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Surplus to the city: Austerity urbanism, displacement and 'letting die'

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Abstract

Urban scholars have traditionally associated displacement in cities of the global North with gentrification, generally understood as a class-based process of neighbourhood change. This article expands this scalar focus and adopts the larger scale of the local authority district (in this case the London borough) as its epistemological starting point to study the displacement of homeless people by the local state. Participatory action research was undertaken with housing campaigners in the East London borough of Newham to explore who is being displaced, their experiences of displacement and the impacts of displacement on their lives. Empirically, the article argues that displacement in this case is a product of national welfare state restructuring – or ‘austerity urbanism’ – implemented through a localised regime of ‘welfare chauvinism’ in which some groups are framed as economically unproductive and therefore undeserving of access to social housing. Displacement has the effect of reinforcing the surplus status of these groups by separating them from employment, education and care networks and eroding their physical and mental health. The article draws on research on the biopolitics of surplus populations in the global South to develop an original theorisation of the relationship between welfare state restructuring and displacement. This theorisation reveals that displacement is the spatial expression of a biopolitical shift away from the logic of ‘making live’ associated with the post-war welfare state towards a logic of ‘letting die’ more traditionally associated with post-colonial contexts.

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Introduction

In September 2013, eviction notices landed on the doorstep of Jasmin Stone, Samantha Middleton and 27 other homeless young mothers living in the Focus E15 hostel in the East London borough of Newham (one of 32 local authority, or ‘council’, districts that comprise Greater London). If they wanted to be rehoused, they were told that they would have to relocate away from London, the city of their birth and home to their families and support networks. They were not alone: the same year, investigative journalists began to report that growing numbers of homeless Londoners were being removed from their home boroughs, or even the city altogether (Mathiason and Hollingsworth, 2013). In 2016, 18,700 London households in temporary accommodation (37% of the total) had been relocated to another borough. In addition, between 2012–2013 and 2014–2015, the number of households in temporary accommodation relocated outside of London had more than doubled from 637 to 1,653 (Watt, 2018a). This phenomenon has led scholars to argue that significant displacement of homeless households has taken place both within and away from London since the 2008 financial crisis (Hardy and Gillespie, 2016; Watt, 2018a, 2018b, 2020).

Urban scholars have traditionally associated displacement in cities of the global North with gentrification, generally understood as a class-based process of *neighbourhood change* (Marcuse, 1985; Lees, 2014; Newman and Wyly, 2006; Slater, 2004). However, Davidson (2011: 1993) has questioned this focus on the neighbourhood scale and called for a relational, multi-scalar approach that explores how local processes of urban change are shaped by broader processes of ‘class structuration’. This critique is echoed by recent calls to challenge the traditional methodological focus on particular scales in urban research (Brenner, 2019). In response, this article adopts the larger scale of the local authority district (in this case the London borough) as its epistemological starting point for studying displacement. Rather than examining displacement *from* a particular urban neighbourhood, it focuses on various sites *through which* homeless households are displaced by the local state, such as local authority housing offices and temporary accommodation.

This epistemological pivot away from the neighbourhood scale enables a relational, multi-scalar analysis of the role of welfare state restructuring occurring between national and local state scales in the production of displacement. This reveals that displacement in Newham is the spatial expression of changing state–citizen relations occurring as a consequence of what Peck (2012) terms ‘austerity urbanism’: budget cuts and welfare reforms introduced by the national state and implemented at the urban scale. In the context of Newham, austerity urbanism is implemented through a localised regime of ‘welfare chauvinism’ (Guentner et al., 2016) in which some groups are framed as economically unproductive and therefore undeserving of access to social housing, resulting in their displacement from the borough. In order to understand this shift in state–citizen relations, it is necessary to draw on research on the biopolitics of ‘surplus populations’ in the global South. This informs an original theorisation of urban displacement in the global North as the spatial expression of a biopolitical shift away from the logic of ‘making live’ associated with the post-war welfare state, towards a logic of ‘letting die’ more traditionally associated with post-colonial contexts (Li, 2010). In the process, the article contributes to postcolonial urban scholarship that draws on the experiences of the global South to generate insights into urban marginality in the global North (Roy, 2003; Silver, 2019).

The article begins by reviewing research on urban displacement in the global North, which has tended to focus on neighbourhood processes of gentrification. Second, it discusses austerity

urbanism and housing in the UK and the emergence of a localised regime of welfare chauvinism in Newham, and explains how this has resulted in the displacement of homeless households. Third, the article discusses the participatory action research methodology that was designed and carried out in collaboration with local housing campaigners to interview people experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness in Newham. The fourth section discusses the findings from these interviews in terms of who is being displaced from Newham, their experiences of displacement and the impact of displacement on their lives. The penultimate section argues that displacement in this case is the spatial expression of a shift in the biopolitical logic of the UK welfare state away from 'making live' towards 'letting die'. The article concludes by reflecting on the significance of this shift for understanding displacement, for the geographies of urban theory production and for future research on the biopolitical transformation of welfare states in the global North.

Understanding urban displacement

Displacement was established as a core concept within urban studies by gentrification researchers seeking to understand neighbourhood change in post-industrial North Atlantic cities. In his influential article on New York City, Marcuse (1985) theorised displacement as the product of neighbourhood-based processes of abandonment and gentrification. Whereas abandonment occurs due to public or private disinvestment in particular neighbourhoods, gentrification is a 'spatially concentrated' process in which

new residents – who disproportionately are young, white, professional, technical, and managerial workers with higher education and income levels – replace older residents – who disproportionately are low-income, working-class and poor, minority and ethnic group members, and elderly- from older and previously deteriorated inner-city housing (Marcuse, 1985: 198–199).

Marcuse (1985) argued that displacement occurring as a result of neighbourhood gentrification and abandonment took several forms, including direct displacement, exclusionary displacement and displacement pressure. This analytical fusion of displacement and neighbourhood change is foundational to much critical urban research, not least in the context of London, a city with a well-documented history of gentrification (Atkinson, 2000; Lees, 2014; Watt, 2021). Building on Marcuse, many prominent urban scholars have argued that displacement is an integral component of gentrification, and that the two terms should therefore be analysed in tandem (Smith, 1996; Lees et al., 2008). Indeed, one recent paper aims to 'put displacement front and central as [gentrifications] defining feature' (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2019: 12).

Following Marcuse's (1985: 199) definition of gentrification as a 'spatially concentrated' process, urban displacement in the global North has typically been studied as the product of local processes of class-based neighbourhood change (Davidson, 2011). These place-based studies provide rich insights into how neighbourhood transformation results in the spatial dislocation of low-income residents through both physical relocation and subjective experiences of loss of place (Atkinson, 2015; Lees, 2014; Newman and Wyly, 2006; Slater, 2004; Watt, 2021). Upon reviewing the literature on urban displacement, therefore, Elliott-Cooper et al. (2019: 12) conclude that 'displacement is an inevitable consequence of neighbourhood gentrification'. However, Davidson (2011: 1993) argues that gentrification researchers' traditional focus on neighbourhood change has led to a neglect of broader processes of 'class structuration' occurring at different scales. As such, he calls for a more relational, multi-scalar approach to studying urban displacement. Research on gentrification in the global South has sought to address this by extending gentrification theory to include large-scale displacements caused by state-led megaproject development (Lees et al., 2016). However, a growing body of literature raises concerns about the overstretching

of the concept of gentrification on the grounds that it risks obscuring the distinctive mechanisms that lie behind diverse local processes of displacement, silencing alternative theoretical approaches and reinforcing Western academic hegemony in the process (Ghertner, 2014; Maloutas, 2018; Smart and Smart, 2017).

This article addresses these critiques of established urban displacement scholarship in two respects. First, it shifts the explanatory focus away from processes of gentrification at the neighbourhood scale and explores the role of welfare state restructuring at both local and national scales in producing urban displacement (van Lanen, 2020). In the process, it seeks to problematise the fetishisation of particular scales in urban research and contribute to a more relational, multi-scalar approach to urban theory production (Brenner, 2019). Second, it draws on theory developed in postcolonial contexts in order to theorise urban displacement as a product of the shifting biopolitical logic of the UK welfare state away from protecting surplus populations towards ‘letting [them] die’ (Li, 2010). In the process, it responds to recent calls to think beyond traditional geographical distinctions between global North and South (Brickell et al., 2017; Horner and Hulme, 2019) and to invert established epistemological hierarchies by drawing on southern experiences to generate insights about urban marginality in the North (Roy, 2003; Silver, 2019).

Austerity urbanism, welfare chauvinism and displacement in London

The UK post-war welfare state sought to protect citizens from housing insecurity through the provision of public housing and statutory support for homeless people. Public housing became a mainstream form of tenure, and 31% of London’s households were council tenants in 1981, compared to 15% in the private rental sector (PRS) (Watt, 2021). In addition, the 1977 Housing Act gave vulnerable ‘priority needs’ homeless people (including pregnant women, care leavers, people with disabilities, etc.) the right to secure council tenancies in public housing (Watt, 2018b). From the 1980s onwards, however, the privatisation of public housing has formed a central pillar of the neoliberal project to roll back the welfare state and promote ‘individual self-reliance and private market provision’ (Hodkinson and Robbins, 2013: 61). This was pursued through policies such as the ‘Right to Buy’ introduced in the 1980 Housing Act in which public housing was sold off at a discount to tenants, and the 1996 Housing Act, which eroded the rights of vulnerable homeless people to permanent housing. The outcome was the ‘residualisation’ of social housing as a tenure for only the most disadvantaged and the accompanying expansion of private renting: By 2011, only 14% of London’s households were council tenants, compared to 25% in the PRS (Watt, 2021).

Following the 2008 financial crash and subsequent public bailout of the financial sector, the 2010–2015 Coalition and 2015–2019 Conservative governments implemented drastic public spending cuts and welfare reforms on the grounds that they were necessary for reducing the fiscal deficit. However, post-crisis austerity is a deeply ideological project and represents an ‘intensification’ of the neoliberal strategy to roll back the welfare state (Peck, 2012: 629). Central to this project is what one UN expert describes as a process of ‘radical social re-engineering’ where responsibility for welfare is shifted from state to individual and paid work is presented as the only solution to poverty (Alston, 2019: 4). To this end, austerity policies have been accompanied by an official discourse that blames the ‘undeserving’ poor for their own poverty due to a supposed culture of ‘worklessness’ and ‘welfare dependency’ (Slater, 2014). In addition, the Coalition government seized on the idea of the ‘Big Society’ in order to ‘redefine the relationship between citizens and the state’ through the promotion of charity-based welfare and community self-reliance, or ‘empowerment’ (Hodkinson and Robbins, 2013: 64). According to Hamnett (2014: 492) these changes represent the ‘biggest single reshaping of the welfare state’ since its establishment after the Second World War.

In the area of housing, austerity policies were intended to further residualise social housing, expand market provision and increase dependence on the PRS (Hodkinson and Robbins, 2013). Key reforms include: cuts to central government funding for local authorities to provide social housing, the capping of both total household benefits and Housing Benefit and the reduction in Housing Benefit for social tenants with unoccupied bedrooms (the infamous ‘bedroom tax’). In addition to cutting public spending, these reforms were justified in ideological terms of ensuring ‘fairness’ for taxpayers and incentivising paid work (Hamnett, 2014; Powell, 2015). The outcome of these reforms has been a growth in rent arrears, evictions and homelessness, and an increase in the number of homeless households living in temporary accommodation for extended periods of time, sometimes several years (Paton and Cooper, 2016; Watt, 2018b). The impacts of this shift are geographically uneven across the UK, with London hit particularly hard due to high rents and large numbers of people relying on Housing Benefit (Hamnett, 2014).

Peck (2012: 631) describes ‘austerity urbanism’ as a ‘socially regressive form of scalar politics’ in which costs and risks are offloaded from central governments to low-income urban areas that are particularly vulnerable to budget cuts. As such, austerity is experienced most severely at the urban scale. The growth in housing insecurity described above is particularly acute in Newham, a deprived borough of East London that has experienced deep cuts in funding from central government, a dramatic reduction in its social housing stock since the 1980s and rising private rents following the 2012 Olympic Games. As a result, by 2016 Newham had the highest number of households in temporary accommodation (4142) and highest number placed out of borough (1653) in London (Watt, 2018a, 2018b). Although budget cuts imposed by the national government often leave cities ‘no alternative but to follow the path to austerity’ (Peck, 2012: 641), it is important to note that local state policies also play a role in producing housing insecurity. In Newham, the impacts of national austerity policies intersect with local state-led gentrification processes to produce displacement. For example, Newham Council has pursued regeneration via the demolition and rebuilding of public housing estates, resulting in the displacement of social tenants (Gillespie et al., 2018; Watt, 2021).

Decentralising power to local authorities has been a key pillar of austerity urbanism in the UK. The 2011 Localism Act, described by Hodkinson and Robbins (2013: 64) as the ‘the main legislative instrument of the big society’, sought to give greater freedoms to local authorities (despite cutting their funding) while also empowering local communities to play a more active role in public service provision and planning (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013). Localism is central to housing policy under austerity (Paton and Cooper, 2016). The Localism Act enables local authorities to place priority need housing groups in PRS accommodation. In addition, the Act gives local authorities greater autonomy over how they manage their social housing waiting lists. Newham responded to this by deciding to prioritise those in paid employment and ex-members of the armed forces. Robin Wales, Mayor of Newham from 2002 to 2018, justified this decision on the grounds that

these measures will help ensure priority is given to those *who contribute to society* ... Our scheme is about giving something for something; we want to recognise the efforts of those working for low incomes by prioritising them for social housing (quoted in Atwal, 2012, our emphasis).

Newham’s use of the Localism Act to prioritise certain groups, and by implication deprioritise others, is an example of ‘welfare chauvinism’ where ‘bordering practices’ are employed to create categories of people who are excluded from access to social rights and welfare provision (Guentner et al., 2016: 392–393). This bordering is justified on the grounds of ‘deservingness’: ‘undeserving’ categories such as migrants, the unemployed and single mothers are distinguished from ‘deserving’ groups such as ‘hard working families’ in order to justify their exclusion (Guentner et al., 2016: 393).

Citing the Localism Act as an example, Guentner et al. (2016: 399) argue that welfare chauvinism in the UK 'has been particularly visible in the housing arm of the welfare state'. This bordering is evident in Newham's decision to allocate social housing to those in paid work and ex-members of the armed forces in return for their contribution to society. As Watt (2018a) argues, this effectively discriminates against women who perform unpaid reproductive work, such as childcare. This is reflected in a 99% increase in the number of households with dependent children in temporary accommodation in Newham between 2012 and 2016 (Watt, 2018a). This bordering process represents a reframing of social housing as a privilege for the 'deserving' poor rather than a right (Humphry, 2019). This is part of a wider shift to a 'different kind of welfare state, concerned less with living standards and equality and more with individual responsibility and paid work' (McEnhill and Taylor-Gooby, 2018: 252). As such, localism under austerity urbanism involves the 'rescaling of state space' (Brenner, 2019: 11) through the fracturing of the national post-war welfare state (and its associated citizenship rights) and the emergence in its place of localised regimes of welfare chauvinism.

The Localism Act enables local authorities to house those who are not considered deserving of social housing in the PRS. However, cuts to Housing Benefit and rising rents in the capital mean that London authorities are increasingly housing people in council- and PRS-owned temporary accommodation outside of their own borough, sometimes for years at a time (Hardy and Gillespie, 2016; Watt, 2018a, 2018b, 2020). In some cases, people are offered housing outside the city altogether in places as far away as Manchester (200 miles from London). As such, state rescaling under austerity urbanism has produced localised regimes of welfare chauvinism that result in the displacement of the 'undeserving' poor. This demonstrates the importance of a multi-scalar approach that looks beyond processes of neighbourhood change in order to analyse the role of welfare state restructuring occurring between national and local state scales in the production of displacement.

Methods

Although quantitative methods can measure the extent of displacement in gentrifying neighbourhoods (Atkinson, 2000), they reveal little about who is being displaced, their experiences of displacement or the impacts of displacement on their lives. As such, there is now a growing literature that employs qualitative research approaches to provide in-depth context-specific insights into how particular socio-economic groups are affected by displacement (Atkinson, 2015; Lees, 2014; Newman and Wyly, 2006; Slater, 2004; Watt, 2021). Building on these approaches, this research developed a participatory method of 'dialogic collaboration' (Gillespie and Hardy, 2021) with housing campaigners in Newham. Such an approach draws on and contributes to an established history of 'engaged' research in geography (Harney et al., 2016). Yet, while 'co-production', 'impact' and 'public engagement' have become key agendas within the UK academy, particularly for obtaining funding, it is questionable whether the priorities of non-academic partners always drive the central research questions and priorities. Instead, in this research, the questions and methods emerged directly from the authors' role as participants in the Focus E15 housing campaign in Newham and from the activists themselves. The campaign emerged in September 2013 when the group of young mothers living in the Focus E15 hostel organised to contest their eviction notices. The campaign has subsequently expanded to address a range of housing justice issues and to demand 'social housing not social cleansing' for working-class people in London and beyond (Gillespie et al., 2018).

The foundational organising practice of Focus E15 is a street stall that takes place every Saturday afternoon on a high street in Newham. Every week campaigners occupy the pavement to hang banners, hand out leaflets, play music, make short speeches and ask people to sign petitions.

Many people approach the campaign stall to share their own story of housing insecurity or displacement. The authors' participation in the campaign predated the research project by around two years and their status as academic researchers was secondary to their role as campaigners (Gillespie et al., 2018). From 2014, we began to realise, along with the core activists, that the sharing of stories at the street stall constituted a large body of data on experiences and impacts of displacement occurring as a result of austerity policies. As researchers, we realised that we could utilise our skills to capture this data in a systematic way to provide an evidence base for Focus E15's campaigning around the displacement of homeless people from Newham.

Members of the campaign steering group were involved in the research throughout. The research questions were developed and the methods were selected in a dialogue between the authors and the activists (Gillespie and Hardy, 2021). Although quantitative data was already emerging on the growing number of out-of-borough placements in London (Mathiason and Hollingsworth, 2013), it was agreed between all of us that not enough was known about who was being displaced, their experiences of displacement and the impacts of displacement on their lives. To answer these questions, generated through dialogue, a structured interview tool with questions to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data was designed in collaboration between the authors and other campaign members who themselves had experienced homelessness and displacement. The interview questions were sketched out during a meeting in one of the activists' temporary accommodation. The researchers then took responsibility for developing the structured interview tool. This tool was piloted over the course of two meetings with the activists, who commented on the phrasing of questions and suggested ways of reframing them. The tool was then amended by the authors and finalised with the consent of the activists. It was agreed that campaign members should be trained as peer researchers in order to build research capacity within the movement. Peer researchers interviewed Newham residents who had approached the council with a housing need. Participants were recruited at the weekly stall, at the council's housing offices and in temporary accommodation in and outside of London. The adoption of this non-random sampling approach means that the numbers presented below are reflective of the sample collected, rather than being representative of those facing homelessness in Newham as a whole.

Displacement is notoriously hard to research: once people have been moved it becomes difficult to find and identify them. Many studies have been place-based, examining displacement *from* particular urban neighbourhoods (Marcuse, 1985; Newman and Wyly, 2006, Slater, 2004; Lees, 2014). In contrast to these studies, our main recruitment sites – the council's housing offices and temporary accommodation – represented sites *through which* people were displaced by the local state. It was the peer researchers' own embodied experience of the geography of homelessness and displacement in London that enabled them to identify these sites. As such, the research was able to recruit hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups, such as the hidden homeless, who would be easily overlooked in studies of displacement that focus on established place-based communities, such as council estate tenants. In other words, the mobile, multi-sited approach to sampling faithfully reflects, and better captures, the 'nomadic state of homelessness' (Watt, 2018a: 49) in contemporary London where individuals and households find themselves 'fixed in mobility' (Jackson, 2012: 725). In addition, beginning from these sites enables state–citizen relations to come into view as a key analytical category for theorising urban displacement. In total, 64 structured interviews were conducted in this way. Where possible and in cases in which respondents consented, interviews were recorded, resulting in a total of 32 recorded interviews.

In this article, we focus solely on respondents ($n = 38$) who were formally or informally offered housing outside the borough or the city, or were told to look for housing elsewhere, by Newham Council. This data is supplemented by 12 additional qualitative interviews conducted by the authors with people purposively sampled to identify those experiencing displacement from the borough. The sample of the 50 participants was made up of 35 women and 15 men; 29 with

dependent children, 21 with no dependent children; 39 were British and 11 non-British nationals; 17 were White and 32 Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME). A total of 11 stated they had a disability and 27 did not; 36 were unemployed, six in some form of employment and six in other forms of education or training. In some cases, respondents declined to answer demographic questions, meaning that some numbers provided do not add up to a total of 50.

The high degree of flux in people's lives and their complex housing histories made it difficult to capture the data. Due to this complexity, as well as poor mental health in some cases, respondents often struggled to articulate the processes leading to their displacement. As Chloe (17, Black-Portuguese) said: 'I didn't even know how I could actually explain a lot to you. I don't even know if I understand most of it!' As such, some respondents either declined to respond to particular questions or felt unable to answer them, resulting in missing data. The structured interviews were input into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and analysed to generate descriptive statistics, frequencies and cross-tabulations to provide a sense of the patterns in the data. The qualitative transcripts were input into NVivo and coded by the authors using a combination of both deductive and inductive codes. Deductive codes were informed by existing knowledge produced by investigative journalists (Mathiason and Hollingsworth, 2013) and activists' lay knowledge of the processes they were contesting. These include: 'displacement', 'temporary accommodation' and 'becoming homeless'. Inductive codes emerged from dialogue between the authors and peer researchers, who identified what they saw as key themes and codes to emerge from the data. 'Mental health' and 'welfare state' emerged as key analytic codes. These were derived from the descriptive codes of depression and anxiety for the former, and benefits, social services and the Council for the latter. A report was produced and discussed with the steering group, following which the analysis was developed and deepened based on feedback from the peer researchers, generating connections between the various codes. The report was presented by the peer researchers and authors at a public event in East London in December 2016, where the findings were discussed by campaigners, academics and practitioners working in the fields of health, housing and social justice.

The project had a number of important effects in terms of shaping activism to resist displacement and engender housing justice. Conducting the interviews served as an organising tool by enabling campaigners to identify and support individuals facing homelessness and displacement in the borough. One respondent became a leading activist within the campaign and organised protests against the poor living conditions in temporary accommodation. In addition, other researchers have adapted the interview tool for their own projects on the impacts of austerity (Research for Action, 2018). Finally, the findings about the impact of housing insecurity and displacement on mental health led to a Focus-E15 campaign entitled 'housing is a mental health issue' and contributed towards the establishment of the Housing and Mental Health Network, which brings together academics, psychologists and campaigners to address the relationship between housing and psychological well-being through research and practice.

Displacement in Newham

In what follows, we examine who is being displaced, their experiences of displacement and the impacts of displacement on their lives. First, we demonstrate that Newham Council's specific enactment of austerity urbanism, embodied in its localised regime of welfare chauvinism, disproportionately impacts on women and disabled people who are framed as 'economically unproductive' and therefore undeserving. Second, we demonstrate how people are not necessarily a priori unproductive, but are often constituted as such through their experiences of displacement, which lead to separation from employment opportunities and care networks and deteriorating health.

Displacement is a process that impacts unevenly on different raced (Slater, 2004), aged (Newman and Wyly, 2006) and gendered (Watt, 2018a) working-class people. Amongst the 50 respondents facing displacement in Newham, women were disproportionately affected ($n = 35$). In terms of other social characteristics, 11 of the people facing displacement in this sample identified as having an impairment or chronic illness and, more broadly, 19 said they had health conditions affecting their housing need. Newham's social housing allocation policy 'prioritise[s] those in employment', defining contributions to society as 'the efforts of those working' (London Borough of Newham, 2016). Since women and disabled people face significant labour market disadvantage (DWP 2014), it is perhaps inevitable that these groups are disproportionately negatively affected by this policy. A total of 36 of 50 respondents were unemployed. A total of 16 had been unemployed for less than a year and 16 were long-term unemployed (more than a year), with most of the long-term group unemployed for 2–4 years. Four did not state the length of time of their unemployment. Most respondents' most recent labour market engagement reflected low-paid, feminised forms of work including retail and hospitality, care work, administration and hairdressing. A small minority had no work history and each of these respondents were under 30 and self-reported mental health problems.

Despite Newham's stated aim of prioritising those in paid employment for social housing, a second category of people facing displacement included those who were in low-paid work. Dana (23 years, Black-British Caribbean) had worked as a hairdresser, but when her landlord evicted her she was told she would have to wait '6–7 months for another property' in Newham. Since Dana had two small children, she was unable to wait and chose to accept accommodation outside London, losing her job in the process. She accepted displacement because 'I was too scared to say no because of the threat of making me intentionally homeless', potentially leading to the removal of her children. A significant proportion of mothers in the sample who were seeking accommodation for both themselves and their children experienced the threat of the removal of their children as a lever to accept accommodation outside the borough. Emma (25 years, Black-British Caribbean) was explicitly told by the council to give up her job as a nursery assistant, where she had worked for seven years, because the only accommodation they could offer for herself and her two small children was over 100 miles away in Birmingham. Lucille (33 years, White-British) had lost her job as a hospital cleaner when she was moved to a different local authority area. In each of these cases, respondents approached the Council for assistance due to the unaffordability of rents in the PRS. Low pay is an endemic feature of the UK economy, which experienced a 10% reduction in real wages between 2004 and 2015 (OECD 2016). Despite being in paid employment, respondents were nonetheless displaced due to the shortage of social housing in the borough.

Although unemployment can lead to displacement, the relationship between housing and employment is not unidirectional. For half of the respondents who were not in paid employment, the loss – or threatened loss – of housing was a *cause* of that unemployment. Indeed, eviction or threat of eviction (by both Council and PRS landlords) was the most highly cited reason for ending employment. For example, Ahmed (26 years, British-Pakistani) was evicted from a Council-run hostel in Newham and offered accommodation outside London following rent and council tax arrears arising from having his benefits sanctioned due to missing an appointment with a welfare officer. Since being forced to move would dislocate him from his job in retail, he resigned as a pre-emptive measure in order to be able to stay in labour market in the future: 'I gave my notice in about 2 weeks ago, because I got faced with eviction, I didn't want to just leave without getting a reference'. Although Ahmed was in paid work, he was viewed by the council as having compromised his deservedness for social housing by generating rent arrears, enabling them to deprioritise him and discharge their duty of care.

Relocation away from respondents' places of employment also threatened their ability to remain in work. Jose was paying £117 a week to travel back to his job in London:

Lots of people ... say the same. We have to go to London [for work], we can't afford it. Because they don't take into consideration that almost half of the wages go into commuting. Are you supposed to fly to work?

Others had similarly been forced to stop working as they were moved too far away to commute, and some were explicitly told by council officers to give up their jobs to accept housing outside the city. Cassandra (37 years, White-Latvian) was moved to temporary accommodation outside London. Eventually, she had to end her employment in order to frequently travel back into the city to attend housing appointments with the hope of securing more permanent housing: 'I don't live temporary life, even though I'm in temporary accommodation'.

Displacement from Newham (both actual and threatened) had further detrimental impact on people's ability to participate in the labour market by removing people from their care and support networks:

They rang me ... a month ago to view a property in Tilbury in Essex, outside London, and I've explained to them I can't accept a property in Tilbury because it's far away, I don't have the money or the expenses to spare to go back and forth ... every morning to bring my daughter to school and attend college. My mother, my friends, regularly help me in terms of childcare to pick her up so it's just like realistically, you know, it's really far away (Molly, 30, Black-British Caribbean).

Helen (21 years, White-British) had not previously worked due to severe mental health problems, but hoped to enter the labour market: 'I have mental health problems, but I want to work. I have friends and doctors here [in Newham]. How can I get better if I move to Manchester?' These examples illustrate how austerity is experienced in the everyday through the spatial reconstitution of relationships of care and support (Hall, 2019). This disruption of place-based networks of social reproduction undermined participants' ability to engage with the labour market.

The threat of displacement also frequently led to ill health, resulting in unemployment. Indeed, the third most common reason for currently unemployed respondents to have ended their previous job was ill health. Molly (30 years, Black-British Caribbean) said that her eviction notice and offer of accommodation in Essex had led to severe anxiety: 'I'm waking up at 4 o'clock in the morning, I feel like I can't breathe... I'm having panic attacks, I can't sleep'. Angela (49 years, White-British) had received an eviction notice from her private landlord, but when she approached the Council for support she was told that she was not a priority case and that she would need to find her own accommodation. Angela said she could not afford other PRS accommodation due to her low income. The stress of this situation led to health problems which ultimately forced her out of her job of 12 years as a nursery manager:

Before [the eviction notice and encounters with the Council] ... I was alright, I was working full time, I was maintaining everything ... It's just lately ... I'm thinking maybe all the stress, constantly, over the situation. And it's got worse.. Just the other day ... on the bus I felt like 'I'm going to faint' and all I could do was pray, I was feeling so helpless. I got off from the bus, sat on the pavement for a little while and then went to the housing office.

Recurrent fainting episodes meant that Angela was unable to work, forcing her out of the labour market. Newham Council offered Angela PRS accommodation in Manchester, but she refused on account of her ill-health: 'because it was too far from my family, I'm really sick and my daughter is

my carer, I need to be near my family'. Eventually, Angela was placed in temporary accommodation in a cramped and mouldy bedsit in Newham. These living conditions exacerbated her asthma and she developed early stage emphysema.

Placement outside of the borough exacerbated existing, or produced new, health conditions, often making respondents less able to engage in the labour market. Toni (22 years, British-African), who had been moved out of Newham to the next-door London borough of Redbridge, said:

[My housing situation] has caused me stress, like I'm on medication again now – before I wasn't ... I'm not sleeping, I'm not eating right ... I had heart surgery in November. It was unsuccessful and I'm meant to be getting it again, but I don't feel like I'm in the right state of mind to get it done.

Emma (25 years, Black-British Caribbean) had been placed in temporary accommodation outside London, where she had lived for a year and a half with two small children. She reported having 'scabs from scratching and welts all over my body, I get cold sores and rashes due to stress. I don't want to get out of bed in the morning'. Jose (55 years, White-Portuguese) has diabetes and arthritis and had spent over two years in cramped temporary accommodation outside London in which nine people were sharing one bathroom and toilet:

I go to the toilet frequently because I'm diabetic. Sometimes I want to go toilet but people are in there, because we are 9 people in the house. Do you know what I do? I get a bucket, I go in my room, I wee there and take it afterwards. Secondly, these knees have become worse because I don't soak them in water. This bathroom, you can't sit there. Because of hygiene matters, I can't. And it's torturing me.

The inability to soak his joints had worsened the arthritis in his knees, meaning that he was unsure whether he would be able to continue in his job as a cleaner.

Although Newham is undoubtedly experiencing gentrification due to post-Olympics urban redevelopment and rising rents (Watt, 2018b, 2020), a focus on neighbourhood change is insufficient to explain the process of displacement discussed above. Instead, displacement in this case is produced by the intersection of neighbourhood processes of gentrification with welfare state restructuring occurring between local and national state scales. Newham's social housing shortage combined with growing unaffordability in the PRS has created housing insecurity, particularly in the context of wage stagnation and employment precarity (Watt, 2020). However, those who approach the Council for help encounter a localised regime of welfare chauvinism that limits access to residual social housing through bordering practices. In addition to excluding people on the grounds of nationality or migration status, this bordering is also determined by notions of 'deservingness' (Guentner et al., 2016). Those deemed undeserving are increasingly offered temporary accommodation in the PRS, often outside of their home borough and sometimes outside of the city altogether. In prioritising 'those who contribute to society' (defined as those in paid work and ex-armed forces members) when allocating social housing, Newham Council implicitly frame those outside of paid employment as economically unproductive and therefore undeserving (Humphry, 2019). The consequence is that those who are disadvantaged in labour markets, such as disabled people and women with young children, are increasingly offered poor quality, overcrowded housing outside of their own borough, sometimes hundreds of miles away from London (Watt, 2018a, 2018b, 2020).

The proclaimed logic of austerity is to discourage welfare 'dependency' and incentivise paid employment by 'making work pay' (Wintour, 2013). Yet, far from enabling paid work, the experiences discussed above demonstrate that the housing impacts of austerity urbanism have in fact undermined respondents' labour market engagement. Displacement reinforces labour market

disadvantage and exclusion by separating people from employment opportunities and care and support networks in the city. In addition, displacement leads to deteriorating physical and mental health for many, further limiting their ability to undertake paid work. Drawing on Sassen (2014), displacement in Newham represents a shift away from the logic of social and economic inclusion that characterised the post-war welfare state towards a logic of ‘expulsion’ in the era of austerity urbanism (Watt, 2018b). Although Sassen identified this historical shift, she did not articulate the biopolitical implications for those populations facing expulsion. We address this in the following section by arguing that the end point of the expulsory logics analysed here is letting die – expulsion from life itself.

Surplus to the city

To understand the relationship between welfare state restructuring and displacement, it is necessary to draw on research on the biopolitics of surplus populations in the global South. Placing the case of Newham within this global context enables an original theorisation of displacement beyond existing conceptualisations of austerity urbanism. This theorisation reveals that displacement is the spatial expression of a biopolitical shift away from the post-war role of the welfare state in reproducing those populations who are surplus to the requirements of capital. This approach is inspired by postcolonial urban scholarship that draws on the experiences of the global South to generate insights about urban marginality in the global North in order to ‘unsettle the normalized hierarchy of development and underdevelopment’ (Roy, 2003: 463). In the process, it demonstrates how urban inequalities can be theorised across traditional geographical distinctions between the global North and South.

Foucault (2003) identified the emergence of a ‘biopolitical’ technology of power from the eighteenth century in which states either ‘make live’ or ‘let die’ by regulating and insuring the biological reproduction of entire populations. In her discussion of the dispossession of the peasantry in contemporary Asia, Li (2010) advocates biopolitical ‘make live’ interventions, such as rural employment guarantees, to reproduce those growing ‘surplus populations’ that have been separated from the land and proletarianised, but whose labour is of no use to capital. Sanyal (2014) argues that capitalist development in the postcolonial world is characterised by processes of primitive accumulation that create a ‘vast wasteland inhabited by people whose lives as producers have been subverted and destroyed by the thrust of the process of expansion of capital, but for whom the doors of the world of capital remain forever closed’ (Sanyal, 2014: 53). These surplus populations often reproduce themselves in the informal economies of the rapidly growing cities of the global South where urbanisation is characterised by a ‘persistent disconnect between capital and labor’ (Schindler, 2017: 54).

Duffield (2007: 24) distinguishes between interventions to reproduce surplus populations in the global North and South in order to draw a distinction between ‘the biopolitics of insured and non-insured life’. In the UK, the post-war welfare state ‘ameliorated the problem of surplus life through social insurance’ (Duffield, 2007: 23). By contrast, Duffield argues, only a small minority in the global South is covered by social insurance regimes, and biopolitical interventions by actors such as development NGOs typically promote community self-reliance. This stark North–South distinction in how surplus life is reproduced leads Duffield to conclude that the enterprise of international development serves to reproduce, rather than narrow, the ‘global life-chance divide’ (p. 18). Similarly, Li (2010: 79–80) contrasts Britain’s post-war welfare state as a biopolitical intervention to ‘make live’ with the ‘letting die’ of surplus populations in the global South under colonialism and structural adjustment programmes. However, Li (2010: 82) also problematises the North–South binary proposed by Duffield and argues that progressive political movements in the global South ‘can sometimes assemble a protective biopolitics, despite the odds’. This is

particularly evident in the growing popularity of cash transfer programmes as a strategy to reproduce surplus populations following the emergence of the post-Washington consensus in the 1990s (Ballard, 2013).

The experiences of displacement discussed in this article also problematise Duffield's global North–South distinction between insured and uninsured life. The post-crisis restructuring of the welfare state, enacted through Newham Council's localised regime of welfare chauvinism, represents a shift away from social insurance and public welfare towards the promotion of self-reliance and individual responsibility as a strategy for reproducing those who are considered unproductive and therefore surplus to the requirements of capital, the borough and the city. Just as the decay of water pipeline infrastructure in US cities has led postcolonial urban scholars to question established distinctions between the infrastructural North and South (Silver, 2019), therefore, austerity urbanism in the UK disrupts Duffield's (2007: 24) distinction between the biopolitics of 'insured' life in the North and 'uninsured' life in the South.

Displacement that occurs as a result of welfare state restructuring has the effect of separating people from employment, education and care networks and eroding their physical and mental health. Under austerity urbanism, therefore, the role of the welfare state has shifted away from a biopolitical intervention to *protect* surplus populations towards *actively producing* people as surplus by undermining their ability to participate in urban labour markets. As such, austerity urbanism involves not only the displacement of one class (working) with another (middle–upper), but also the transformation of the class status of the displaced from working to surplus. The rendering of particular people as surplus creates a manifold crisis of social reproduction for those removed or threatened with removal from the city. This crisis, which encompasses intersecting crises of health, care and employment, concerns the reproduction of life itself. Drawing on Li's, (2010) formulation, therefore, displacement under austerity urbanism is the spatial expression of a biopolitical shift away from 'making live' towards a logic of 'letting die' for those considered unproductive and therefore undeserving of protection. It is this changing relationship between citizen and state, rather than a process of neighbourhood change, that is key to understanding displacement under austerity urbanism in the UK.

Conclusion

This article has pivoted epistemologically away from the neighbourhood scale, the focus of much urban displacement research, to examine displacement at the local state scale of the London borough. Doing so has enabled us to argue that displacement in Newham is the spatial expression of a biopolitical shift in the role of the welfare state away from 'making live' towards 'letting die'. This has implications for how we understand the *mechanisms* and *consequences* of urban displacement, and for the geographies of urban theory production. In addition, it points towards a research agenda for understanding the changing biopolitical logic of Northern welfare states in the 21st century. The underlying *mechanism* of displacement in Newham is not neighbourhood change alone, although rising rents and the regeneration/demolition of social housing estates are clearly important parts of the story. Rather, a relational, multi-scalar analysis reveals that displacement in Newham is the spatial expression of changing state–citizen relations occurring as a result of national budget cuts and welfare reforms enacted by the local state through practices of welfare chauvinism. This demonstrates how questioning the methodological focus on particular scales in urban research can enable new insights into the dynamics of displacement in particular, and urban change more generally (Brenner, 2019; Davidson, 2011).

The *consequences* of displacement are complex and include shifting, co-constitutive constellations of vulnerabilities related to employment, care and health. Newham's localised regime of welfare chauvinism results in those who are disadvantaged in labour markets, such as women

and disabled people, being deprioritised for social housing and displaced into temporary accommodation outside the borough, or the city altogether. Importantly, however, this article reveals that this disadvantage is reinforced by displacement as those affected experience separation from employment, education and care networks and the erosion of their physical and mental health. As such, while the stated aim of austerity policies is to enforce paid employment as the only viable means of reproduction, the outcome is to reinforce and deepen the difficulties some groups face in selling their labour. This demonstrates that urban displacement is not only a consequence of class inequalities, but also actively produces these inequalities. In addition, it illustrates the importance of studying the relationship between housing, employment and displacement in order to understand how they intersect to produce social, spatial and economic marginalisation.

The established direction of epistemological travel in urban displacement research has historically been from global North to South, as theories of gentrification developed in North Atlantic cities have been translated to African, Asian and Latin American contexts, provoking fierce debate about the geographies of urban theory production (Ghertner, 2014; Lees et al., 2016; Maloutas, 2018; Smart and Smart, 2017). Inspired by postcolonial urban scholarship (Roy, 2003; Silver, 2019), this article has reversed this direction of travel by drawing on debates about the biopolitics of surplus populations in the global South in order to explain urban displacement in the global North. Recent experiments in social protection policies across the global South problematise any simple distinction between Northern welfare states that reproduce surplus populations through social insurance and Southern contexts in which those same populations are left to fend for themselves (Ballard, 2013; Duffield, 2007; Li, 2010). Similarly, Northern welfare states are increasingly characterised by a shift in the opposite direction as social insurance and public welfare are replaced by the promotion of self-reliance and individual responsibility. This article demonstrates the potential of theories drawn from the global South to illuminate the biopolitical transformation of welfare states in the global North.

This article has identified displacement as one consequence of the shift in the biopolitical logic of the welfare state away from 'making live' towards 'letting die'. However, there is a need for further research to identify other consequences of this shift. A biopolitical logic of 'letting die' is particularly evident in the UK government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Conservative government abandoned attempts to suppress the virus in March 2020 and allowed it to spread through the population. The fact that the UK has (at time of writing) one of the highest absolute and per capita death tolls in the world casts further doubt on any simple distinction between insured life in the global North and uninsured life in the South. In addition, the government has consistently resisted pressure from campaigners, such as Manchester United footballer Marcus Rashford, to provide assistance to the growing number children experiencing food poverty in one of the richest countries in the world. The UK government's response to coronavirus and child poverty are both characterised by a biopolitics of abandonment and neglect. In the wake of the pandemic, a progressive politics must challenge this normalisation of 'letting die' and demand the biopolitical protection of all lives, regardless of their utility to capital.

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