

Review

A Critical Literature Review of Housing and Migration: Understanding Causality, Cohesion and Citizenship

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Abstract

As housing and migration are increasingly emerging as key global concerns in the 21st century, this article offers an in-depth evaluation and synthesis of existing research at the intersection between housing and migration. Through a detailed critical review of discipline-specific approaches in sociological, political and economic traditions, the article assesses the strengths, weaknesses and gaps in extant literature to challenge and define underlying assumptions and approaches to analysis. The article argues that the debates surrounding migration have been under-theorised in the housing literature and that, despite some exceptions, the general literature in migration studies has tended to underplay the importance of housing. Moreover, studies which have been undertaken within housing research can be criticised on grounds of being aspatial, ahistorical and/or apolitical. This critical review identifies cross-cutting themes of causality, cohesion and citizenship as areas for further development and argues that future housing and migration research studies should have a more solid theoretical foundation, which can offer opportunities for more effective, engaged scholarship.

Keywords: theory; migration; housing; home; inhabitation; borders; causality; cohesion; citizenship

1. Introduction

At present, there is no single, coherent theory of international migration, only a fragmented set of theories that have developed largely in isolation from one another, sometimes but not always segmented by disciplinary boundaries. Current patterns and trends in immigration, however, suggest that a full understanding of contemporary migratory processes will not be achieved by relying on the tools of one discipline alone, or by focusing on a single level of analysis. Rather, their complex, multifaceted nature requires a sophisticated theory that incorporates a variety of perspectives, levels and assumptions (Massey et al. 1993, p. 432).

It is commonly suggested that ‘we seem to be living in times of unprecedented migration’ (De Haas 2023, p. 1) and that the issue of migration represents the ‘most divisive issue in modern politics’ (ibid.). Increasing ‘securitisation’ of migration has accompanied expanding ‘bordering practices’ as the ‘border’ makes an incursion into broad areas of civil society (Bowling and Westenra 2018; Paasi 2009; Tazzioli 2019). In the context of populist critiques of multiculturalism and globalisation increasingly resonating with voters

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and taking root in mainstream political discourse, housing and broader social citizenship rights are increasingly drawn along social divisions on the basis of legal status, ethnicity, gender and race (Aas 2014; Franko 2026). Migration has progressively become positioned as a matter for national security—carrying a threat of terrorism and everyday crime, as well as supposedly threatening the economy and the welfare state, imposing severe strain on health, education and housing systems—particularly in times of crisis (Bhagat 2019; Boldrini et al. 2023).

A notable feature of these discourses is the centrality of housing to these debates. Migrants are variously argued to limit access to housing for supposedly ‘indigenous’ or ‘native’ communities, gain unfair priority in housing allocations, have access to better quality housing, as well as restrict supply to employment and training opportunities for other groups (see Drinkwater et al. 2003 for a review of survey evidence). These debates have a strong ethnic and racial dimension, with ‘white communities’ protesting about the unfairness of racial preferences in bureaucratic decision-making; an interesting inversion of traditional concerns and research studies, which have highlighted the persistence of institutional and structural discrimination in housing and welfare delivery (see, for example, Henderson and Karn 1984). Whilst the politics of contemporary migration policies have been extensively discussed (see, for example, Jones 2017), there has been less extensive theoretical discussion of the relationship between these issues and housing policies and practice. In light of these controversies, it is noticeable that despite growing empirical interest in housing and migration, for example, discussions of integration and resettlement (Dwyer and Brown 2008; Brown et al. 2024), there is a distinct lack of theoretical analysis of the role of housing. An early attempt at a literature review was provided by Greenwood (1975), although the focus of this study was primarily an empirical discussion, based within a U.S. context. Firmer theoretical foundations would integrate ‘a variety of perspectives, levels and assumptions’ (Massey et al. 1993, p. 432) and offer new insight into cross-cutting themes, situating housing within the wider discussion of the causes, consequences and experiences of migration (both external and internal). What role does theory play within this context? A useful definition is provided by Graham (2000), who contends that a theory:

will be taken to be any set of ideas, or conceptualisation, which goes beyond the particularities of individual cases and offers some more general framework, or account of the nature of certain circumstances, relationships or events. In addition, a theory must have explanatory force, which is to say that it must contribute to make these circumstances, relationships or events intelligible (p. 258).

The article aims to refine existing theoretical frameworks (and propose new areas for theoretical development) by integrating and combining findings across disciplinary siloes to develop a new understanding of housing and migration. Through a detailed evaluation of discipline-specific approaches in sociological, political and economic traditions, this review addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the strengths, weaknesses and gaps in existing knowledge at the intersection of housing and migration? (2) What are the underlying assumptions within research studies, and how might these be challenged and refined? and (3) How can new theorisation transcend disciplinary boundaries to explore cross-cutting themes, such as causality, cohesion and citizenship? The article concludes by arguing for a more detailed examination of how migration and housing are interconnected and a more sophisticated analysis of cause, effect and outcomes for individuals and groups, from an interdisciplinary perspective (see also Brettell and Hillifield 2023). The article advocates for theory which takes into account historical processes, recognises the importance of economic, social and political questions and offers opportunities for more engaged scholarship. These factors are particularly important given migrant and foreign-born claims on home, housing and habitation to form an increasingly

important site of struggle for identity and belonging and, crucially, to capture the ‘heterogeneity of the housing experience’ (Brown et al. 2024).

In a discussion of migration and housing, Jacobs (2023) distinguishes between theory that is prescriptive (which considers the impact of migration on housing markets) and that which is heuristic (which considers the migrant experience and the role of housing within capitalist society). Jacobs (2023) argues against approaches which emphasise the commonality of migrant experiences rather than stressing the extent of differentiation based on considerations of culture, gender, race or class. With this consideration in mind, this article is structured around broad distinctions between economic (with a focus on causation), social (relating to cohesion) and political theories (with an emphasis on citizenship). Whilst acknowledging that these categories are not distinct and that there is considerable overlap between each, we argue that this approach provides a useful starting point to consider the strengths and limitations of existing models of migration and housing.

2. Materials and Methods

This article involves a critical review of literature which develops and applies a theoretical understanding of the combined subjects of migration and housing. A *critical literature review* is a methodology that ‘seeks to identify most significant items in a field’ to produce a ‘conceptual contribution’ (Grant and Booth 2009, p. 94). In contrast, a *systematic review* is ideally suited to those research questions which seek to address ‘feasibility, appropriateness, meaningfulness or effectiveness’ (Pearson et al. 2009, p. 85), or a *scoping review* which is useful as a tool to ‘determine the scope or coverage of a body of literature on a given topic and give clear indication of the volume of literature and studies available as well as an overview (broad or detailed) of its focus’ (Munn et al. 2018, p. 2). Whereas a systematic review investigates a particular research question in depth, and a scoping review considers its breadth across a wide range of literature, a critical literature review ‘analyses and synthesises material from diverse sources’ with the specific aim of refining existing theoretical frameworks and developing a new phase of conceptual interpretation (Grant and Booth 2009). A critical review is therefore the starting point for further evaluation.

Following the example of Mallett (2004), whose critical review facilitates interdisciplinary discussions of the meaning of home through the identification of common themes, we conducted a structured search of publications, primarily within the fields of sociology, economics and political science, which considered both housing and migration. Google Scholar searches of articles published in English included the terms ‘theory’, ‘migration’, ‘migrants’, ‘immigration’, ‘housing’, ‘home’, ‘dwelling’, ‘inhabitation’, ‘border(s)’ and ‘bordering’. The search included academic monographs, journal articles, and, to a lesser extent, published research findings from think tanks and publications by advocacy/pressure groups (by virtue of limiting the review to work that develops or applies theory, such as ‘grey’ material generated relatively few search results). The initial search was subsequently widened to incorporate a broader set of academic discussions of governance, public administration, globalisation, quality of life, as well as reference to historical discussions within what can be termed a ‘social ecology’ approach. These latter sources were chosen for their potential relevance to theoretical discussions of housing and migration. The review involved a total of 190 sources.

We excluded empirical research which did not explicitly engage a theoretical framework for analysis, as our focus was on literature which articulated a conceptualisation that offered explanatory power, offering discussion beyond description, with specific relevance to discussions of housing and migration (rather than sources which discussed migration per se). The literature review was not limited by geography, although the focus of the search centred predominantly on European and North American literature (perhaps

due to limiting the search to materials published in the English language). Similarly, the search concentrated on material published in the 21st century, although the search also included seminal work in the latter half of the 20th century. The criticality of literature was assessed in this structured review of the literature, which was undertaken following Saunders and Rojon's (2011) 'checklist' for a critical literature review, to determine the most relevant and significant research, using recognised expertise in the field and evaluated according to a clear and logical structure.

3. Results

The framework chosen for analysis of the data on housing and migration was analysed according to three main categories that broadly corresponded to 'traditional' academic disciplines of economics, sociology and political science. This framework involved analysis of the central themes of causation, cohesion and citizenship; categories selected on the basis that although containing overlapping themes, they represented distinct approaches to methodology (whether positivist, interpretivist or critical realist), research methods (quantitative, qualitative) and explanatory potential (impact, outcomes and ethics). Thematic content analysis (TCA) was deployed to identify 'shared, multifaceted meaning patterned across' texts 'unified by a central organizing concept or idea' (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 77). The thematic 'units' of causation, cohesion and citizenship are the high-level outcome of the analysis of 190 sources to offer a holistic meaning of the data (McClelland 1975).

3.1. Causality: Economic Explanations of Housing and Migration

The majority of empirical studies on housing and migration have been conducted from an economic standpoint, providing analysis at both macro and micro levels, often with a comparative and an international focus (for example, Massey et al. 1993). Principally, economists attempt to understand bi-directional, 'two-way causality' between housing market conditions and migration flows (Cochrane and Poot 2021; Mangum and Molloy 2021). These approaches have involved 'neoclassical' economic approaches (focusing on costs, wage differentials and employment opportunities), where migration is viewed as an outcome of individual decisions (see also Shields and Shields (1989)).

3.1.1. The Fiscal Impact of Migration

Researchers have attempted to explain the impact of migration on labour markets, focusing on differentials in wage levels (for example, Dustmann et al. 2013; Manacorda et al. 2012). Studies investigating the 'fiscal impact' (i.e., economic costs and benefits) of immigration (Vargas-Silva et al. 2014), housing and employment outcomes for refugees (Bevelander et al. 2019), as well as implications for the welfare state (for example, Borjas 1999; Griswold 2012), have been highly influential in contemporary debates surrounding migration. A high number of studies have analysed housing markets and house price differentials (Jones et al. 2003), as well as offering discussions of housing demand, need and the (in)ability of local government to fulfil statutory duties in light of increasing migration in local areas (Salt 1991). Both international and internal migration (e.g., intra-urban and inter-regional) feature in economic explanations of housing and migration.

These kinds of studies tend to use aggregated, quantitative data, often based on demographic data, to consider explanations of why and how people migrate, what happens to migrants and their 'absorption' and integration into mainstream society (Ager and Strang 2008; D. Massey 2013). As Hollifield (2020) argues: 'Although economists also borrow and work with other disciplines—demography, sociology, and history for example—they maintain a focus on their own (quantitative) methodology and (often highly formal) models, especially rational choice' (p. 6). This kind of 'heavily inductive, positivist,

behavioural and “data driven” (Hollifield 2020, p. 2) scholarship has been instrumental in defining the field of migration studies. It has tended to focus on population dynamics, the pattern and direction of migration flows and the characteristics of migrants (such as age, gender, occupation or education). The research questions in this vein of study tend to revolve around concepts of scarcity, cost-benefit and rational choice (ibid.), often based on what Iosifides (2017) terms ‘methodological nationalism’ (p. 128), where the nation state is taken as the natural and necessary form of society in modernity.

However, in economic terms, what is known as the ‘endogeneity problem’ (the difficulty of distinguishing cause and effect) is widely seen as problematic due to measurement errors, sample selection bias or omission of key variables (Clemens and Hunt 2019). Research by Dustmann et al. (2016) highlights the difficulties of drawing firm conclusions about the impact of migration (both internal and external), given the wide range of causal and explanatory possibilities.

3.1.2. Globalisation

More recently, ‘new economic approaches’ such as ‘dual market’ or ‘labour systems’ theories place greater focus on structural features, including the impact of globalisation processes or market penetration across boundaries (Stark and Bloom 1985; Stark 1991). Such approaches include a ‘world systems’ model, using concepts of ‘structural penetration’ and ‘imbalancing’ of peripheral areas, resulting in mass displacement (Portes and Walton 1981; Sassen 1988). These latter approaches emphasise the ‘pull factors’ of the labour demands of modern industrial economies. Studies have therefore discussed the process which both facilitate (for example, worker visas and tax breaks) and restrict migration (punitive constraints) in response to changing economic conditions. Notably, housing not only has a key role in preventing migration (for example, prohibitive Right to Rent provisions in U.K. immigration law), but also in counterbalancing restrictions imposed on migrants, in the case of ‘chain migration’ (where migrants arrange access to housing through informal mutual support of migrant hosts) as well as ‘migrant squats’ in resistance movements (Dadusc et al. 2019). The work of Massey et al. (1993) provides a broad overview of these approaches, but notable in these analyses is the limited discussion of the role that housing plays in decision-making or discussion of the consequences for local communities and migrant groups.

Others have taken a more critical approach to debates about the impact of globalisation in determining migrant experiences. For example, writers such as Swyngedouw (2002, 2004) have criticised the pre-eminence of the ‘global’ in much of the literature and political rhetoric, which he argues ‘obfuscates, marginalises, and silences an intense and ongoing socio-spatial struggle in which the reconfiguration of spatial scales of governance takes a central position’ (p. 63). At the same time, Swyngedouw argues that the ‘rhetoric’ of globalisation is paralleled by and facilitates the emergence of more authoritarian or at least autocratic forms of governance’ (Swyngedouw 2002, p. 63), demonstrating a need for economic explanations to be framed within a wider political context.

3.1.3. Political Economy

An alternative economic perspective is provided by Obeng-Odoom (2022), who advocates a framework he terms Georgist political economy (GPE), inspired by George’s ([1898] 1992) theories of land, as an alternative to classical and neoclassical models of economics. This approach has the benefit of acknowledging growing concentrations of economic wealth and power, the ‘enclosure of the commons’ (or the colonisation of public space by private sector interests) and socio-spatial injustice (p. 37). This work draws upon both institutional (with a focus on land, the nature of capital, labour and the role of the State) and stratification (focusing on structural inequality) economic explanations. Such

work provides an attempt to explain ‘global migration crises’ (p. 64), including attempts to analyse structural racism, often from a Marxist perspective and influenced by writers such as Harvey (1978). Obeng-Odoom’s work is important in emphasising the agency of migrants as well as the capacity for resistance, acknowledging the ‘indivisible interactions of ecology, economy and society’ (Obeng-Odoom 2022, p. 250).

3.2. Cohesion: The Sociological Study of Integration and Exclusion

Sociological theories have focused not only on labour markets, but on wider features of capitalist and non-capitalist societies which provide an impetus for both internal and external migration. Migration flows are therefore stimulated by the availability of land, materials and labour within increasingly globalised societies (D. S. Massey 1989). Sassen’s (2016) work on migration flows provides important insights into changing global patterns and trends, in what she terms an ‘epochal’ change.

3.2.1. Assimilation, Integration and Stratification

Sociological studies have provided important insights into the role of assimilation, integration and social stratification of migrant groups in different social environments (Phillips 2006; Lessard-Phillips and Li 2017). Influenced by early sociological studies on assimilation and ‘acculturation’ (Park 1930; Gans 2007), separation and marginalisation (Vaughan 2005), important work has been undertaken in relation to policies which can encourage or discourage integration (Platt et al. 2022; Bilgili 2015). There has been a long and important series of historical studies (often from a U.S. context) which has highlighted the significance of contingencies in public policies (such as the role of private sector real estate in compounding racial segregation—‘blockbusting’) and discriminatory financial practices (so-called ‘redlining’) and individual decision-makers to determine processes of racial transition (Gotham 2002). These ‘invasion-succession’ models highlight how patterns of spatial segregation ‘result from the conscious actions taken by individual decision makers in various class, race, gender, and community-based groups, acting under particular historical circumstances’ (Feagin and Parker 1990, p. 12; Gotham 2002, p. 86).

However, much of the above work tends to focus on employment, education or public participation and pays only limited attention to the role of housing markets and neighbourhood planning. Whilst studies have looked at the impact of migration on school performance, employment conditions and wider patterns of disadvantage and discrimination amongst migrant groups (Dustmann et al. 2011) or upon wider patterns of social change (Portes 2010), and despite studies which have looked at integration and resettlement for asylum seekers (Brown and Horrocks 2009; Netto 2011), there is a notable gap in theoretically informed literature studying housing and migrant communities. The application of ‘contact’ theory (Allport 1954; Bassoli and Luccioni 2024), which examines how positive interaction might limit prejudice between groups, offers a useful lens for discussing these issues in relation to housing (Perry et al. 2026).

In addition, as Jacobs (2023) argues, many studies have tended to treat migrant groups as passive actors, and there is a need for studies which treat individuals and groups as active agents with the capacity for resistance and dynamism to change their circumstances. Other writers have written of this tendency towards the objectivisation and subjectivation of migrants, determining how migrants are governed and racialised or ‘migratised’ (Anderson 2017; Tazzioli 2021), whilst acknowledging the ‘mutability of race’ (Davis 2011); that is, the heterogeneity and constantly changing process of racialisation. Work on the social construction of development discourses (Silvey and Lawson 1999), as well as contested notions of race, identity, belonging and connection, demonstrate the contribution of sociological studies of migration (Lawson 2000).

3.2.2. Quality of Life and the Meaning of Home

An important strand of work has studied the meaning of home for migrant groups (Boccagni 2017), including studies on architecture and design (Lozanovska 2019). Common concepts in these studies include transience, displacement, mobility and attachment (Ralph and Staeheli 2011). Others have emphasised how homes fail to deliver security, comfort or belonging through the concept of ‘non-home’ (Boccagni and Nieto 2022), with work analysing the role of ‘remittance houses’ for migrant groups (Lacroix et al. 2016) and their link with identities and transnational aspirations (Vargas-Silva and Boccagni 2024). The work of Boccagni (2017) contains important sociological insights into what he terms the ‘migration-home nexus’ to account for connections between the home and mobility across borders. Such discussion of belonging and place-making for migrant groups provides a useful typology of concepts of home, distinguishing between descriptive, normative, metaphorical and analytical perspectives (Boccagni 2023, p. 5), including scholarship, which uses participatory research methods to understand the migrant experience (see, for example, Byrne et al. 2021). Other work has found that social capital is a significant predictor of quality of life among migrant populations, but the existence of ‘variations in this relationship across different measures of social capital and other domains of quality of life among migrant groups’ (Adedjei 2021, p. 87). Literature on the quality of life for migrant groups has been strongly informed by ‘intersectional’ work, which emphasises the role of race, gender and class (Fathi 2017; Bastia et al. 2023; Freedman et al. 2023; Cleton and Scuzzarello 2024).

These perspectives provide important insights into the migrant experience of home, but would benefit from wider analysis and critique of institutional structures, processes, governing strategies and the operation of legal processes. The work of Lawson (2000) highlights the contribution of migrant voices in empirical research, emphasising the capacity for agency and helping challenge dominant discourses as part of a broader geography of movement. Her call for a critical ethnography of migration offers potential for housing studies to investigate the social construction of ‘belonging, identity formation and “migrancy” (embracing complex migrant subjectivities)’ (p. 174) in greater depth. A further important point is that discussion of migration and housing has frequently focused on vulnerability, precarity and dispossession (Lees et al. 2018; Schierup et al. 2021); there has been much less attention on the relationship as applied to higher-status, high-skilled and elite groups in terms of distorting housing markets, displacement and gentrification (Atkinson et al. 2024).

Sociological studies have analysed the role of structure and agency in determining cause and effect, with important implications for the effectiveness of migrant groups in gaining access to housing, as well as their experiences of different forms of housing provision. Criticisms of structuration theory have led some to advocate critical realism as a useful approach to consider migration (Bakewell 2010; Iosifides 2017; Serpa 2023; Menezes et al. 2026).

3.2.3. Crimmigration and Advanced Marginality

An important sub-field of sociology can be found in the area of socio-legal studies, most notably in the sphere of ‘crimmigration’ (Stumpf 2013), which emphasises the combination of criminal justice and immigration control (Serpa 2023), sometimes seen as the central or defining feature of contemporary migration studies. The value of a crimmigration framework can be seen in emphasising the interdependence of legal processes (such as detention and surveillance) and strategies to control immigration (securitisation often through racialisation, social exclusion and deportation) (Bowling 2013). One useful explanatory device (De Haas 2021) demonstrates how migration is driven by a combination of aspiration (desires and dreams to move) and capabilities (resources and freedom to

achieve objectives) within specific geographical circumstances. Seen as an intrinsic part of wider social change, De Haas (2021) distinguishes between instrumental (or functional) and intrinsic (as a direct contribution to wellbeing) dimensions of mobility, which can help explain complex and sometimes counter-intuitive processes of transformation and development.

The work of Foucault (1972, 1991) and Bourdieu (1986, 1996) has also been highly significant for its contribution to the cultural capital of migrant groups (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007; Hardy 2003). This work has been used by writers such as Wacquant (2014) to consider the relationship between housing, ethnicity and ‘advanced marginality’ (Powell and Robinson 2019; Robinson 2008). For example, Erel (2010) argues that ‘migration results in new ways of producing and re-producing (mobilizing, enacting, validating) cultural capital that builds on, rather than simply mirrors, power relations of either the country of origin or the country of migration’ (p. 642). In a similar vein, albeit with a focus on highly-skilled migrants, He and Colic-Peisker (2025) offer the concept of ‘homeownership habitus’ to reveal how homeownership functions not only as a status-marker and transnational investment strategy, but is also integral to ‘adult transitions’ and familial inter-generational support.

Levin’s (2016) research into the concepts of home and its relationship with migration makes a contribution to scholarship on material culture, drawing on diverse theoretical strands as part of what some refer to as a ‘post-social turn’. More recent studies, based on cultural anthropology, include discussions of subjectivity and the experience of home (see Papastergiadis 2000; Jacobs 2019, 2023). This work includes research into the significance of families and networks, influenced by actor–network theory (Callon 1999; Latour 2011). These approaches have examined the interrelationship between human and non-human actors and have examined the key significance of technologies of surveillance, bordering practices and other institutional forces in framing public policies, practices and experiences (Diedrich 2025). These latter accounts have value in identifying the ‘distinctive logics of action’ and key ‘organisational mechanisms’ which determine the experiences of migration and the impact of policy and practice upon migrant groups (Lang et al. 2021). More recent studies have investigated liminality and the transitional statuses of migration, involving uncertain legal status and social invisibility, alongside increasing precarity and often limited agency. See, for example, Khosravi (2018) on the feeling of ‘waiting’ and work by Lancione and Simone (2021) or Marotta (2025) on ‘liminal’ inhabitation.

3.3. *Citizenship: The Contribution of Political Science*

Theories in political science have been highly significant in illustrating how concepts of power, conflict and inclusion or exclusion operate within a housing context (Marsden and Harris 2015; Mitton 2021). In respect to debates around migration, theories have helped explain how race, ethnicity, precarity and identity can be linked to questions of social justice within modern societies (Jordan and Düvell 2003; Veeramoothoo 2020). The work of Rex and Moore (1969) represented an early attempt to consider the role of migration and housing, demonstrating how community conflict and institutional discrimination operate in tandem to limit access to housing for minority groups.

3.3.1. Governance and Public Management

Discussions within political science have looked at citizenship and public participation (Strang et al. 2018; Peters et al. 2020), and from a theoretical perspective, Foucauldian scholarship has been increasingly important in the field of housing studies. In the context of migration, the ideas of ‘biopolitics’ and ‘governmentality’ have been significant as an explanatory framework for understanding the linkages between housing and migration (McKee 2009). Migration is inherently connected to politics and governance, with its focus

on dispossession, coercion and forced movement (Kreichauf and Lees 2026). The governmentality perspective advanced by Bosworth and Guild (2008), for example, explicitly shifts the focus of the legal issues surrounding the securitisation of migration to the political domain, providing analytical concepts to examine contemporary struggles over access to citizenship (Weber and McCulloch 2019). As Jones et al. (2017) comment, ‘walls, borders, maps, properties, identity documents and enclosure laws are fundamentally technologies of governance that are fundamentally about controlling and excluding’ (p. 65). Governance processes and the role of the State, therefore, warrant further investigation. As an example, D. Massey (2015) calls for ‘greater theoretical attention to the self-interested actions of politicians, pundits, and bureaucrats who benefit from the social construction and political manufacture of immigration crises when none really exist’ (p. 279). Within this context, the concept of ‘bare life’ and ‘necropolitics’ (Mbembe 2019) has also been influential in demonstrating the role of political power in determining life and death decisions—a situation with strong relevance to critical migration studies. Other scholars have applied a necropolitical framework for understanding the control (and eradication) of migrant homes (and sanctuary cities), or ‘necrosettlements’ (Jha 2023; Kirk 2024).

A focus on political science can also enable a focus on institutional features and questions of public management, which are underplayed in the literature (Larrison and Raadschelders 2020). This latter factor is important as ‘migrants navigate the new institutions and access local services and resources in the destination communities, they come in contact with governments, authorities, organizations, businesses, community institutions, long-term residents, and other migrants’ (Yeo and Huang 2020, pp. 176–77). Public administration can therefore play an important role in providing explanations of key features and processes such as street-level bureaucracy, local level implementation, social equity, analysis of ‘wicked’ problems, the effects of globalisation and comparative politics (Larrison and Raadschelders 2020, p. 37).

Explanations based on political science can also illuminate the capacity for agency (in the face of institutional constraints), often taking a ‘bottom-up’ approach, emphasising the capacity for struggle and negotiation, as a counter to more traditional passive representations of the migrant experience (see, for example, Mainwaring 2016; Safoune et al. 2020). Within such representations, the border is a contested site, where notions of sovereignty, citizenship and security are subject to continual negotiation (Borrelli et al. 2022), with migrant networks providing important avenues for resistance to hegemonic structures (Rother 2018), as well as opportunities for ‘co-agency’ (Ducu et al. 2024).

3.3.2. Bordering

Other important work has been conducted around ‘bordering’ and about the importance of the ‘humanitarian border’ as a form of social control (Walters 2010; Novak 2025; Cobarrubias and Novak 2025), although there has been little explicit analysis of the role of housing within these exclusionary processes (see Lafazani 2024 and Serpa 2021 for an exception here). Important discussions have focused on the issue of ‘domicide’ (Porteous and Smith 2001; Nowicki 2016; van Isacker 2021), and migration scholars working in the field of border studies tend to use the term ‘inhabitanace’ (drawing on Lefebvre 2003) over ‘home’ or ‘housing’ (Dadusc et al. 2019). Furthermore, Clare et al. (2022) provide an insightful discussion of the impact of bordering upon migrant groups in the U.K. housing association sector.

Some writers have focused on collective strategies, such as migrant squatting, which can produce ‘corridors of solidarity’, with grassroots social movements to provide non-institutional responses to racism and xenophobia (Dadusc et al. 2019). Wider studies in human geography include research into the colonial role of the State in depriving migrants of both space and time in ‘housingscapes’ (Mitrović and Vilenica 2021) through

governmentality, segregation (Khosravi 2018) and Gilmore's (2018) concept of 'organised abandonment'.

The growth of a 'new populism' in public discourse represents wider anxiety surrounding migration, assimilation, ethnicity and race, much of which has been deliberately exacerbated by politicians and commentators, often motivated by self-interested purposes. The rise of 'reactive populism' (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Jopke 2021) and the emergence of new forms of 'scientific racism' (Thränhardt 1993), alongside a politicisation of scholarship in migration (Brettell and Hillifield 2023, p. 29), requires a detailed analysis of migration and housing from a political science perspective.

3.3.3. Neoliberalism and Displacement

Much work in housing studies has been conducted on financialisation, commodification and neoliberalism—all of which have had a significant impact on migration and the experience of migrant groups in the housing arena (Jacobs 2019; Brenner and Theodore 2002). This work includes those who have looked at the traumatic experiences of those who remain homeless (Soederberg 2019; Søholt and Aasland 2021). The impact of privatisation, neoliberalism (Darling 2016), austerity urbanism and global displacement has thus been significant in the experience of migrant groups, and discrimination within housing markets provides important insights into the migrant experience (Walks and Soederberg 2021), including access to the social rented sector, poor condition of properties and increasing precarity (Bhagat 2024). Discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and/or religion has been a common theme in the analysis of migrant experiences (see Preece and Bimpson 2019; Jacobs 2023).

From the context of neoliberalism, studies have looked at 'zemiology'—the study of social harm (see, for example, Soliman 2019). As Canning (2018) argues, 'the reality of more banal and grinding aspects of seeking asylum which are not necessarily linked to criminalisation—enforced welfare dependency, inadequate housing, violent relationships—often go unseen or under-focussed' (p. 128). Important scholarship has been conducted by Tazzioli (2019) into the problematisation of migration and, influenced by Foucault, the biopolitical technologies that target those individuals who are racialised as 'migrants' (Tazzioli 2021). Such an 'autonomy of migration' approach places resistance first in a Foucauldian understanding of power relations, to see control as a reaction to the movement of people, rather than viewing migration as a response to control and market forces. The 'problem' in this context is the discipline of free movement through violence and repression—not the crossing of borders itself (Dadusc et al. 2019).

There has been considerable work in the literature on housing as a tool for segregation (Fortuijn et al. 1998; van Kempen 2005), on migration and social exclusion (Samers 1998) and as a means of financial injury (for example, through predatory lending) (Benouna 2026). Writers have shown that the planning profession has had an ambiguous and often ambivalent relationship with migrant communities and has struggled to define specific roles for planners within those communities (Vitiello 2009). Research into the allocation of social housing amongst immigrant communities has concluded that there is no evidence that social housing allocation favours foreign migrants over U.K. citizens (Rutter and Latorre 2009, p. ix), whilst studies have considered the relationship between housing and mental health amongst asylum seekers (Spira et al. 2025).

In relation to the agency of migrant groups and resistance to public policy mentioned in the section above, studies have investigated the capacity and opportunity to provide counter-narratives to existing structures (see, for example, Lees et al. 2018; Santamarina and Karaliotas 2025). Work in this vein includes discussions of the impact of 'actually existing' racial capitalism (Fields and Raymond 2021) and the impact of 'racial neoliberalism' (Bhagat 2024). Much work has been conducted into housing and ethnicity to highlight

institutional and structural forms of disadvantage in the U.K. (Finney et al. 2019; De Noronha 2024). Such work has highlighted the material and ideological features of refugee marginalisation (Bhagat 2019), including a focus on forms of ‘legal-spatial violence’ (Kreichauf 2021) and processes of ‘un-homing’ (Elliott-Cooper et al. 2020). Such studies interrogate the impact of racial capitalism, urban austerity, the marketisation and commodification of housing and institutionalised inequality within cities experiencing a ‘global housing crisis’ (Potts 2020).

Work on gentrification and displacement provides an important contribution to debates around migration (Bhagat 2024), and writers such as Kreichauf and Lees (2026) argue that the concept of displacement is situated within two distinct fields of migration and urban studies. Their work examines connections, similarities and differences between displacement processes, forms and experiences, arguing the need to draw upon concepts of accumulation by dispossession, power, temporality, space and resistance (Harvey 2012); or ‘expanding dispossession’ (Bin 2018).

However, with some exceptions (Ghorashi 2023), the housing literature contains only limited theoretical discussion of these central issues. Discussions on housing policy have tended to downplay the issue of migration. Further research is therefore needed to understand how discussions of how notions of sovereignty and citizenship are affected by race, gender and class dynamics when affecting migrant groups and how processes of inclusion and exclusion are affected by media communications, public opinion and political discourse (Datts 2020; Conrad 2021). It is clear that more explicit theorisation is needed to provide a clearer explanation of the politics of migration and its implications for discussions of housing.

4. Discussion

The sources considered above represent differing accounts and approaches to the study of housing and migration, and these approaches have, in general terms, been considered according to separate academic disciplines. Given the centrality of housing issues to the debates surrounding migration, theoretical discussion and empirical study can benefit from approaches which consider the different aspects of migration from a structural perspective (to explain cause and effect, implications for social integration and exclusion) as well as at an individual level (to analyse experiences, identity and exclusion). Moreover, the connection between political and sociological accounts is important, as home can be seen as a ‘porous’ place; one that is neither public nor private but constituted at the intersection of the domestic and political world (D. Massey 2013; Blunt and Dowling 2006).

As Kreichauf and Lees (2026) comment, ‘people who are internationally displaced are often those most vulnerable to the repeated loss of housing and home in cities’ (p. 8). There is consequently a need for more sustained and explicit theoretical discussion of the relationship between housing and migration, which can benefit from both theoretical insight and empirical investigation. Why has it been difficult to analyse the connections between housing and migration? Whilst there have been important attempts to provide some sound theoretical basis for migration studies, for example, Iosifides (2017), who considers what he calls ‘migrantization’ research within a framework of critical realism, the aim of this approach is ‘to discover, uncover or indicate how various causal powers—of structural, discursive/cultural and agential character—interact and produce certain outcomes. It presupposes that both measurable and non-measurable dimensions of the social world are relevant’ (p. 128). Whilst this may prove a fruitful avenue for housing scholarship, we suggest there are three main deficiencies in existing studies of housing and migration.

First, many migration studies have tended towards the *aspatial*; often neglecting discussion of definition, scale, or terminology. ‘Home’ can be understood at different levels—

whether point of origin, nationality, hometown or existing accommodation. Reference to 'housing' and 'inhabitation' rather than home is more specific, and perhaps less used in sociological work. This approach should acknowledge the 'flexible classifications of difference devised for governing different people' (Lowe 2015, p. 32). As Tazzioli (2021) writes:

on the one hand the question 'who is a migrant?' can never be answered once for all and the putative answer will always depends on 'where' and 'when'; yet, on the other hand, the lives of those who are racialised and governed 'here and now' as 'migrants' or as 'undeserving refugees' are daily affected and obstructed by those laws and policies. (p. 3).

What Tazzioli (2019) terms the 'making of migration' thus happens not only through practices of bordering, but also through knowledge practices (such as technologies, classifications and categorisations) as well as 'non-knowledge' (i.e., the limits of quantification of migration) (Scheel 2021). Geographical scale is also an important consideration, with much scholarship dominated by perspectives from the global North (see Sagnic et al. 2026), highlighting significant disparities between where refugees are located and where research is produced. Theoretically informed studies also need to take account of a number of key dichotomies within housing and migration or border studies, such as push/pull causation, internal/external displacement and undocumented/documentated groups. Migration issues are inherently dynamic, fast-changing and problematic (particularly in relation to legal status), and theory needs to take account of this complex environment.

A 'socio-spatial' perspective offers a broader scope for the theorisation of housing and migration. As Gotham (2002) contends, the 'socio-spatial perspective illuminates the contingencies of neighborhood transition by emphasizing the power of actors and events to transform ecological patterns' (Gotham 2002, p. 104). In similar terms, Taylor (1982) has proposed a 'materialist' framework which brings together the political and geographical in a 'political economy of scale', where the 'world-economy is the scale of reality, the state and nation represent the scale of ideology and the city is the scale of experience' (p. 15). Such approaches offer promising opportunities to develop more clearly integrated (and spatially situated) theories of housing and migration.

A second key point is that housing studies have tended to be *ahistorical*; neglecting analysis of temporality. Space is a significant theme for both migration and housing, but so is time; for example, the length of residency is significant for housing and immigration rights. This temporal dimension of migration is important, not only in a legal sense (to determine rights) but also in determining the ways in which people resettle—or not, as in the case of transnational living—and how they might overcome discrimination in housing markets. Temporality is also crucial in a political sense to understand the complexities and changes in the movement of people (and State responses to cross-border movement) in the context of (post)colonialism. The heterogeneity of migrant experiences and the arbitrary nature of racialised classifications, challenging what Tazzioli (2021) terms 'the de-historicization of the racialized migrant body', offer an alternative approach to the genealogy of migration (ibid.). Such approaches can show the 'irreducibility' of migrants to traditional social movements and the 'recursive criminality' by which they are targeted.

The final point is that housing studies have tended towards *apolitical* accounts, a particular critique of housing studies. The concept of 'domopolitics' (Darling 2011) provides a fruitful area of analysis to explain the operation of governance through calculation, regulation and discipline. Kreichauf and Lees (2026) have developed the concept of 'multiplied displacement', a 'framework to explain the proliferating assemblage of the repeated loss and lack of home, connected through broader processes of racialization, governance, and the capitalist mode of production' (p. 3). An alternative to the apolitical tendency within housing and migration studies can be found in work by Wacquant (2008; 2014) on

‘territorial stigmatisation’, ‘advanced marginality’ and the ‘rightward tilting of the bureaucratic state’. Such an approach has much to offer for scholars of migration and housing and can help advance our understanding of contemporary processes.

5. Conclusions

The quote highlighted at the beginning of this review acknowledges the increasing complexity and diversity of the concept of migration. The research questions raised at the beginning of this article asked the following: (1) What are the strengths, weaknesses and gaps in existing knowledge at the intersection of housing and migration? (2) What are the underlying assumptions within research studies, and how might these be challenged and refined? and (3) How can new theorisation transcend disciplinary boundaries to explore cross-cutting themes, such as causality, cohesion and citizenship?

The discussion highlights how the strengths of approaches have sustained investigation of causal factors (often from an economic perspective), important insights gained from sociological studies (into processes of inclusion and exclusion) and an emphasis on social justice and citizenship (informed by political science). However, the main weakness in theoretical development has been analysis which fails to adequately explain how a combination of historical, socio-spatial and political processes affects the housing experiences of migrantised groups. Existing literature should pay more attention to the temporal dimension, emphasising the dynamics of migration, the racialised dimension to the debates, as well as the role that gender and class play within this contested arena.

This critical review has demonstrated that existing scholarship combining these areas has been relatively distinct, according to disciplinary boundaries, informed by assumptions about the most effective methodological approaches (for example, positivism, social constructionism or critical realism). New theorisation is therefore needed to avoid these siloed debates and aim to overcome academic distinctions by pointing out how they might speak to each other through a critical focus which can combine key contingencies to explain the variegated explanations of causality, cohesion and citizenship. This approach should highlight the value of multi-disciplinary approaches which avoid a focus on specific themes whilst overlooking others—in this way, theory might lead to new understanding of key concepts and processes, informed by a historically informed, socio-spatial analysis which acknowledges complexity and contestation in contemporary economic and political discourse.

Moreover, as Obeng-Odoom (2022) contends, the use of theory in relation to migration is important, as it should lead to change; engaged theorising is therefore both fundamental and should be transformative (p. 255). An acknowledgement of complexity and what can be termed ‘intersectionality’ is needed to effectively combine key insights from different disciplinary approaches. Swyngedouw’s (2002) argument that we need to pay greater attention to ‘spatial scale’ demonstrates how configurations of scales interact and relate, and how they are more than just ‘the sum of their parts’. For Swyngedouw, this can facilitate an emancipatory and empowering process (p. 63). In such ways, housing and migration research can benefit from a consistent and more effective interdisciplinary approach to provide a more sustained examination of how theory can provide enlightenment into an increasingly polarised and contested subject area.

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