

HOUSING AND HEALTH

It has been known for a long time that the kind of houses people live in affects their health. Bad housing is not the only reason why people become ill. Other things, like the kind of job, income, nutrition, and the quality of health care, also influence people's health. But housing is very important if one looks at the reasons why people get diseases. If diseases and ill health are to be prevented, better housing becomes necessary.

In this article, Myra Lipschitz* looks at the problems which most township people experience with their houses, and what this means for their state of health.

Government spending on housing

In the past, it was the Department of Community Development which provided low income housing. But over the last three years, the government cut down on the money spent on low income housing, and housing in general. This cut-back ties in with the curbing of government spending in other areas. Another reason for this cut-back is the fact that the Department of Community Development does not want to be seen as the landlord of the working classes; it does not want to be the target of township protests. Instead, the government wants to shift the responsibility for housing onto the private sector; the government would like to see individual investors take over.

To achieve this, the Government made the following regulations:

- The state will only be responsible for housing those people who earn less than R150 per month. The houses for these people will be built much more cheaply than in the past.
- People who rent their houses from the council will be expected to buy their houses. Those who do not buy their houses, will have to increased rentals.

All new houses for those people who earn more than R150 per month will be built in self-help schemes, on serviced plots, or by companies and individual investors.

The government's cut-back on housing finances will mean lower standards of housing. Houses will, in future, be built without electricity, without floor finishes, without paint on the inside walls, without fences and washing lines. This, together with high unemployment and the rising cost of living, means that the general state of health of people will get worse.

Overcrowding

Overcrowding is one of the most widespread problems with township housing. The Slums Act says that each person needs a minimum of 3,22 square meters to live in. Yet in houses in Manenberg (Cape Town), one person on average has 2,19 square meters of space. In Valhalla Park (Cape Town), one person in an average house has 2,65 square meters of space.



Overcrowding is getting worse in most townships. This is not only because of the many people who come into the cities from the rural areas, but also because of the population increase within the townships themselves. The number of houses that are built each year is simply not enough to house all the people who need a roof over their head. As a result, people try to build backyard shacks or huts next to their houses. Most of these outbuildings are occupied by legal residents who cannot fit into the houses any longer.



It has been shown that the number of children who die under the age of five years increases as the worse the houses get more crowded. This is not surprising if we look at the diseases which can spread so much more easily in overcrowded houses. Among these diseases are tuberculosis (TB) and other diseases relating to the breathing system and the lungs, like bronchitis, croup, and pneumonia. Skin diseases, for instance scabies, are also very common in people who live in overcrowded houses. With people living so closely together in such small spaces, both skin diseases and infectious diseases can get passed on very easily and quickly.

Overcrowding is also linked to rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart diseases.

Water Supply, Toilets, Sewage

Along with overcrowding, poor water and sanitation facilities are responsible for a whole range of diseases. Where there is no piped water or toilets in the house, people have to use buckets or pit toilets outside the house. In both cases, the germs of stomach diseases breed very easily and quickly. This is worse where the houses are overcrowded, and many people have to share the use of one toilet/bucket. The diseases of the stomach are particularly dangerous for babies and small children.

Building materials from which the houses are constructed

With the government cut-back in finances for low-income housing, cheap building materials are being used. This directly affects the health of people living in those houses.

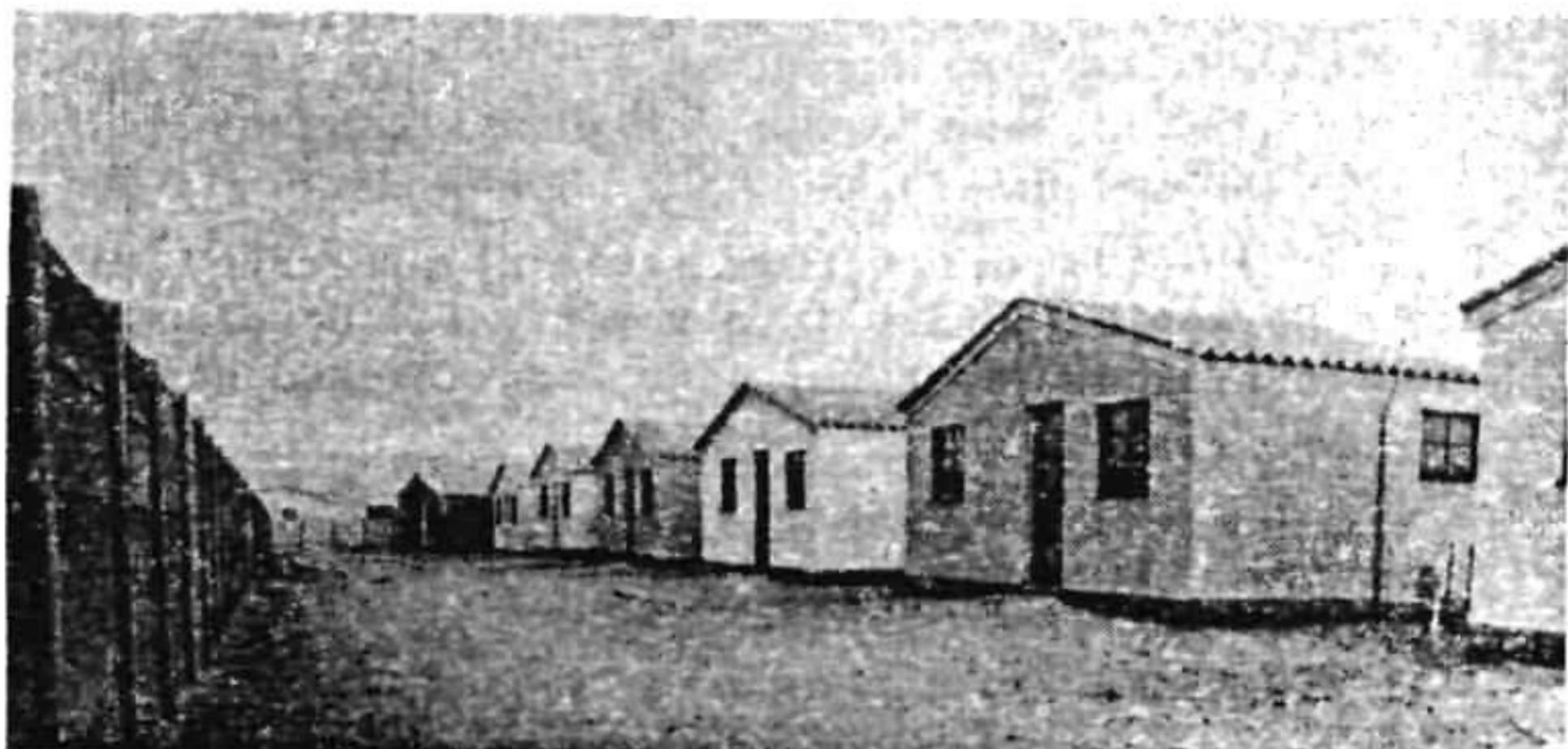
With the cheap bricks used for the outer walls of township houses, damp often gets to the inner wall. This damp can cause mould and fungus to grow on the inside of the wall. Some people are allergic to breathing this mould and fungus, and get asthma as a result.

Damp, and with it the growth of mould and fungus, can also come from the concrete floor slabs. Often, these concrete floor slabs are not damp-proofed. In that case, the damp that gets through the floor rises up into the walls. Another source of dampness could be broken water pipes, which often happens if the pipes are made of cheap materials.

Cheap floor tiles are likely to break and crack with wear and tear. In these cracks, germs can breed which can cause infectious diseases such as hookworm and roundworm infections.

The roofs of township houses are, in many cases, made of corrugated asbestos cement. Many of the houses do not have ceilings. If the asbestos cement breaks or gets worn at any point, asbestos fibres get released. Even though one will usually not be able to see the fibres with the eye, they may be very dangerous. They can cause diseases of the lung, or even cancer of the lung lining.

Township houses are usually built with air bricks. With windy weather, the air bricks often get blocked. At the same time, when it is windy and cold, the windows do not get opened. So there is very little fresh air coming in.



Fumes and smoke inside the houses

With the very little fresh air that can get into a house, the fumes and smoke inside the house can affect people quite badly. The fumes from gas cookers can cause diseases of the breathing system (pneumonia and bronchitis), cough, and bladder infections. This can get particularly bad in children.

The need for setting standards for housing

Having shown the health problems that arise from bad housing conditions, it becomes clear what the government's cut-back on housing will mean. If the houses that were built in the past already show the problems, that have been described in this article, people's health can only get worse with the new, even more cheaply built houses.

People therefore need to organise around housing problems. There is a need to lay down minimum demands for housing standards which will make for better health.

*This article is drawn from material presented to the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa, Paper no. 164, "Housing and Health".
