



# A Thematic Analysis of Media Reporting on (Un)healthy Housing in Aotearoa New Zealand May-June 2023 and May-June 2024

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## 1.0 Introduction to the Research

The Healthy Homes media analysis is part of an ongoing programme of work by the Wellington Regional Healthy Housing Group (WRHHG), aiming to develop and test new ways of talking about healthy homes in, order to help people think more productively about the topic.

The intention of this research is to consider how (un)healthy housing is framed in Aotearoa New Zealand media. Media was harvested from articles published over May-June 2023 and May-June 2024, to allow comparison over time.

The findings from this research will be used, together with insights gathered via other research being undertaken by WRHHG, to inform the development of helpful messaging and communication around healthy homes. This research was carried out with funding support from the Building Research Association of New Zealand (BRANZ) Research Levy, and advisory input from The Workshop.

### 1.1 Housing, Health, and Wellbeing

The impacts of a person's home on their health and wellbeing are numerous. Poor quality housing (dwellings that are damp, cold, and mouldy) are known to harm occupant health through increased rates of asthma and other respiratory illnesses alongside cardiovascular disease. For tamariki, children, this can have life-long impacts. In addition, concerns around household overheating are an emerging concern in the face of our warming climate.

Beyond the physical impacts of housing, it is also known that insecure tenure (unstable housing often associated with renting), culturally inappropriate, or inaccessible housing can also harm mental health and community connection<sup>1</sup>.

Aotearoa New Zealand's (Aotearoa NZ's) housing stock remains in poor condition despite a sizable body of research highlighting these health risks. The impacts of this are varied, with Māori, Pacific, low-income, one parent households, and disabled communities disproportionately represented in unhealthy houses and insecure tenure types<sup>2</sup>.

### 1.2 The Research Programme to Date

This project is the third of three research reports led by the WRHHG as part of the Healthy Homes Communication Action Research Programme, each capturing a key group of voices here in Aotearoa NZ.

[A public narratives survey](#) was carried out in 2022. This first report by Bonnie-Estelle Trotter-Simons focused on how the general public talk about homes and health: their understanding of the impacts of housing on health, where they placed the responsibility for keeping our homes healthy, and whether their lived experiences impacted this.

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<sup>1</sup>Philippa Howden-Chapman et al., "He Kāinga Oranga: reflections on 25 years of measuring improved health, wellbeing and sustainability of healthier housing," *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand* (2023).

<sup>2</sup> Stats NZ, "Housing in Aotearoa: 2020" (2020).

[A political discourse analysis](#) carried out by Lydia Le Gros was published in 2023. Using Hansard Reports (transcripts of New Zealand Parliamentary debates) this work questioned how, and indeed if, health is considered in our political discourse on housing

[How to Talk About Healthy Homes: A Narrative Communications Toolkit](#) was launched in 2024. This action-orientated resource brings together the wider work of the WRHHG to help communicators, educators and advocates productively talk and write about our health and homes. This toolkit clearly lays out effective, evidence-based strategies for communicating for change.

### 1.3 Why Focus on Media Reporting?

Though the form and consumption of media are changing in response to accelerated technological changes it remains, at its root, an important form of mass communication. Alongside communicating current events and political or social happenings, media outlets often act as the translators of research and policy – describing technical jargon in plain language.

There are areas of contention in this space with increasing dialogue around outlets' claims of 'objectivity' in reporting, critique of the monocultural lens often seen in western media, and discussion of the complex pathways by which media impacts policy.<sup>3</sup> In their 2013 article Happer and Philo go so far as to assert that media framings can construct the parameters of social issues in the public's mind, limiting possibilities for social change:

*we found that the media also severely limit the information with which audiences understand these issues and that alternative solutions to political problems are effectively removed from public debate<sup>4</sup>*

As something which both reflects and informs public and political discourse the media is a compelling site for further analysis.

### 1.4 Summary of Our Findings

Here we summarise our five key findings. For more detailed explanations of these themes and how they relate to the wider programme see the Results and Implications sections.

1. Though the connection between housing and health is mentioned a lot in our media, this is often as a quick aside without much detail or context.
2. When the media focused on staying warm and well in winter they often focused on individual solutions (like wearing warm clothes or getting thermal-backed curtains) rather than bigger ideas, like how we can improve the standard of the housing we have available.

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<sup>3</sup> Adam F. Simon & Jennifer Jerit, "Toward a Theory relating political discourse, media and public opinion," *Journal of Communication* (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Happer & Greg Philo, "The Role of the Media in the Construction of Public Belief and Social Change," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* (2013), 321

3. The media reports of tragic housing disasters were empathetic and talked about the need for us to do better as a country, while reporting on daily housing struggles often talked about the needs of different groups being in opposition.
4. The Healthy Homes Standards (one of the main legal frameworks for making sure rentals are up to standard) were often taken out of context by politicians who emphasised economic concerns.
5. There are lots of different on-ramps to deeper discussions about housing and health and good examples of articles that link individual stories with the bigger picture, asking us to question why as a country we allow these poor conditions to continue.

## 2.0 Research Aims and Questions

A brief glance at current headlines in Aotearoa NZ would indicate that housing is a regular character in our national discussions, with headlines about the escalating scale of homelessness<sup>5</sup>, property valuations,<sup>6</sup> and impacts of coastal erosion on our housing.<sup>7</sup> What a brief glance at these headlines cannot tell us is whether this reporting includes reference to the health and wellbeing impacts of our housing and, more importantly, *how* this issue is being discussed.

This research takes a scholarly approach to this question, asking how media reporting considers health in their discussions on housing, the voices represented or omitted in these discussions, and finally, the values and assumptions underpinning these framings. The same two months (May and June) of 2023 and 2024 are included to allow comparison between these two years.

### 2.1 Key Aims:

1. How does Aotearoa NZ media discuss (or frame) health and housing?
2. What assumptions and values underpin the way in which health and housing are framed?
3. Are there notable differences between reporting in 2023 and 2024?

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<sup>5</sup> "The grim picture of homelessness for NZ women," RNZ (7 Dec 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Brianna McIlraith, "House prices to remain flat throughout the summer," Stuff (21 Jan 2025).

<sup>7</sup> Jamie Morton, "Eroding New Zealand: new maps reveal where our costs are crumbling fastest," *New Zealand Herald* (15 Aug 2024).

### 3.0 Methodology

In this section we outline the method used for analysis – reflexive thematic analysis (TA) – the sampling frame, and the parameters of the project.

#### 3.1 Harvesting the Data

Data was collected from three large media sites in Aotearoa NZ: *The New Zealand Herald*, *Stuff*, and *RNZ* (Radio New Zealand). Supplementary material collected from three smaller media outlets was also included in the reflexive thematic analysis to capture a wider breadth of reporting and ensure Māori-run media was included.

All articles from the *New Zealand Herald* (*New Zealand Herald*, *Herald on Sunday*, *New Zealand Herald Saturday*), *Stuff* (*Stuff.co.nz*), *RNZ* (*Radio NZ* and *Radio NZ the Detail*) and *The Spinoff* were accessed via *Newztext*. *E-Tangata* and *Te Ao Māori News* articles were accessed via their organisational websites.

Inclusion criteria was determined first through a keyword search (see Appendix 1), then checked individually to ensure relevance. Search terms were determined after a brief scoping search.

#### 3.2 Limitations and Possibilities for Future Research

Due to an emphasis on language and framing, the results focus on articles that address health and housing in-depth rather than those that briefly mention this topic, though these are referenced. A short overview of the search results can be seen in Appendix 2.

We note for interest that the two main reasons for exclusion following the keyword search were 'health' used to refer to the state of the economy or house prices, and descriptions of 'building health standards' in reference to commercial premises. Further quantitative research could build on this qualitative foundation by considering what proportion of the articles that report on housing mention health and wellbeing, compared to other factors such as house and land prices and housing shortages.

#### 3.3 Braun and Clark's Thematic Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyse the data. As Braun and Clarke describe, this method provides practical steps for determining patterns (*themes*) in a dataset. Line by line analysis (*coding*), followed by the grouping of key ideas highlighted both the content of individual articles and the similarities or differences within the dataset as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

For those unfamiliar with TA, coding refers to the process of naming each idea within the text with a word or phrase. Theme generation refers to bringing these codes together to find

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<sup>8</sup> Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke, "What can "thematic analysis" offer health and wellbeing researchers?" *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Wellbeing* (2014).

patterns.<sup>9</sup> Using a real example from this research the code ‘opposing sides’ was one of the building blocks of the theme ‘All in this together?’ which references the discursive use of opposition when describing the needs of different groups, namely renters and landlords (see results).

## 4.0 Comparing Coverage in 2023 and 2024

In October of 2023 the National Party formed a coalition with New Zealand First and the ACT Party to establish the 54th New Zealand Parliament. The dataset therefore spans a change of Government, with the articles from 2023 shaped around the upcoming election, while the 2024 harvest highlights the early days of the new electoral term.

The major housing news stories that dominated May and June 2023 were those surrounding the fatal fire at Loafers Lodge and the aftermath of Cyclone Gabrielle which had hit the North Island in February of that year. Interestingly, both these news stories received media attention even a year on, indicating their continued impact on our conversations around housing and health.

Despite the different political landscape, the reporting between the two years closely resembled each other. Based on this – and the limited number of articles which addressed the topic in substantial depth – the themes have been developed from the entirety of the data harvest.

The themes discussed below represent the broad trends in media reporting on healthy housing over Autumn 2023 and Autumn 2024 and speak to the persistent issues of substandard housing we face, coupled with our slow moving progress in improving housing conditions.

## 5.0 Key Themes

### 5.1 The Elephant in the Room

The first point of note is how few of the articles addressed healthy homes with any real depth. The majority of articles captured by the search terms mentioned ‘healthy homes’ as an aside, or as a cursory acknowledgment, without additional detail or context. For example, two articles giving advice to property investors note:

*"Obviously, when you're renting a residential property it needs to meet healthy homes criteria, which even some new build properties don't automatically pass"*<sup>10</sup>

*"Rental properties need to meet Healthy Homes rules"*<sup>11</sup>

Another, following the experiences of a first home buyer:

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<sup>9</sup> Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke, “Thematic analysis,” *The Journal of Positive Psychology* (2017).

<sup>10</sup> Hannah McQueen, “Residential or commercial? How to choose your investment property,” *Stuff* (13 May 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Susan Edmunds, Granny flats: Do they pay off? Investors run the numbers, *RNZ* (18 June 2024).

*'however she added insulation and brought the home up to healthy homes standards. She also made some changes to the backyard.'*<sup>12</sup>

Even articles which focused on the rental market– where our poorest housing is disproportionately found – often echoed this cursory nod at the issue:

*"Government changes to strengthen the law to ensure rental homes are healthy and fit for purpose".*<sup>13</sup>

Another, outlining court proceedings following the sale of a “rot-infested” house, went so far as to talk about the dwelling as “damp and mouldy”<sup>14</sup> without once mentioning the potential health consequences of this. In this example, the elephant in the room is not even acknowledged.

While the repetition of terms such as ‘healthy housing’ and ‘Healthy Homes Standards’ ensure that housing is, at least discursively, linked with health in the readers’ mind, we seem to struggle to have a sustained conversation around health and housing in our media discourse.

## 5.2 Cold Housing and Winter Illness

A suite of articles provided practical tips for improving homes’ thermal performance in winter. These educational pieces were aimed at an individual or household and recommended insulation, thermal-backed curtains, energy efficient heating, and proper ventilation practices among others:

*'always open the curtains on a sunny day, especially on north-facing windows, to take full advantage of the free heat that will come gushing through the windows.'*<sup>15</sup>

*"starts with ensuring the basics such as heating, insulation and ventilation are up to scratch. It costs money to do these improvements, but it lowers heating bills."*<sup>16</sup>

Though this individual focus fit the intended audience – a householder struggling with indoor cold – it sometimes obscured the wider social context. In the second quote the writer presumes the reader is able to afford these amendments and so save on future costs, while others suggest repairs and alterations most tenants would not be allowed to do to their rented dwelling.

Even articles that directly addressed the widespread systemic issue of housing-related ill health often paired these with behaviour change solutions. A piece discussing children’s health shifts from a considered description of the respiratory illnesses associated with “cold damp homes” to propose solutions like “jammies... blankets, hot water bottles.”<sup>17</sup> While these are useful tools in the short term - and no doubt reflect the charity’s best efforts within funding constraints - this discordant framing leaves the impression that unhealthy housing is a social issue with individual solutions.

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<sup>12</sup> Kylie Klein-Nixon, “First-time buyers: Want a home at 2013 prices? You can buy for under \$500k, but you're going to have to move south,” *Stuff* (12 June 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Anne Gibson, “Landlord and tenant chiefs: A tale of two wish-lists,” *NZ Herald* (15 May 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Lane Nichols, Seller told to pay nearly \$1m for deceptive sale of rotting home, *NZ Herald* (22 May 2024).

<sup>15</sup> Michael Begg, “The three key factors to heating your home and saving money,” *RNZ* (11 June 2024).

<sup>16</sup> “Staying warm in winter amid the cost of living crisis,” *NZ Herald* (28 May 2023).

<sup>17</sup> “Valerie Adams helps charity warm up winter for kids,” *NZ Herald* (14 May 2023).

An NZ Herald article titled ‘Staying warm in winter amid the cost of living crisis’ even mentioned higher level interventions –

*‘In the Budget last week, the Government announced that it would be funding another 100,000 Warmer Kiwi Homes retrofits, and providing five million LED lights for people who qualify.’*

– before emphasising individual behaviour:

*“Like everything with money, be mindful. Put a jumper on at home, or don’t whinge about the cost of heating. If you’re running heating but barely in a room, then turn it off.”<sup>18</sup>*

This discord is actually observed in an article from RNZ that questions a recent initiative titled ‘Find Money in Weird Places’ which encourages people to–

*“[switch] off appliances at the wall when they are not in use, keeping heat pumps set to less than 21C, doing cold laundry washes.”*

Critiquing this campaign, an ActionStation advocate calls for a structured response:

*“We need to address the systemic issues of poverty in this country...how we can support people right now with more fit-for-purpose public housing, liveable incomes and universal community services... so that people don’t have to ‘find money in weird places’.”<sup>19</sup>*

### 5.3 All in This Together?

Building on this tension between the collective and the individual, this theme considers how media reporting of acute crises emphasises the collective, while reporting on the housing crisis as usual often presents different groups in opposition.

Dominating the news cycle in mid-May 2023 was the story of the Loafers Lodge fire – a fatal fire at a Wellington boarding house. These detailed accounts frequently lent on the framing of the collective, calling on us as a united ‘*New Zealand*’<sup>20</sup> to work together to ensure such tragic events do not repeat themselves and ‘*our people*’ get the support they need.<sup>21</sup> This latter quote comes from an opinion piece by a policy advisor for the Salvation Army who notes his intentional use of the collective ‘*our*’.

Importantly, the solutions discussed in light of this event also centred around collective action: updating the criteria for a building Warrant of Fitness,<sup>22</sup> addressing the lack of affordable

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<sup>18</sup> Staying warm in winter amid the cost of living crisis,” *NZ Herald* (28 May 2023).

<sup>19</sup> Brianna McIlraith, “Anti-poverty campaigners say new power saving campaign ‘profoundly immoral,’” *Stuff* (24 May 2023).

<sup>20</sup> Sarah Robson, “Men without a safe place to call home,” *RNZ* (9 June 2023)

<sup>21</sup> Ronji Tanielu, Loafers Lodge tragedy highlighted what’s broken within our social systems, *Stuff* (20 May 2023).

<sup>22</sup> Phil Pennington, “Loafers Lodge had a building WOF, but what exactly does that mean?” *RNZ* (16 May 2023).

housing in the city,<sup>23</sup> and improving the conditions of other boarding houses that face similar risks.<sup>24</sup> The overall media impression of this incident was overwhelmingly one of empathy for the residents and a call for a collective response.

A similar empathetic lens is seen in the reporting of Cyclone Gabrielle, an extreme weather event which hit the East Coast of the North Island in February 2023:

*"[Recovery manager] Tahuri was worried people would end up badly out of pocket, or worse, living in damp, unhealthy health homes come winter."*<sup>25</sup>

In notable contrast, the media reporting of emergency and transitional housing — also a symptom of our housing system's dysfunction — lent on combative narratives:

*"The government's decision to cut the number of emergency housing motels in Rotorua is "the first step" in taking the area back, a National MP says."*<sup>26</sup>

Or again in a piece exploring an Auckland Council report into the "poor" conditions of Auckland's boarding housing, Mayor Wayne Brown was quoted saying:

*'The streets are not safe because of these people.'*<sup>27</sup>

Both these quotes effectively 'other' emergency housing residents and move the conversation away from a lack of adequate housing to how we manage the residents themselves. While these interjections come from quoted political figures not the journalistic framing, they nevertheless show a marked contrast to the conversations that emerged in the aftermath of the Loafers Lodge Fire and Cyclone Gabrielle.

Relatedly, the vocabulary of opposition also appeared when discussing the rental market with the so-called 'war on landlords' and terms such as 'battle'<sup>28</sup> going so far as to evoke violent imagery. In this way healthy homes are positioned as something that must be won by tenants, rather than as a human right of legal entitlement.

#### 5.4 The Healthy Homes Standards

The Healthy Home Standards are our main legislative tool, aside from the Residential Tenancies Act, for ensuring that our rental housing meets minimum standards. They featured frequently in the dataset though, as discussed above, this was often a cursory nod. Skirting further questioning about the Council's responsibility to tenant a number of derelict and abandoned Council owned dwellings:

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<sup>23</sup> Georgina Campbell, "Last resort lodge exposes sad reality," *NZ Herald* (24 May 2023).

<sup>24</sup> Bill Hickman, Review shows 25 more buildings like Loafers Lodge operating in Wellington, *RNZ* (30 May 2023).

<sup>25</sup> Kate Green, "Wairoa residents remain in limbo three months after Cyclone Gabrielle," *RNZ* (11 May 2023).

<sup>26</sup> Melanie Earley, "End to emergency housing motels 'first step' in taking Rotorua back, MP says," *RNZ* (9 June 2024).

<sup>27</sup> Jordan Dunn, Boarding house report raises raft of concerns, *NZ Herald* (10 June 2024).

<sup>28</sup> Anne Gibson, "Landlord and tenant chiefs: A tale of two wish-lists," *NZ Herald* (15 May 2023).

*'Queenstown Mayor Glyn Lewers blamed the cost of getting the properties up to the government's Healthy Homes standards. "We've done 13 of them and that was \$370,000," he told Checkpoint on Thursday.'* <sup>29</sup>

Another article centering on the poor housing and employment conditions of migrant workers in Queenstown quoted another City Councillor:

*The cost of getting the properties up to the government's Healthy Homes standards was a barrier, [Councillor Wong] said. He urged the government to help to fund bringing them up to standard so they could get homeless people out of their cars and into a home.* <sup>30</sup>

In both quotes, the Councillors shift focus from health to finance, positioning the Healthy Homes Standards as a barrier to utilising these Council owned dwellings. In another example the Property Investor's Vice-President is quoted referring to strengthening of healthy homes legislation as:

*"An old battle scene where landlords lost and tenants won"* <sup>31</sup>

In these accusatory terms healthy homes and the Healthy Homes Standards almost take on a life of their own — a political device divorced from the conversation about health. For the most part, the authors strategically countered these political plays through outlining what the legislation actually entails:

*'The Healthy Homes standards include minimum requirements for heating, insulation, ventilation, dampness, drainage and draught stopping.'* <sup>32</sup>

And pairing these discussions with other voices such as a Queenstown housing advocate who countered this political dialogue by placing responsibility back on the shoulders of the Council:

*"We've been speaking to council for a long time about what they have available and they've never mentioned the situation with the cabins"* <sup>33</sup>

## 5.6 On-Ramps to the Conversation

Particular topics seemed to lend themselves more easily to sustained discussions on health. Tenant descriptions of substandard rental housing were often used as a visceral illustration of the issue:

*"[the occupier] had to tie the cupboard doors closed so the rats didn't get in"* <sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> "Queenstown council-owned cabins empty, despite rental crisis," *RNZ* (8 June 2023).

<sup>30</sup> "More than 25 people sharing facilities at one house, charged \$250 each a week, migrant says," *RNZ* (26 June 2023).

<sup>31</sup> Anne Gibson, "Landlord and tenant chiefs: A tale of two wish-lists," *NZ Herald* (15 May 2023).

<sup>32</sup> "More than 25..." *RNZ* (26 June 2023).

<sup>33</sup> "Queenstown council-owned cabins empty, despite rental crisis," *RNZ* (8 June 2023).

<sup>34</sup> Hera Lindsey Bird, Rules for property managers are scrapped. But what's the worst that could happen? *The Spinoff* (8 May 2024).

*"[the Tenancy Tribunal Adjudicator] accepted the tenants' evidence, and said the obvious mould and mushrooms growing through the floor posed a serious risk to health"*<sup>35</sup>

These stories acted as an effective foil to claims that the Healthy Homes Standards were unnecessary simply by highlighting the grim reality of living in substandard, unhealthy dwellings. When faced with indoor mushrooms the sole focus on finance becomes almost absurd.

While tragic housing incidents focused media discussions on health, positive news stories also provided a useful entry point. An article describing a new passive house development from Kāinga Ora quoted a Kāinga Ora representative at length:

*"It's a striking difference in what a warm and dry home can do. It's just the smarter way these buildings are built. It's remarkable, particularly for respiratory illnesses."*<sup>36</sup>

Describing their newly built public housing complex in the far North, the Chief Executive of Te Hau o Ngāpuhi was quoted saying –

*"It was a moemoea [dream, aspiration] for our kuia, kaumātua and our iwi, to not just apply the biomedical model of health when our whānau are unwell. What we wanted to do was ensure we looked after their holistic wellbeing, which meant we needed to address the social determinants of health."*<sup>37</sup>

Finally, the reporting on rheumatic fever prevalence in Aotearoa NZ is a clear stepping off point into a conversation around healthy homes. This transmissible disease is partly attributable to poor housing conditions and overcrowding, and disproportionately impacts Māori and Pacific communities:

*'Over the past decade a range of prevention programmes have focused on sore throat management and access to care, healthy housing and raising awareness'*<sup>38</sup>

*'Pacific children were 80 times more likely to contract the fever than other groups, in part because of overcrowding and poor housing conditions'*<sup>39</sup>

There are numerous entries to the conversation around health and housing from first-hand stories of substandard rentals to considered reports of the persistence of preventable diseases. What these articles have in common is a sustained emphasis on health and a considered description of how individual stories reflect or deviate from a wider phenomena – they ask us to question why we allow these conditions to persist.

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<sup>35</sup> Miriam Bell, Rent must be reduced when 'uninhabitability' is established, tribunal says, *Stuff* (21 June 2023).

<sup>36</sup> Colleen Hawkes, Kāinga Ora's new social housing is so good tenants can expect to pay nothing for heating, *Stuff* (22 June 2023).

<sup>37</sup> Peter Degraaf, More units open in Te Kohekohe - Northland's first of a kind community housing complex, *RNZ* (13 May 2024).

<sup>38</sup> NZ minister announces plan to tackle 'worrying' rheumatic fever rates, *RNZ* (15 June 2023).

<sup>39</sup> Stewart Sowman-Lund, "We've reached the shortest day, but winter illnesses haven't slowed down," *The Spinoff* (21 June 2024).

## 5.7 Who Gets a Say on Healthy Homes in the Media?

Though authorial choices were the main factor which determined the focus and framing of an article, the other voices included in the conversation also played a big part. A focus on the collective does not mean we should obscure the differential impacts of our substandard housing on different communities. Journalists drew on political figures, expert advisors, tenants, landlords, iwi and hapu representatives, architects, and homelessness advocates among others.

Subject experts played an important role in communicating the scale of our housing issues:

*“New Zealand has high asthma rates internationally, impacting on one in seven children aged 2–14 years. Asthma and respiratory diseases are also two of the leading causes of sickness and death in New Zealand.” [NZ Green Building Council]<sup>40</sup>*

Māori and Pacific voices played a crucial role in grounding the media conversation in their communities needs and aspirations –

*“But I believe that the solutions for addressing energy hardship for Māori communities has to come from Māori communities. A model of by Māori for Māori.” [Hinerangi Pere– Waikato Tainui Energy Navigator]<sup>41</sup>*

– and pointing to the overlaid racist landscape that often went unmentioned in mainstream media reports:

*“If we had a whole lot of Pākehā children in Remuera dying of an infectious disease [rheumatic fever] we would see huge political campaigns and resourcing into it,” [Dr Anneka Anderson]<sup>42</sup>*

Previous themes have addressed the extent to which political figures are featured in this dataset but it is worth noting that there is repeated inclusion of voices from across the political spectrum.

## 6.0 Implications of Our Findings

We know that a systematic, collective approach to tackling our housing crisis is the key pathway to ensure that everyone around the motu is housed in healthy and stable homes. We make choices, accept the status quo, or advocate for change, in part, because of how we frame the issue.<sup>43</sup> In reporting on housing and health, media outlets face a real challenge. Not only is the issue complex – and sometimes contentious – many journalists are time-poor.

Long-form pieces or those that rely heavily on research or stakeholder interviews are time and money intensive. Nevertheless, even within these constraints, opportunities exist to affirm

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<sup>40</sup> Sarah Heeringa, “The hidden costs of poor house design - and what we can do about it,” *Stuff* (11 May 2023).

<sup>41</sup> Robin Martin, “Taranaki whānau living in cold to deal with energy costs, iwi says,” *Te Ao Māori News* (28 May 2023).

<sup>42</sup> Stewart Sowman-Lund, “We’ve reached the shortest day...,” *The Spinoff* (21 June 2024).

<sup>43</sup> Dr Jess Berentson-Shaw, “How mindset and narrative shifts can enable change: a briefing paper,” *The Workshop* (2023).

helpful narratives that move focus from housing as a financial asset to a basic foundation of our country's health. The media reporting of acute housing crises provides a useful example of how when the conversation is turned towards housing as a system, and the need for us to do better as a country, we also engage with more meaningful solutions. This is clearly visible in the media reporting on the tragic fire at Loafer's Lodge which directly addressed the social and regulatory situation which allowed such a tragic event to occur, avoiding the individual focus often seen in our reporting on emergency housing.

While every story of unhealthy housing is an important one, we need to see these as part of a bigger picture — not thousands of individual stories of damp, cold, and draughty houses but a larger narrative of an unhealthy housing stock. Not one exceptional landlord who failed to meet the Healthy Homes Standards, but a lack of regulatory enforcement. This individual focus is a missed opportunity to discuss broader structural approaches to addressing the issue at its foundations and the inequitable burden of housing-related ill health some communities face.

Articles that wove together individual stories with the wider housing context gave more nuanced accounts of the issue than those focused on the newsworthy event as a 'one off.' Excellent examples of this are visible in our conversation around rheumatic fever which skillfully addressed the individual experiences of this medical condition, inequity in disease burden for Māori and Pacific whānau, and critically, considered the role of housing and poverty in disease transmission.

## 6.1 How Does this Work Connect to the Wider Programme?

So, how do these results compare to our work on how politicians and the general public talk about healthy homes?

1. In both parliamentary debate and media commentary politicians shifted focus from health to housing supply, sometimes suggesting that healthy housing standards are a barrier to increasing our housing stock.
2. In all three datasets (political, public, and the media) individual solutions to our poor housing dominated the narrative, while structural considerations were infrequent.
3. Unlike the Hansard reports — which showed a narrow view of what unhealthy housing looked like — both media reporting and public discussion offer a far more nuanced view of the many ways homes can harm health, often shown through first-hand stories.
4. **The media depictions, and particularly the narrow political rhetoric on healthy homes do not reflect the widespread belief among the general public, demonstrated in our public narratives survey, that the health of our homes is a problem.**<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Bonnie-Estelle Trotter-Simons, "Healthy Homes Narratives Survey Report: How are People in Aotearoa New Zealand Talking About Healthy Homes?" Wellington Regional Healthy Housing Group (2022).

## 6.2 Communicating for Change

From this research we see three main routes for helping to promote a more robust and fruitful media discussion on healthy homes:

1. Ensuring that when substandard housing is talked about, we talk about health.

Too often media reporting skirted the issue – discussing flood damaged properties or winter cold without addressing the elephant in the room. When we present substandard housing as *unpleasant* rather than a *health hazard*, the true impacts are not clear.

2. More media reporting engaging with the issue in-depth.

We need nuanced accounts of health and housing that get to the core of the issue and maintain a focus on health. Importantly, without these more substantial accounts the former suggestion may run into obstacles of its own, as a cursory mention of healthy homes or the Healthy Homes Standards can too easily become a political debate divorced from a real conversation about health.

3. Productive media framings.

We need coverage that highlights the upstream causes of everyday news stories, stays focused on health and wellbeing, and moves our conversation away from individual behaviours to housing as an infrastructure for health.

## 7.0 Appendices

### Appendix 1: Boolean Search Terms

hous* OR home* OR rent* OR landlord* OR whare
AND
health* OR wellbeing* OR sick* OR hauora

**Note:** Two search terms in te reo Māori (*whare and hauora*) were included to ensure relevant articles using reo Māori kupu were captured in the search.

### Appendix 2: Overview of Newstext Search

A brief summary of the article numbers elicited through the Boolean search are shown in columns two and four respectively, while columns three and five show the actual number of articles included in analysis. Due to the qualitative nature of this work the decisions around inclusion and exclusion of harvested articles were guided by the first author and are therefore subjective. The Newstext Data harvest occurred over January and February 2025.

	Total results search (May-June 2023)	Total included (May-June 2023)	Total results search (May-June 2024)	Total included (May-June) 2024	Total included (both years)
<b>NZ Herald</b>	345	<b>20</b>	406	<b>14</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Stuff</b>	551	<b>43</b>	289	<b>9</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>RNZ</b>	245	<b>15</b>	263	<b>15</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>All outlets*</b>	1,141	<b>78</b>	958	<b>38</b>	<b>116</b>

\*excluding supplementary articles from The Spinoff and Te Ao Māori News (see methods section).

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