

INTEGRATING PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES INTO LOCAL HOUSING POLICY DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract

This paper presents the development of the Local Housing Strategy of Amarante, Portugal, as a case study of psychology-informed municipal policy design. The work was commissioned to support an application to the national 1st Right housing program and is reframed here as applied research guided by environmental psychology and community psychology. Specifically, the analysis was informed by person-environment fit, place attachment, social support, and ecological interdependence. A mixed-method participatory design combined content analysis of stakeholder questionnaires (N = 52), semi-structured follow-up interviews and clarification contacts with local political and institutional actors, consultation with frontline agencies, review of public demographic and housing statistics, and documentary analysis of regional, national, and European policy frameworks. The findings showed a structural mismatch between housing supply and housing adequacy: while family dwellings increased, population declined, low incomes, rent inflation, degraded housing, accessibility barriers, and weak informal support networks concentrated housing insecurity among older adults, isolated persons, single-parent households, and people with disabilities. At least 260 households and 5 housing clusters, comprising no fewer than 901 people, were identified as living in or near inadequate housing conditions. The strategy translated these patterns into a targeted investment package of about EUR 13 million, prioritizing rehabilitation, rental support, and territorially dispersed responses. The case illustrates how psychological concepts can strengthen local housing policy by linking material deprivation to belonging, autonomy, accessibility, and community integration.

Keywords: *Local housing strategy, evidence-based policy, public investment, social policy planning.*

1. Introduction

Housing is not only a material resource but also a psychosocial setting that structures safety, privacy, routine, autonomy, and participation in community life. International housing and human-rights frameworks have long framed adequate housing as a prerequisite for health, social protection, education, and civic participation. From a psychological perspective, housing insecurity is therefore more than a market failure: it is a condition that can erode perceived control, intensify chronic stress, weaken social ties, and disrupt place-based identities.

The present paper revisits the Local Housing Strategy of Amarante as an applied research case positioned at the intersection of environmental psychology and community psychology. Two theoretical lenses were particularly useful. First, person-environment fit helped interpret situations in which the built environment was objectively or functionally incompatible with household needs, especially in cases of reduced mobility, overcrowding, poor conservation, and deficient accessibility. Second, community-psychology concepts of ecological interdependence and social support helped explain why vulnerability was not evenly distributed across the municipality: risk accumulated where low income, aging, disability, isolation, and weak local support networks overlapped.

This reframing responds directly to the challenge of demonstrating that the work contributes to psychological knowledge and not only to administrative planning. The goal was not to test a single psychological model experimentally, but to use validated psychological perspectives to organize diagnosis, interpret vulnerability, and improve the targeting of public action.

2. Objectives

The study had three objectives: (a) to characterize demographic, socioeconomic, and housing dynamics relevant to local housing exclusion; (b) to identify psychologically salient patterns of vulnerability associated with inadequate housing; and (c) to translate this evidence into a municipal strategy aligned with the Portuguese 1st Right program while preserving community integration and territorial cohesion.

3. Method

A mixed-method applied design was used. First, a macro-social diagnosis was built from public indicators on demography, income, employment, buildings, dwellings, and rents. These data were drawn from official statistical platforms and analyzed descriptively, with attention to temporal trends and territorial differences within the municipality.

Second, local needs were mapped through a participatory procedure. A structured questionnaire, organized around eligibility profiles defined in the 1st Right program, was distributed through Qualtrics to parish-level actors, social-service teams, and community organizations; the approved abstract reports 52 completed stakeholder responses. Pandemic constraints required replacing some originally planned focus-group sessions with telephone and individual follow-up contacts. Additional qualitative information was obtained from municipal divisions, charitable organizations, Habitat for Humanity Portugal, and nine local real-estate agencies.

Third, qualitative material from questionnaires, follow-up contacts, and institutional inputs was subjected to directed content analysis. Coding categories combined statutory housing-need profiles with psychological constructs relevant to housing insecurity: person-environment misfit, barriers to autonomy, isolation and reduced social support, cumulative vulnerability, and threats to community integration. Convergence across qualitative evidence, municipal records, and public statistics was used as a triangulation criterion to increase analytical robustness.

4. Results and discussion

The macro-social diagnosis revealed a paradox that is highly relevant psychologically and politically. Between 2011 and 2019, Amarante lost 5.18% of its population, yet the stock of family dwellings increased by 2.19%. In 2011, 11.96% of dwellings were vacant, while mean rents had increased by 44.07% since 2001. In parallel, the mean monthly salary in 2018 was EUR 878.1, about 25% below the national average. These data indicate that the local crisis was not simply one of absolute shortage; it was a crisis of affordability, adequacy, and access to fit-for-purpose housing.

The participatory diagnosis identified 260 households and 5 housing clusters, involving at least 901 people. Within this group, 174 were older adults, 112 were isolated persons, 207 were dependents, 66 belonged to single-parent households, and 50 had some form of disability or incapacity. The most frequent housing problems were insalubrity or insecurity (133 cases), inadequate accessibility or functional mismatch (33), precarious housing situations (17), homelessness (19 persons), and overcrowding (12 cases). These patterns are important psychologically because they point to chronic exposure to stressors that reduce residential control, compromise privacy and restoration, and undermine the capacity to maintain stable social roles.

Older adults emerged as a particularly important group. The report highlights demographic aging, growth in one-person households among people aged 65 years or more, and repeated instances of isolated persons living in degraded or inaccessible housing. Interpreted through environmental psychology, these cases exemplify declining person-environment fit, where stairs, structural degradation, poor thermal conditions, or unsuitable layouts become barriers to everyday competence and to aging in place. Interpreted through community psychology, they also show how housing vulnerability is intensified when weak support networks and territorial isolation restrict help-seeking and daily participation.

The strategy translated this diagnosis into an estimated global investment of EUR 13 million. Most of the investment was directed toward rehabilitation-oriented actions, with Lines of Action 2 and 4 together accounting for more than 86% of the total. This distribution is theoretically coherent: rehabilitation and territorial dispersion preserve local bonds, reduce displacement, and support continuity of community membership. In other words, the strategy did not treat housing as a merely physical unit to be allocated, but as a psychosocial environment that should sustain belonging, dignity, and autonomy.

Methodologically, the study also demonstrates the value of participatory and ecologically grounded assessment. Frontline stakeholders were indispensable for identifying hidden vulnerability that would have remained invisible in aggregate statistics alone. At the same time, the analysis has limitations: no standardized psychological scales were administered, and some interpretations are inferential rather than directly measured. Even so, the combination of participatory mapping, content analysis, and territorial statistics offers a strong model for psychology-informed policy design in small municipalities.

5. Conclusions

This case study shows that local housing policy can be strengthened when psychological theory is used explicitly to interpret vulnerability and to design responses. In Amarante, housing insecurity was best understood not only as insufficient supply, but as a cumulative disruption of fit between people, dwellings, and community contexts. Environmental-psychology concepts clarified why accessibility, conservation, and residential adequacy matter for autonomy and well-being; community-psychology concepts clarified why social support, territorial belonging, and dispersed local responses matter for sustainable implementation. For psychology, the contribution lies in demonstrating how psychosocial analysis can improve public targeting. For policy, the contribution lies in showing how evidence-based diagnosis can guide substantial investment toward populations whose housing problems are inseparable from isolation, aging, disability, and social exclusion.

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