolph, B. (2005a) *The expansion of urban consolidation in Sydney: social impacts and implications*, *Australian Planner* 42, 3, 16-25.

⁶ *Ibid.*

just 16% of all households living in flats in these areas, well below the Sydney average.

The question then arises as to what is the social context these families are living in, and how might this inform our understanding of the impacts of future planned densification of Sydney. Mapping Figure 2 against Figures 3 and 4 allows a very simple conclusion to be drawn between these location of these two distinctive higher density sub-markets and the plans for urban renewal and greater densification. Clearly, on current settings, social outcomes in the Central East area of Sydney will be markedly different to those likely in the Central West region.

It is likely that children in the new middle and upper income high amenity developments now being built in waterside and inner city locations may experience trouble-free childhoods, although this remains untested. On the other hand, the older low end rental flat market in a range of locations across the city is likely to be a very different experience for a child. We will return to the more qualitative issues of living in these areas later. But first we will review a range of basic statistics about the nature of high density sector and the position of children who live in this sector.

Table 1: Planned urban outcomes and dwelling targets for Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane (South East Queensland) under current metropolitan planning strategies

	Sydney	Melbourne	Brisbane/South East Queensland
Preferred urban form	Compact city	Compact city	Compact city
Location of higher density outcomes	Regional Centres Major Centres plus town centres, urban villages and neighbourhood centres	Urban Activity Centres Transport orientated development	Activity Centres Strategic Development Sites
Total dwellings targets	640,000 by 2031	550,000 by 2026	620,000 by 2030
Higher density renewal targets	60-70% (445,000)	Increasing to 50% (244,00)	67% (426,000)

Source: Randolph, B. (2006 forthcoming)⁷

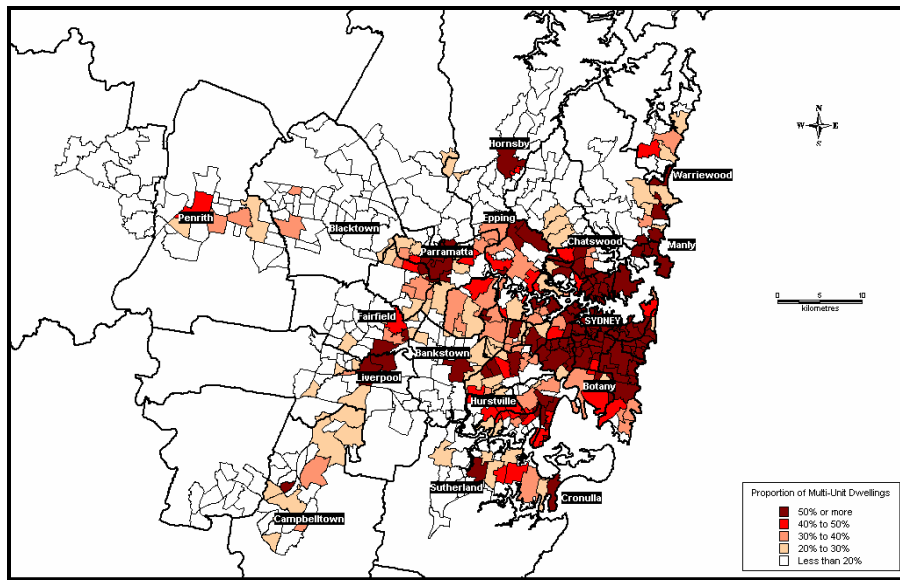
Table 2: Multi-unit dwellings in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, 1981 to 2001

	Separate Houses	Multi-Unit Dwellings	Total
2001			
Sydney	907,195	500,089	1,438,394
Melbourne	919,704	302,897	1,243,373
Brisbane	481,333	107,986	601,146
Proportion of total dwellings			
Sydney	63%	35%	100%
Melbourne	74%	24%	100%
Brisbane	80%	18%	100%
Change 1981-2001			
Sydney	+185,353	+187,602	+373,304
Melbourne	+238,976	+104,507	+342,885
Brisbane	+193,472	+64,100	+263,339
Total	+617,801	+356,209	+979,528
Percentage change 1981-2001			
Sydney	+26%	+60%	+35%
Melbourne	+35%	+53%	+38%
Brisbane	+67%	+146%	+78%
Total	+37%	+64%	+43%

Source: ABS Census 1981 and 2001

⁷ *ibid*

Figure 1: The proportion of multi-unit dwellings by suburb, Sydney 2001



Source: Bunker, *et al*, 2005b⁸

Figure 2: The proposed distribution of additional development in Sydney to 2025

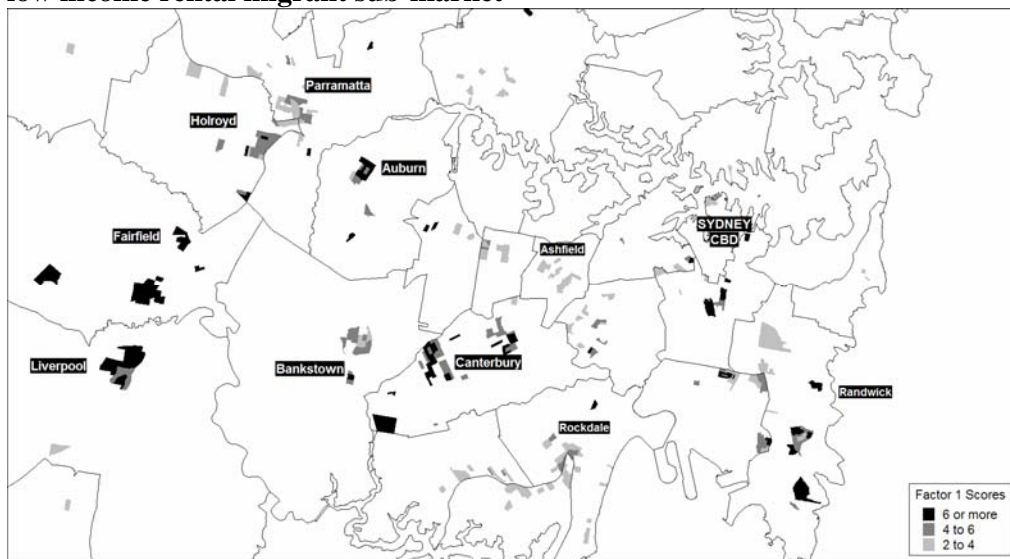


Source: DIPNR 2004⁹.

⁸ Bunker, R., Holloway, D. and Randolph, B. (2005b) *Building the connection between housing needs and metropolitan planning in Sydney, Australia*, *Housing Studies*, 20, 5, 771-794

⁹ NSW Department of Planning, Infrastructure and Natural Resources (2004)

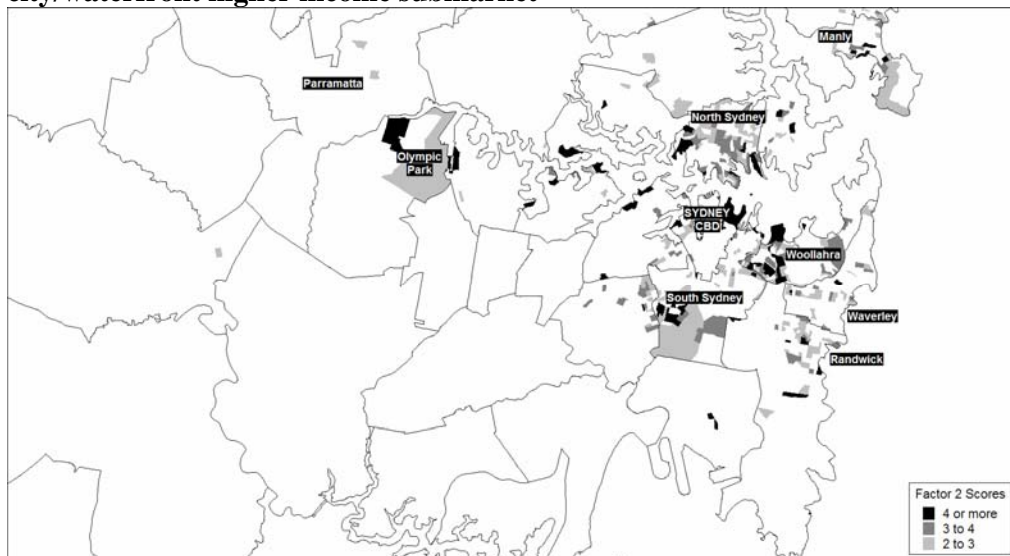
Figure 3: Unpacking the Sydney high density housing market – the suburban low income rental migrant sub-market



Source: Bunker *et al*, 2005a

Key statistics: 43% families with children; 43% with household incomes under \$400; 3% with household incomes over \$1500; 70% private rental; 36% of household with no car; 80% of individuals overseas born; 9% of adults employed as managers and professionals; 24% of adults unemployed

Figure 4: Unpacking the Sydney high density housing market – the inner city/waterfront higher income submarket



Source: Bunker *et al*, 2005a

Key statistics: 33% couple only households, 10% with household incomes under \$400; 44% with household incomes over \$1500, 42% fully owned and 31% private rental; 36% of individuals overseas born; 59% of adults employed as managers or professionals; 3% of adults unemployed.

4 Children and the higher density housing market

While the above analysis was derived from research which only tangentially concerned itself with families and children, this section reviews more directly the evidence from the 2001 Census as to the location of children in the higher density Sydney housing market. A number of key indicators of the lived experience of children in the higher density sector, also drawn from the 2001 Census, are also reviewed. The aim here to show how aspects of the built environment, particularly, location and dwelling characteristics, interrelate with key social characteristics of the households in which children live. This represents only a brief overview, and much more detailed analysis awaits the release of the new 2006 Census in mid-2007. However, it will serve as a starting point to better understand where and how children and higher density housing interrelate.

4.1 Children in flats in Sydney

The overall number of children living in flats in Sydney by local government area (LGA) in 2001 is given in Table 3. Of the 753,641 children aged under 15 in Sydney at that time, 70,177, or just under one in ten (9.3%), lived in a flat.

Where did they live? Column 2 in Table 3 and Figure 5 shows the numbers of children living in flats for each Sydney local government area (LGA) in 2001. The clear leader is Canterbury with 8,305, followed by Parramatta (4,049), Randwick (3,902), Rockdale (3,305) and Fairfield (3,063). Of the top 10, seven are located in the Central West region and the other 3 in the eastern and St George area of the city. However, in proportional terms, a higher percentage of children in inner city and eastern suburbs lived in flats, given the concentration of this dwelling type in these LGAs. The figure reaches 78% in the City of Sydney although elsewhere proportions of children living in flats only exceed 30% in North Sydney, South Sydney, Ashfield, Botany Bay and Canterbury.

Table 3: The number of children aged under 15 living in a flat, Sydney Local Government Areas 2001**Children living in flats, Sydney 2001**

LGA	All households in flats		Households with income under \$600		
	No of children	% of all children	No of children	% of children in low income households	% of children in flats
Canterbury	8305	32.7	3674	50.9	44.2
Parramatta	4039	15.0	1418	24.0	35.1
Randwick	3902	25.3	994	50.5	25.5
Rockdale	3305	22.9	1123	37.1	34.0
Fairfield	3063	7.8	1657	14.3	54.1
Bankstown	2680	7.8	1210	14.8	45.1
Holroyd	2658	16.1	1069	28.5	40.2
Liverpool	2641	7.1	1175	15.0	44.5
Sutherland Shire	2469	6.2	817	22.5	33.1
Auburn	2455	21.5	1061	30.4	43.2
Warringah	2399	10.7	586	29.6	24.4
Marrickville	2261	24.0	832	41.7	36.8
Botany Bay	2215	36.3	672	54.5	30.3
Ryde	2132	13.8	628	32.2	29.5
Hurstville	2011	16.4	703	33.5	35.0
Waverley	1948	28.2	436	56.0	22.4
South Sydney	1811	34.3	673	47.8	37.2
Ashfield	1687	30.5	499	56.1	29.6
Kogarah	1643	18.8	505	43.3	30.7
Hornsby	1544	5.3	392	16.8	25.4
Willoughby	1519	16.0	347	44.3	22.8
North Sydney	1496	35.2	210	59.5	14.0
Woollahra	1170	20.3	184	50.1	15.7
Strathfield	1112	21.9	322	39.1	29.0
Blacktown	978	1.6	453	3.4	46.3
Sydney	898	78.5	252	73.3	28.1
Manly	862	15.8	145	38.0	16.8
Burwood	847	18.4	282	38.5	33.3
Lane Cove	751	15.6	137	49.5	18.2
Leichhardt	723	10.5	269	26.0	37.2
Penrith	709	1.7	377	5.5	53.2
Drummoyne	624	13.6	134	29.8	21.5
Concord	506	11.3	109	24.2	21.5
Mosman	483	12.0	77	35.0	15.9
Gosford	480	1.5	221	3.7	46.0
Pittwater	382	3.9	92	12.6	24.1
Ku-ring-gai	337	1.7	76	8.4	22.6
Campbelltown	318	0.9	188	2.1	59.1
Wyong	220	0.8	141	1.9	64.1
Baulkham Hills	170	0.6	62	3.0	36.5
Hawkesbury	150	1.0	67	2.9	44.7
Hunter's Hill	143	6.8	58	40.6	40.6
Blue Mountains	75	0.5	45	1.9	60.0
Wollondilly	43	0.5	14	1.1	32.6
Camden	13	0.1	4	0.3	30.8
Total Sydney SD	70177	9.3	24390	18.4	34.8

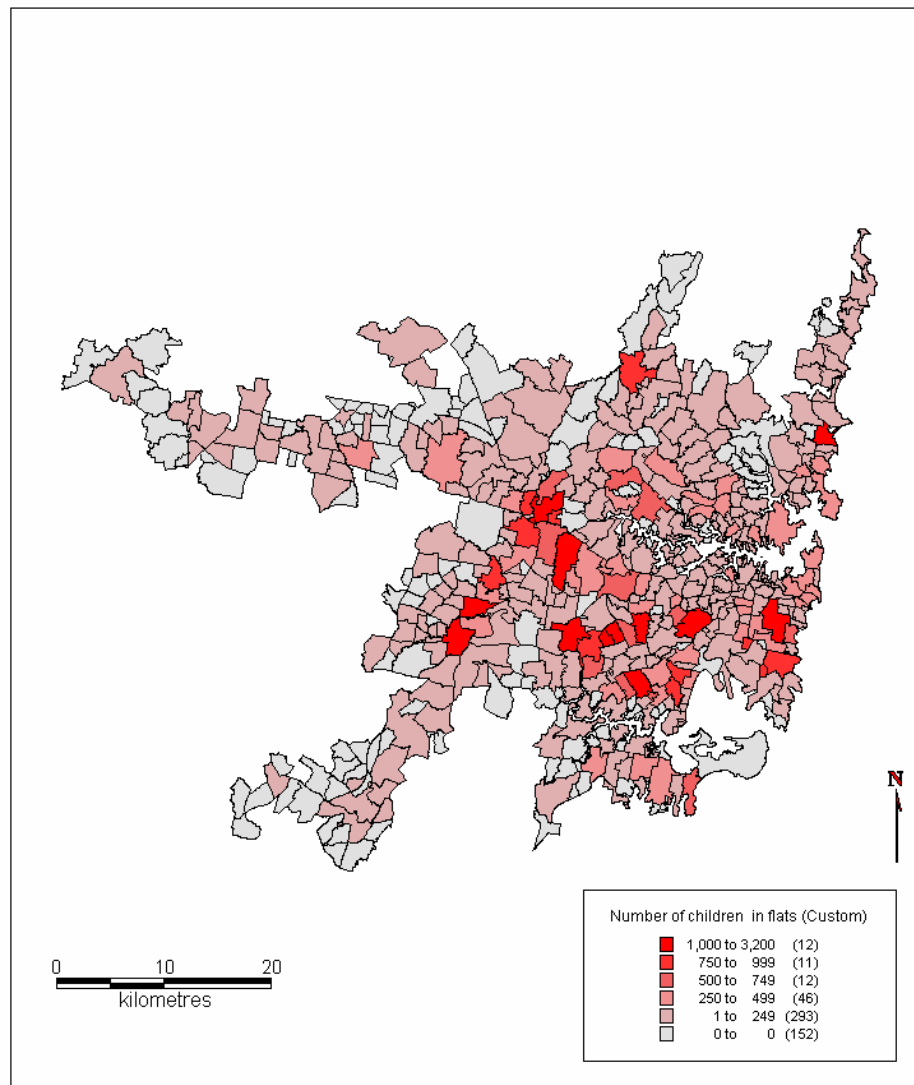
But it's the role of the sector for children in lower income households that is particularly revealing. Table 3 also gives the numbers of children in households living in flats whose weekly income falls below \$600. The listing is broadly comparable, with the top 10 LGAs in column 4 closely corresponding to the top 10 in column 2, with Marrickville edging out Sutherland Shire. In all there were 24,390 children living in flats where the household weekly income was lower than \$600 in 2001, some 18% of all children in lower income households in Sydney. However, 35% of all children in flats fell into this lower income group. This figure reached over 50% in some outer city areas such as Wyong, Blue Mountains, Penrith and Campbelltown, where there are relatively few flats, but also LGAs in the middle suburbs such as Fairfield, Liverpool, Blacktown and Canterbury where there are many more flats. In these areas the flat market is particularly associated with those on lowest incomes. At the other end of the social scale, relatively few children living in flats in , Lane Cove, North Sydney, Mossman, Manly and Woollahra were from low income households.

However, the true *spatial* nature of the 'child friendly' high density market is revealed at a lower spatial scale. Figure 5 shows the distribution of children living in flats at the suburb level across urban Sydney in 2001. The 20 suburbs with the highest numbers are listed in Table 4. This illustrates how the distribution of children in flats is much more concentrated at the local level, with very clear clusters associated with suburban town centres and railways, in line with the localised nature of the suburban flat market. The suburbs of Bankstown and Campsie and Lakemba (both in Canterbury) stand out, followed by a range of other suburbs primarily associated with high concentrations of private rental rather than public housing (Randolph and Holloway, 2005; Bunker *et al*, 2005a).

Table 4: 20 suburbs with the largest numbers of children living in flats, Sydney 2001

Suburb	Children in flats
Bankstown	2192
Campsie	2116
Lakemba	2116
Liverpool	1897
Auburn	1652
Cabramatta	1430
Parramatta	1258
Hurstville	1235
Ashfield	1220
Dee Why	1190
Randwick	1036
Wiley Park	1027
Marrickville	1011
Fairfield	947
Hornsby	936
Merrylands	884
Westmead	849
Eastlakes	848
Kogarah	847
Hillsdale	838

Figure 5: The Number of Children Living in Flats, Sydney Suburbs 2001



4.2 Characteristics of children's households and dwellings

Household Income

Turning to the characteristics of households that children in flats live in, Table 5 summarises the weekly incomes of households in which children in flats live compared to household incomes for all children in Sydney in 2001. Twice the proportion of children living in flats were living in a household with an income under \$600 per week compared to all children in Sydney (35% and 18% respectively). Looked at another way, just under one in five (18%) children in households with incomes under \$600 lived in a flat, compared to just under one in ten (9%) children overall.

Table 5: Children in Flats - Weekly Household Incomes for Households with Children in Flats and All Households, Sydney 2001

Household Income	Children in flats			All Children	
	No	Col %	Row %	No	Col %
Under \$600 p.w	24,390	34.8	18.4	132,437	17.6
\$600 or more p.w.	37,975	54.1	7.1	534,614	70.9
Income N/S	7,811	11.1	9.0	86,587	11.5
Total	70,176	100.0	9.3	753,641	100.0

Mobility

Children in flats are more likely to have moved in the recent past than other children. Table 6 shows that while 36% of all children were living at the same address five years preceding the Census, only 19% of children in flats were at the same address at that time. However, the table highlights other key differences with the rest of the child population: 44% of children in flats were aged under 5 years old in 2001 compared to 33% of all children and 14% were overseas in 1996, compared to just 4% of all children. So children who live in flats are more likely to have moved, come from overseas or be aged under 5 compared to the general child population.

Table 6: Children in Flats – Mobility of Households in Flats with Children and All Dwellings, Sydney 2001 (Address 5 years before Census)

Mobility	Children in flats			All Children	
	No	Col %	Row %	No	Col %
At same address	13,172	18.8	53.2	270,487	35.9
At different address	15,349	21.9	2.4	193,235	25.6
Overseas	9,554	13.6	17.4	32,119	4.3
Under 5yrs	30,641	43.7		248,645	33.0
N/S	1,417	2.0		9,157	1.2
Total	70,133	100.0	9.3	753,643	100.0

Country of Birth of Parent

One of the defining characteristic of children in flats is that the great majority of them live in households where the reference person on the Census form (the parent or guardian) was born overseas: 73% compared to 42% of all children in Sydney (Table 7). The leading origins of households with children living in flats were China (10.1%

of all children in flats), Lebanon (4.5%), India (3.9%), Viet Nam (3.8%), Philippines (3.6%) and South Korea (3.5%).

Table 7: Children in Flats – Country of Birth of Reference Person of Children in Flats and All Children, Sydney 2001

Country of Birth	Children in flats			All Children	
	No	Col %	Row %	No	Col %
Australia	17,639	25.2	4.1	428,419	56.9
Overseas	51,255	73.1	16.2	316,613	42.0
N/S	1,214	1.7	14.2	8,557	1.1
Total	70,108	100.0	9.3	753,589	100.0

Dwelling tenure

Turning to the characteristics of the dwellings they lived in, children living in flats are overwhelmingly in the rental market, with 49,079 (70%) living in a rented property, compared to 29% of all children (Table 8). Overall, 23% of children in households renting their accommodation lived in flats.

Table 8: Children in Flats – Dwelling Tenure of Flats with Children and All Dwellings, Sydney 2001

Tenure	Children in flats			All Children	
	No	Col %	Row %	No	Col %
Owned	7,796	11.1	4.1	190,008	25.2
Buying	10,472	14.9	3.3	314,709	41.8
Rented	49,079	70.0	22.5	218,144	28.9
Other/N/S	2,786	4.0	9.1	30,780	4.1
Total	70,133	100.0	9.3	753,641	100.0

Housing tenure has an important impact on the lived experience of children in flats through its association with mobility. In particular, higher mobility from overseas is strongly associated with rental, as Table 9 illustrates. Leaving aside children not born in 1996 highlights the high proportions of mobile children living in rented flats and flats being bought. While over half of all children in Sydney over 5 years old in 2001 were living at the same address in 1996, the figure falls to 35% for all children living in flats and to 31% for children in rented flats. The high proportion of recent child movers in flats being bought suggests the role of this sub-market for new or expanding families, possibly as first home buyers. Among children in households that were renting, 30% were overseas five years earlier, compared to just 6% of the general child population of Sydney. Clearly, rental flats play an important role as a first staging post for newly arrived families.

Table 9: Children over 5 years old in flats – The association between dwelling tenure and mobility, Sydney 2001 (NB: Excludes Not Stated)

Children over 5yrs	Owned	Buying	Rented	Other/N/S	All in Flats	All Children
At same address	54.4	35.1	30.8	42.0	34.6	54.5
At different address	33.4	53.1	39.2	36.2	40.3	39.0
Overseas	12.2	11.8	30.0	21.9	25.1	6.5
Total	4,510	5,270	26,939	1,349	38,075	495,841

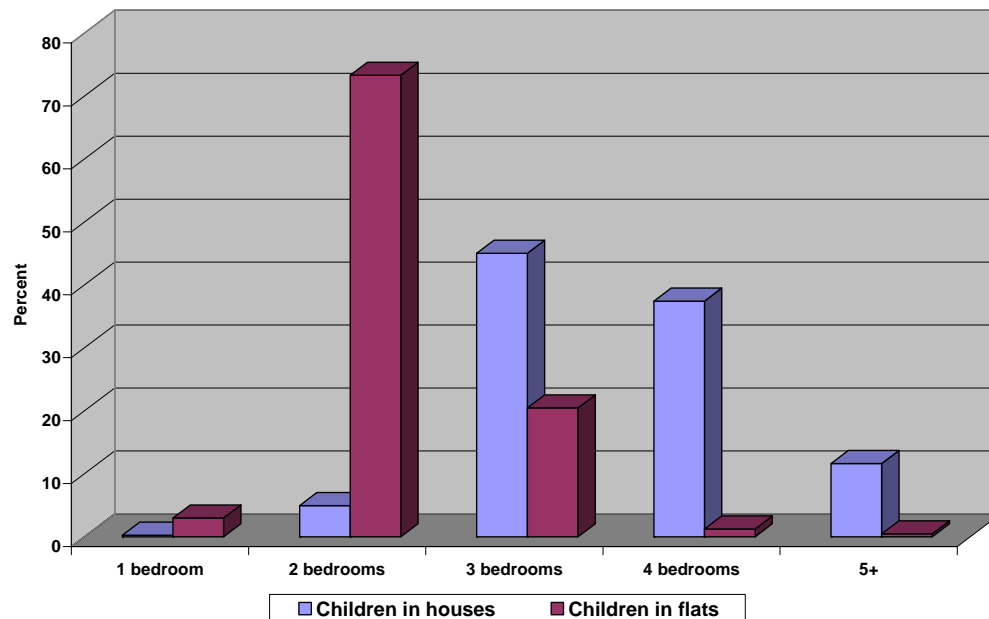
Dwelling size

Finally, children in flats are overwhelmingly associated with smaller sized accommodation (Table 10). Three quarters of children in flats live in dwellings with two or fewer bedrooms, compared to only 13% of all children. Over half (53%) the children living in properties with two or fewer bedrooms lived in flats. Figure 6 contrasts the numbers of bedrooms in houses and flats for children.

Table 10: Children in Flats – Size of Flats with Children and All Dwellings, Sydney 2001 (Bedrooms)

No of Bedrooms	Children in flats			All Children	
	No	Col %	Row %	No	Col %
2 or less bedrooms	53,457	76.2	53.2	100,467	13.3
3 or more bedrooms	15,550	22.2	2.4	646,888	85.8
Not stated	1,092	1.6	17.4	6,285	0.8
Total	70,162	100.0	9.3	753,640	100.0

Figure 6: Children in flats – Dwelling Size for Children in Flats and Houses, Sydney 2001



These data paint a distinctive picture of the housing and household characteristics of children living in flats in Sydney, at least until five years ago. They would predominantly have parents who rented their property. Their homes were physically smaller than the homes other children live in with a clear majority having two or fewer bedrooms. They were twice as likely as other children to have parents on low incomes. They would have been much more likely to have moved recently, especially from overseas. This reflects the very high proportion whose parents were themselves born overseas. And they would more than likely be living in an older middle suburban town centre, although proportionally, children in the inner city were more likely to live in flats.

5 Children in a high density, disadvantaged, middle suburb

So far, we have established the nature of the higher density market in Sydney and the position of children in that market. The next section of the paper shifts its focus to the local scale to review the nature of experience of the higher density market in one of the lower income middle suburban areas which were highlighted above. In these areas, soon to be under pressure for more higher density development, the social context and experience of flat living for children are likely to be very different from the experience facing children in the higher value and status higher density suburbs to the east.

The area chosen for this paper is Fairfield LGA in Western Sydney. As should be evident from the analysis earlier in the paper, Fairfield contains a significant number of children living in flats. It also had a very high proportion of these children living in low income households. Previous research by the author has shown that the housing market in Fairfield is among the lowest cost in Sydney. The Fairfield flat sub-market, in particular, is one of the cheapest. However, the low incomes of flat dwellers means that it is not necessarily very affordable¹⁰. A 2004 report by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modeling found that Fairfield LGA had more people living in unaffordable housing than any other LGA in Australia¹¹

A summary of the key features of the Fairfield flat sector is given in Box 1. A summary of key differences between the profile of children and their households living in flats in Fairfield and those in Sydney as a whole is given in Box 2. As these data confirm, not only is the Fairfield flat market highly disadvantaged in relation to the Sydney average, the sector is home to a significant number of children. Many of these are from recently arrived immigrant communities. The profile of the flat market described in the previous sections is quite evident in Fairfield. Children in this sector live in a housing stock that is characterised by high levels of rental and potentially overcrowding, their households are highly mobile, with very low incomes even in relation to those elsewhere in Fairfield, with parents employed in low paid and unskilled jobs, likely to be recent immigrants or with parents born overseas. The position of recent immigrants was particularly disadvantaged, even in relation to other households in the same sub-market¹². Figures 7 to 10 illustrate some of the key features of households in the Fairfield flat sub-market.

¹⁰ Randolph, B., Holloway, D. and Murray, D. (2005) *A Social Profile of Households in Higher Density Housing in Fairfield*, City Futures Research Centre for City of Fairfield, Faculty of the Built Environment, University of New South Wales.

¹¹ Taylor, E., Harding, A., Lloyd, R. & Blake, M. (Sept. 2004). Housing unaffordability at the Statistical Local Area level: New estimates in using spatial microsimulation, NATSEM, Online Conference Paper CP2004_09. Downloaded from www.natsem.canberra.edu.au/publications/papers/cps/cp04/2004_009/cp2004_009.pdf

¹² Randolph, B. *et al* (2005) Ibid

Figure 7: Rents by dwelling type, Fairfield, W. Sydney and Sydney, 2001

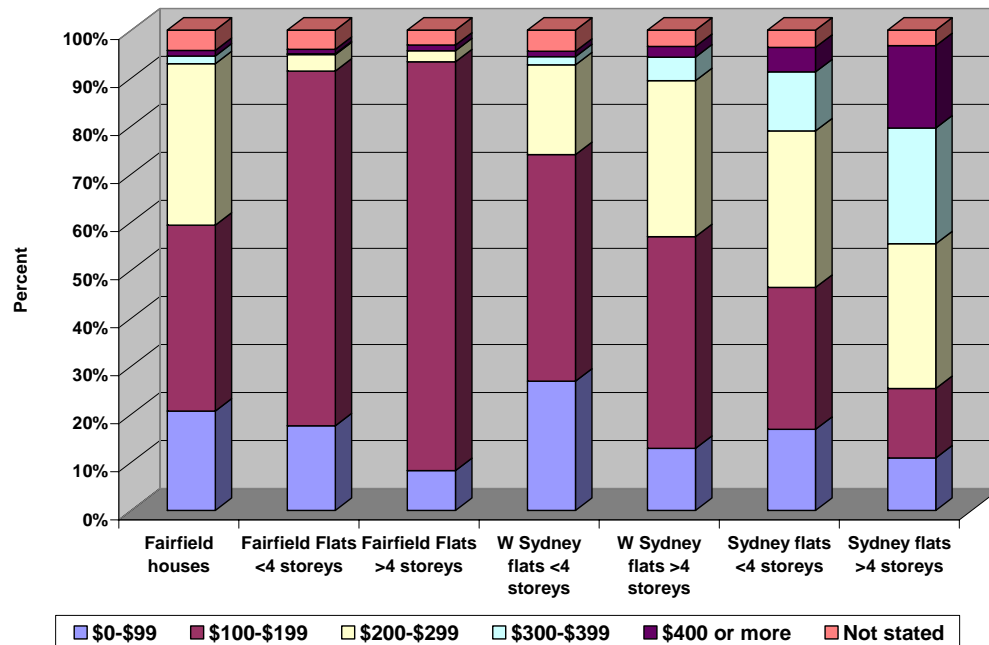


Figure 8: Comparison of Weekly Income of Households for Children Living in Flats in Fairfield and Sydney, 2001

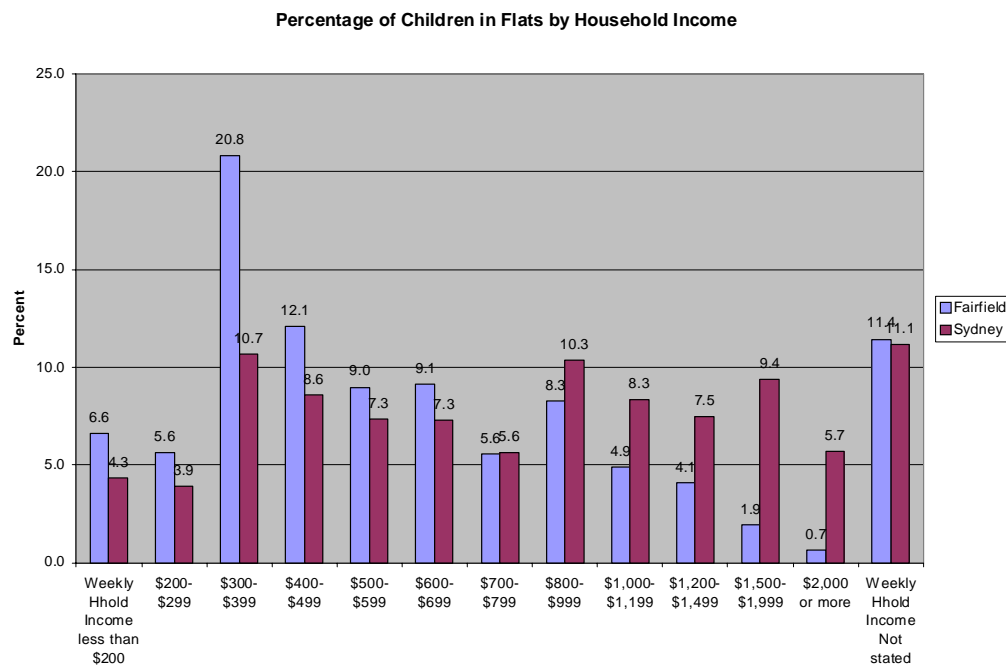


Figure 9: Proportion of households whose weekly earning are under \$400 and over \$1,500, by dwelling type, Fairfield, W. Sydney and Sydney, 2001

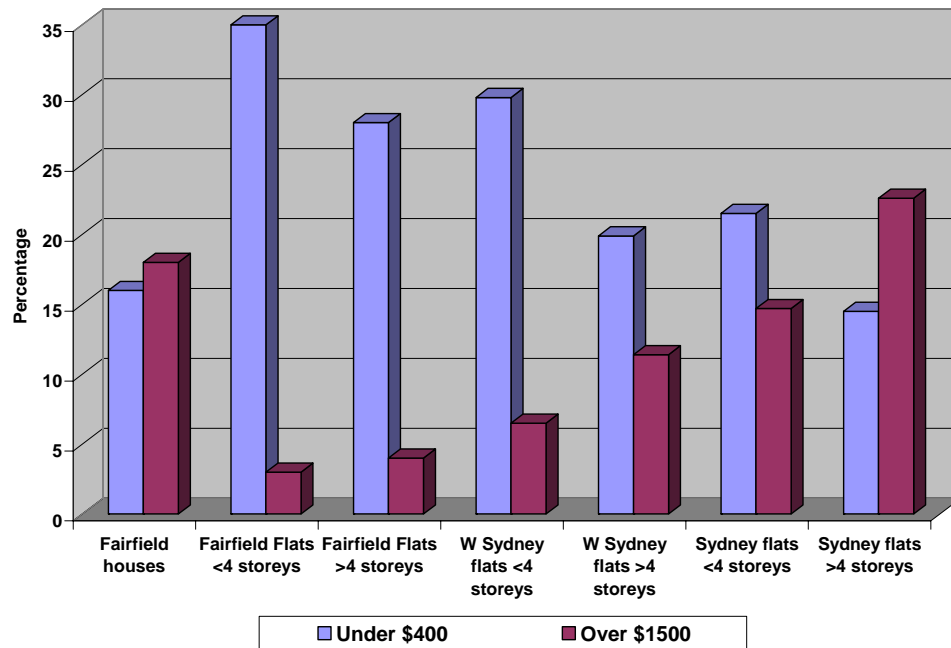
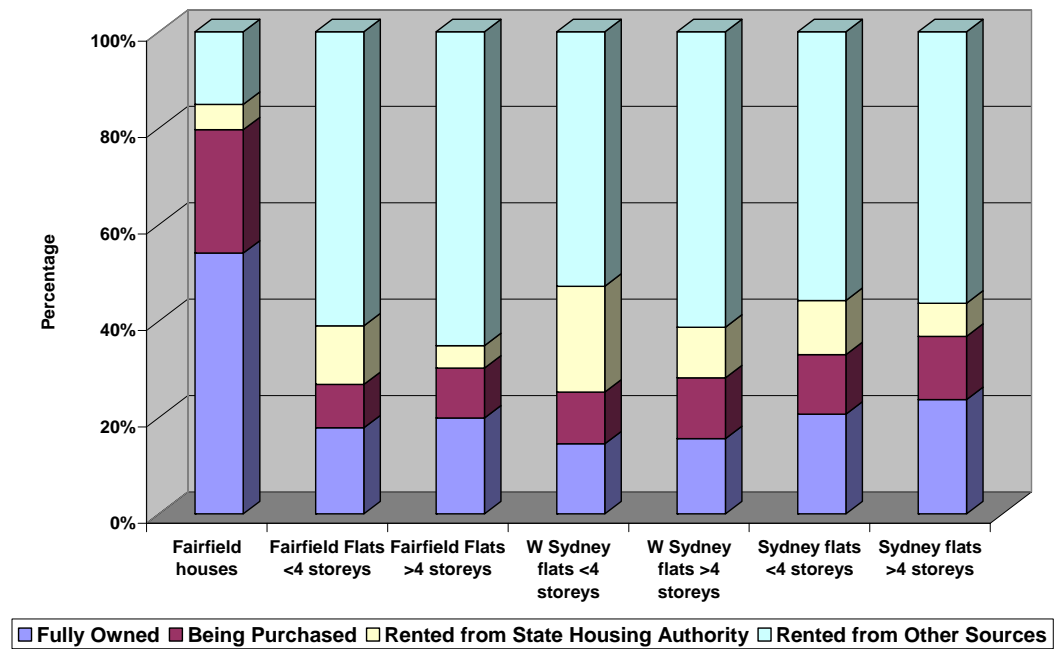


Figure 10: Tenure by dwelling type, Fairfield, W. Sydney and Sydney, 2001

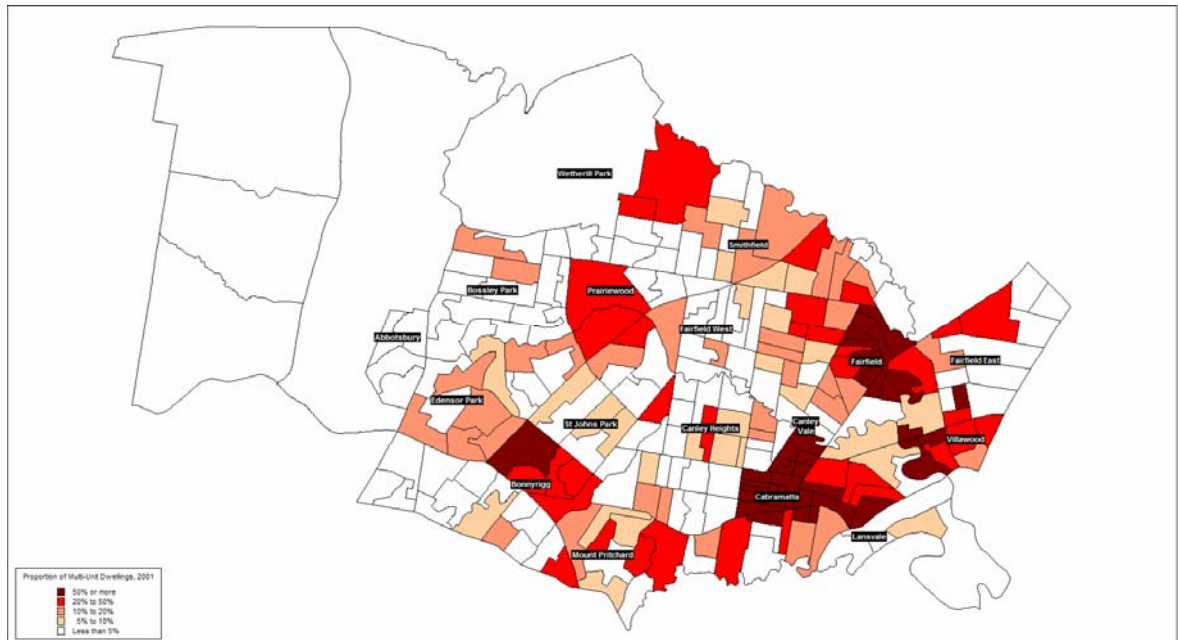


5.1 The Fairfield Flat Sub-market

The Fairfield flat market is one of the cheapest housing sub-markets in Sydney. It is therefore relatively accessible to recent low income migrants and others in low paid work or reliant on benefits and pensions. The role of Fairfield's flat market as one of last resort – or of first rung – is confirmed by the fact that a large number of households living here are on the public housing waiting list or are in receipt of Commonwealth Housing Allowance (Randolph and Holloway, 2006)¹³.

Typical rents for a two bedroomed flat in Fairfield are currently in the region of 180 - \$200 per week, which compares to the rent for a three bedroomed fibro house in the area of \$220 - \$300 per week and slightly higher for a brick house. Prices for flats range from around \$160,000 for a 2 bed unit in an older block to \$280,000 for a 2 bed unit in a newly built block¹⁴. But the main buyers in the area are investors. However, market conditions are currently poor with few investors looking to buy. Rental supply is tightening and rents are starting to rise as investors look to rents to improve their returns¹⁵. The location of the higher density flat market in Fairfield is shown in Figure 11, with Fairfield and Cabramatta town centres standing out clearly.

Figure 11: The proportion of multi-unit dwellings in Fairfield by Census Collector Districts (CDs), 2001



Source: Randolph, *et al* (2005)

ARIAL PHOTOGRAPH HERE – WITH ZONING SUPERIMPOSED

¹³ Randolph, B. and Holloway, D. (2006) *Rent Assistance and the Spatial Concentration of Low income Household in Metropolitan Australia*, Final Report, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne.

¹⁴ Starr Partners Real Estate, Fairfield, personal communication.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Box 1: An Overview of the Fairfield Flat Sector, 2001

- *The Fairfield flat market is overwhelmingly a rental market. Rents are significantly lower than those for Sydney as a whole. The proportion of home buyers is low.*
- *The relatively high proportion of households with children in flats is a key finding: the sector was home for over 3,300 children in 2001. A further key feature of the sector is the predominance of two bedroom flats. These two findings imply that overcrowding might be a particularly significant problem for many families living in the sector.*
- *The Fairfield flat market is characterised by a very high proportion of overseas born residents – four in five were born overseas – particularly Asia and Middle East. The latter were a particularly significant component of recent in-migrants from overseas.*
- *It is also a very low income market, with double the proportion of households earning under \$400 per week compared to those living in houses in Fairfield.*
- *On average, recent migrants from overseas were paying more in rent, had lower incomes than others in the sector, and had poorly paid jobs and low economic activity profiles, implying a potential housing affordability problem for many.*
- *Of those who moved into flats in the five years to 2001, the majority either came from within Fairfield itself or from overseas. Recent in-movers from adjacent areas had somewhat higher income and economic activity levels than longer term residents, but had lower incomes in relation other households in the area.*
- *Those renting privately had the highest mobility rates: two thirds of in-movers were renters.*
- *While a quarter of recent movers in the flat sector had university qualifications, this did not appear to be reflected in their occupation profile or income levels.*

Source: Randolph, et al (2005)

Box 2: A Comparison of Children in the Fairfield and Sydney Housing Markets, 2001

- *Fairfield has a higher proportion of children in households earning less than \$1000 compared to the Sydney average.*
- *This disparity is most significant for low income households, where 29% of children at Fairfield live in households with incomes of less than \$600, compared to 18% for Sydney.*
- *In contrast, a much lower proportion of children in Fairfield live in households who earn in excess of \$1000 per week. The difference is largest for children in high incomes households earning more than \$1500 per week.*
- *As a proportion of total children, all dwelling types at Fairfield are home to a higher proportion of children in households with weekly incomes of less than \$600 per week compared to the Sydney average.*
- *For children living in flats, Fairfield displays a significantly higher proportion of children in low income households compared to the Sydney average. Some 54% of children in flats are members of households with weekly incomes of less than \$600 per week compared to 35% of children in flats in Sydney.*
- *Fairfield displays a higher proportion of children in dwellings which are fully owned, in public rental or in private rental compared to the Sydney average. There is a relatively low proportion living in dwellings being bought on a mortgage.*
- *Fairfield has a higher proportion of children in households with less than \$600 per week for all tenures compared to the Sydney average. The largest differences are for dwellings fully owned (7% compared to 3%) and for those renting privately (11% compared to 7%). Conversely, Fairfield displays a lower proportion of children in households with weekly incomes of more than \$600 per week either purchasing their dwelling or in private rental compared to the Sydney average.*
- *Fairfield has a higher proportion of children in houses with 3 bedrooms, but has an over representation of children in 2 bedroom flats compared to the Sydney average.*

5.2 The built form and planning context

Figures 12 to 17 illustrate the built environment that characterise the higher density town centres of Fairfield Town and Cabramatta Town. The boundaries of these areas closely follow the local planning zones for higher density (Figure 12). Development of the higher density stock in this area has, principally in the form of three story walk-ups, taken place over thirty years or more, with few sites remaining unconsolidated. Some newer redevelopments are being undertaken, including a number of new high rise (8 – 10 storey) blocks having been constructed close to Fairfield town centre (Figure 17). In 2001 there were approximately 2,400 flats recorded in the Fairfield and Cabramatta town centre suburbs (Table 4). Since then, several larger developments have added several hundred new units to this stock.

The built environment children in this sub-market live in is therefore uncompromising in terms of style and layout. Rectangular blocks of 8 or more flats arranged in the familiar 'gun barrel' layout end on to the streetscape is the norm. Not all flats have access to a balcony if above the ground floor. Communal facilities are poor in the older blocks, although generally better in the newer blocks. Stairwells are often poorly maintained and security on the communal entrances often poor. The external environment is typically comprised of concrete roadways leading to multiple garages. Open gardens, where they are provided, tend to be put down to grass although the maturity of the areas is reflected in the numbers of trees which break up the landscape. While some blocks have private garden space, allowing for more supervised and secure play areas, many do not and the open space around the building opens directly onto roads which even in off peak hours are relatively busy, given their proximity to the town centres. The use of the ground floor for garaging means children have little local space to play in. Restrictions on ball games and playing also compound the access to useable space and in some cases children were prohibited from going onto balconies, presumably for safety and insurance reasons.

5.3 Impacts on children and child development

So what are the actual impacts on children of living in these kinds of property? Discussions with a range of local professionals involved in children services and social planning in Fairfield suggested a range of issues that has a direct bearing on the well being of children in the higher density market. These specifically relate to both the physical environment the children are in, but also refer in part to the social context in which these children are brought up.

But what can be attributed to the built form and the way the children experience it, and what is a result of social or cultural issues that may or may not be affected by the nature of the housing they live in? This is difficult to separate out. Given the high proportion of children from backgrounds other than Australian, the overlay of cultural factors and influences is substantial and, at times, difficult to tease out from such a limited analysis. Nevertheless, the following discussion raises a range of consequences for children that either stem from the housing form itself or are affected or aggravated by it.

Flat size and proximity

The internal size and layout of flats and their proximity to one another is a critical area where the built form impinges on children. The limited number of rooms, especially for larger families, is likely to lead to overcrowding problems. Often this might be inter-generational, with three generations sharing a small flat. Shift and night working is a problem with young children who will be expected to remain quiet while the working person sleeps. The same was also true if the parent works at home.

Children are thought to be under strict supervision inside the home, especially in terms of making noise that might disturb neighbours and others in the flat. The use of the lounge room for sleeping was also another issue which had serious implications for children. Cultural predilection among some groups for letting children sleep with parents was of some concern, although whether this was promoted by the small size of flats or lack of rooms was hard to judge. Children of mixed gender sleeping

together was another facet of overcrowding that might, nevertheless, be culturally acceptable.

A final issue associated with the older flats in the area and their lack of modern amenities was the common use of bottled gas for cooking in flats that did not have piped gas. These created a potential safety issue, although it is not clear that this has proved a real problem.

Poor health and parenting outcomes

Keeping children quiet seemed to lead to parenting that emphasised activities that were sedentary. In early years, keeping a baby on a dummy or providing feeding bottles whenever it made noise was thought by those involved in early child development to be a problem. As well as leading to children becoming overweight from an early age, it also led to children that were constantly demanding attention and expecting it when they finally entered the education system, resulting in behavioural problems. This was counter to the positive parenting strategies that children's agencies were trying to promote. Crawling and walking was also being stymied due to space problems with very young children having little access to areas for meaningful activity. Outside the home children were kept in prams and pushers until quite a late age for convenience as well as safety, further reducing opportunities for active walking. The net result was young children entering pre-school or even school with poorly developed social and motor skills.

For older children, videos, computer games or internet were thought to be a common answer to keeping children quite within the confines of a flat. Whatever the reason for this, the lack of physical activity associated with such toys was thought to be a significant issue.

Lack of external space

The potential health issues resulting from a largely sedentary lifestyle within the home are compounded by the lack of safe active play space outside the home. Space around the buildings where children can safely play (or are permitted to play) without parental supervision is notably lacking. Few flats allow for visual supervision from higher floors. The lack of proper fencing or gates means that most parents could not let younger children out of the flat at any time unsupervised. Communal areas were largely put down to concrete or asphalt, resulting in few 'soft' play areas around the home.

Social isolation

While the problems faced by children in preparing to enter formal education was in large part related to the difficulties in speaking English in the home, this was exacerbated by the lack of mixing of communities in public places where children might meet and interact. Mothers, in particular, spend large amounts of time in the home with little interaction with other adults or other children. The physical constraints of the flats meant children spend nearly all the time in the presence of the parent, who for cultural and other reasons may not go out much, at best the daily shopping trip for fresh food.

Parks and other public open space

Access to other public spaces, especially parks, is a critical issue. It was generally recognised that few parents liked using local park areas due to poor security and the use of these areas by local youth and the socially dysfunctional. These open spaces were some of the few places young people could gather, although this led to behavioural problems that impacted on the use of these areas for parents with young children. A further factor was that for some communities, women did not tend to leave the home during the day on their own with the children, unless for shopping trips. Therefore they were unlikely to use the parks.

The result was that the parks that are in the area are underused by families and younger children. As a result, the Council and the Federally funded “*Communities for Children*”¹⁶ project auspiced by the Smith Family were targeting local parks for upgrades and targeting parents of younger children to use these parks. A significant effort was therefore underway to reclaim the parks and encourage their use by parents and children, especially among some of the newer immigrant groups.

Public and community facilities

In lieu of space in the home to meet with friends and neighbours (sometimes compounded by cultural constraints) and other local places to meet, community facilities were becoming used as active social spaces where parents and children could get together in a communal context. Primary schools in particular were place where parent met other parents, especially before and after school hours. It was felt that these places provided a major outlet for socialising which the physical limitations of home denied. The local ‘*Communities for Children*’ initiative was supporting the use of local schools for this purpose.

Traffic

Traffic in local streets was often heavy as higher density housing has been deliberately zoned to be close to town centres. Traffic densities are particularly heavy at the beginning and end of the day. However, the lack of private cars among residents, especially among women and young people, meant that this was to a great extent, a walking community. Nevertheless, children in the streets are usually under close supervision and more often than not young children will be put in a pram rather than walk with their parent.

Accessibility

One of the positives of concentrating lower income households in town centres is that they have greater access to local shops and services as well as to public transport. The latter is important, for these households have generally low levels of private car ownership. However, the downside is that some critical services that are some distance away or not on a frequent public transport route may be difficult to get to without a car. Fairfield Council offices were a particular case in point. In general, however, these locations function generally well in terms of overall accessibility, a factor established in earlier research on the Fairfield town centre area by the author¹⁷

¹⁶ http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/aboutfacs/programs/sfsc-communities_for_children.htm. Downloaded 1.11.2006.

¹⁷ Randolph, B. and Murray, D. (2005) *Defining social exclusion: The contrasting experience of public and private housing*, *Parity* Feb. 2005.

However, while services maybe accessible, they are not necessarily affordable. For example, access to private child care in the local area was thought to be limited for many of these households on cost grounds.

Closeness to family and community

While there are a number of clear negatives associated with higher density flat living for these families in these communities, one positive is that the household can be well connected with their community in the locality. Members of family and cultural groups tend to live locally, which gives support in some case to parents and children when needed. Additionally, the fact that these flats tend to be occupied all day long (unlike the high density professional dormitories in the inner city), it was generally felt there were neighbours who would 'look out' for children especially those from their own community. In this way, the density of the area may help to engender a degree of social cohesion and support.

What is the significance of high mobility?

The high levels of mobility in the sector noted above may have two implications, one positive, and the other negative. The role of the sector as one of transition for newly arrived families was noted by one estate agent who suggested that over time many families become established and move on to a house in a lower density suburb. The trajectory through the low income rental market is no doubt a difficult but positive one for many. Interviewees noted the resilience of the communities in the area. They don't complain and get on with bettering themselves and providing a launching pad for their children into mainstream Australian life. Moreover, for many recent arrivals, their current situation is a substantial improvement on their previous life. Others, however, were thought to remain in the sector for extended periods without managing to progress.

On the negative side the possible disruption to early childhood and schooling from repeated moves of home was mentioned by several of those interviewed. While these moves may well be within the same neighbourhood, in which case established child care or schooling may not be disrupted, these nevertheless have a more subtle disruptive effect. The transitory nature of the local rental flat market was suggested as a reason why only about half the children in one pre-school service in the area moved on to the associated primary school. High kindy turnover rates were also cited as an example of the impacts of a more mobile population, with potential implications for early learning and socialisation opportunities. Transience was also thought to lead to problems in accessing appropriate services.

Figure 12: Aerial photograph of the edge of the higher density Cabramatta residential area, showing the typical urban 'footprint' outcomes of middle suburban higher density residential zoning (to the right of the picture)



Figure 13: Typical 1970s walk-up flats in Fairfield – note poor quality open space and little low level access for parents and children to open space



Figure 14: Gun barrel design and external areas dedicated to car access and garages. No obvious play areas.



Figure 15: Indications of tenure and transitoriness – note pile of discarded furniture on right awaiting council pickup and use of balcony for washing.



Figure 16: Modern medium density development. Better design outcomes, but relatively little open space



Figure 17: Fairfield's high density future – The latest 10 storey block in Fairfield Town Centre. Where will the kids play?



5.3 Implications for children services

The association of higher density housing and families in Sydney's middle suburbs is not new. Alex Gooding noted this trend in his 1992 study of the social impacts of urban consolidation in Western Sydney. He also pointed to the connection between the role of the higher density sector for families and the implications for social services and social infrastructure provision:

“The presence of a significant number of families and young children in multi-unit housing has obvious implications for the planning of human services, especially children's services. Despite the image of multi-unit housing as being largely the domain of childless couples and young singles, the fact is that areas which are undergoing significant consolidation also have a significant proportion of young families” (Gooding, 1992, p. 45)¹⁸.

In particular, Gooding pointed to the higher proportion of families with children aged under 4 years old in areas with concentrations of higher density housing in Western Sydney (50%) compared to areas of low density housing (41%). In other words, the sector was particularly significant for families with very young children. This finding is supported by the analysis represented earlier, with the sector accounting for a disproportionate number of under 5s. The flat sector therefore has significant implications for the early development of very young children.

Gooding also looked at the impact of urban densification on the demand for social infrastructure. He concluded that this form of housing was resulting in increased pressure on day care facilities for very young children and out of school hours care for older children, as well services for youth, family support services and general community support services. A further problem in western Sydney higher density areas was the problem of the existing services backlog that meant new higher density development would compound this problem without additional investment.

Moreover, few government agencies had undertaken analysis of the needs before consolidation had occurred and responses had been *ad hoc*, contrasting to the situation in new release areas. The piecemeal and fragmented redevelopment of consolidation areas also meant that service planning was difficult and unpredictable – it was difficult to predict the likely size and community outcomes in terms of who would live in the dwellings. The small scale of developments compared to new release areas meant that S94 levies were unlikely to include communal facilities and were often inadequate in themselves to fund significant social infrastructure items. Section 94 contributions were poorly planned for in relation to expected local needs especially for families as higher density was not considered a family form of housing.

Gooding concluded, noting that higher density households are disadvantaged in relation to the general population: “It is clear that human services planning and provision to date have not been adequate to meet the current demands caused by urban consolidation” (p65). He suggested that social service providers were

¹⁸ Gooding, A. (1990) *Consolidating for People: The Impacts of Urban Consolidation on the Planning and Provision of Human Services*, Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils, Blacktown.

preoccupied with catching up for the backlog of past underinvestment rather than planning for the outcomes of uncertain new development. Moreover, few services or planners had conducted research on the social impacts of consolidation – or formulated any specific responses. Whether or not Section 94 developer contributions would be able to properly fund new service required to support a denser population is also a moot point. Given the piecemeal manner in which urban renewal takes place, there are rarely sufficient funds in advance to build service as they are required,

Gooding's analysis and his conclusions still stands today. In particular, it was not at all clear that the new wave of urban renewal and higher residential densities in the area were being effectively planned for, other than in a consideration of higher building controls. If they are not, then the same problems will be with us in another twenty years.

Conclusions

Rather than dwell further on what is already an overlong analysis, it might be best to conclude with a discussion of the issues that we need to know more about before the next generation of higher density housing is launched in areas such as Fairfield. In order to get a better fix on the real impacts on children in living in a higher density housing we need to know:

- How long these households live in the sector – is it a quick transition into, out and onto better things?
- What are the issues surrounding overcrowding? Is this a significant issue and for how many children?
- What impacts does living in a flat have on early development and early learning?
- How much does the transitoriness of the flat market affect children? Is it a built form issue or the fact that flats tend to be rental and therefore concentrated in high mobility neighbourhoods? Are children moving more often or are parents under stress due to uncertainty about living arrangements?
- How do households use the space they have in flats – is non-conventional use of the space prevalent and is it an issue for children in these households? e.g. the use of living rooms for sleeping?
- What is the impact on children to lack of interior space, close proximity to neighbours, poor open space provision, etc? How different are these children from Australian norms?
- Mixing with other children – issue of how children in flats get to mix with others in communal play areas rather than in their own tight knit community groups supervised by parents? What is the impact of a lack of useable open space on children's development and wellbeing?

- Language skill development and life skill development – are they affected by the lack of contact through play in early years due to an excessive home based lifestyle and is this cultural or does the built form aggravate any negative effect?
- What are the longer term impacts on development, health and wellbeing of living for long period during childhood in higher density housing? A key question to answer is to what extent does the built form affect children's' outcomes or is it much more a cultural, economic and social issue – would the children living in these flats have the same outcomes if they lived in houses?
- Does the built form matter in influencing the path of early childhood development and then on into later childhood and teenage?

There will no doubt be other questions. However, the main aim of this paper is to stimulate discussion. It is also clear that the above list does not relate solely to children in low income households. Many of these questions are also relevant to all children who live in flats. Given the push towards higher densities, then it will become even more important to answer them as more and more children grow up in higher density environments. The provision of services for them and the design and management of flats with children in mind are the two key issues that our social and land use planners as well as our developers will need to address in the next decade.

In particular, the two key questions that his analysis poses for planners of our cities are:

- How do we plan to avoid child *unfriendly* higher density cities, and
- How do we plan to tackle the poor quality higher density environments we have already created for children in areas like Fairfield?

To date, little constructive thought has gone into these two questions. But we do not want to end up with more concentrated and intractable problems in the future. Let's make sure the compact city is also a child friendly city.