Social Cohesion and Housing Policy Instruments: A Literature Review and Complex Systems Perspective

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September 2025

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Abstract

Despite decades of debate, social cohesion remains an overused and contested idea, especially when it comes to its link to policy. This intradisciplinary literature review aims to better understand how housing policy instruments and social cohesion in Aotearoa New Zealand interact in academic scholarship and policy, providing both conceptual and methodological insights. The research indicates that social cohesion is frequently defined and measured in ways that fail to accurately reflect the complexities of governing a multicultural society. Four themes emerged: neighbourhood dynamics; power and groups; the housing policy mess; and the measurement of social cohesion, wherein efforts to quantify the concept oversimplify its nuances. Throughout these themes, concepts such as belonging, homelessness, and perceived conflict emerge as particularly prominent. The review employs a multimethod approach, integrating NVivo-based reflexive thematic coding, Excel as a transparent data framework, and Kumu for systems mapping to synthesise the material into a Causal Loop Diagram (CLD). This mixed methodology illustrates how interdisciplinary qualitative research can enhanced rigour, innovation, and transparency. The CLD exposes reinforcing and balancing feedback while pinpointing leverage points where policy instruments can either undermine or enhance conditions for social cohesion. The coding outputs and CLD backbone are publicly accessible as a dataset, demonstrating a commitment to open and reproducible research. This literature review provides a comprehensive and reflective understanding of the interaction between housing policy instruments and social cohesion scholarship, while also highlighting a unique approach to examining intradisciplinary fields through complex systems methodologies.

1 Introduction

Social cohesion is a term used prolifically in research and policy, with no easy way to define or measure it [1, 2]. A socially cohesive society is described as a society where everyone belongs and trusts one another, but that aspirational, often normative definition does not work in today's fractured political, economic and cultural environment [3–5]. When governments design policy instruments without understanding how to define or measure social cohesion, they risk developing policy that erodes social cohesion dimensions instead of enhancing positive social cohesion. Rising political polarisation, fragmented social values, and year-on-year declines in institutional trust make understanding social cohesion more pressing [6]. The growing mention of social cohesion is evident in both media and policy discourse. A search of Factiva [7] shows over 25,000 global media mentions of "social cohesion" between July 2024 and July 2025 , while Policy Commons [8] returned over 250 policy documents with "social cohesion" in their title during the same period.

Understanding policy instruments is inherent in analysing how governments influence social outcomes, including dimensions of social cohesion [9, 10]. Policy instruments are how governments act (or refrain from acting) to manage conflicts over resources, rights, and competing values [11]. As Borras [10] argues, policy instruments must be designed in a way that provides problem-oriented solutions for systemic challenges. Vedung [12] similarly highlights that policy instrument selection is one of the most strategic tasks in public policy. When it comes to understanding social cohesion, the policy instrument choice becomes consequential; certain policy instruments may enhance dimensions such as trust and belonging, while others may unintentionally undermine them.

Ongoing ambiguity in how social cohesion is defined and measured has prompted researchers to call for more empirically grounded approaches to its study [2, 5, 13]. This ambiguity has allowed recurring assumptions to circulate in the literature and policy, often reinforcing dominant narratives while leaving structural drivers of fragmentation underexamined. At the New Zealand policy level, the Te Korowai Whetū Social Cohesion Baseline Report [14] acknowledges the challenge of defining and measuring social cohesion across competing contexts. Similarly, scholars have noted the absence of a shared theoretical or empirical framework, which has hindered the development of effective policy responses [1, 3, 15]. In response, a more creative methodological approach is needed to clarify what social cohesion means, how to measure it, and how it can be empirically studied and applied in policy during a complex intersection of economic uncertainty, populist resurgence,

and normative disruption [16, 17].

This literature review focuses on housing policy instruments as a lens through which to explore the interface between policy instruments and social cohesion. Housing is a foundational area of government intervention that cuts across health, economic, and cultural domains [18, 19]. Housing is a critical yet overlooked element in understanding how policy instruments shape social cohesion. As we face the pressing challenges of ageing populations, increasing disability rates, and a rise in cultural diversity, the demand for thoughtfully designed housing is more urgent than ever. For example, as of 2023, Asian countries remain the largest source of overseas-born residents in New Zealand, with the Asian working-age population increasing by 23 percent between 2018 and 2023, largely driven by migration from India and Southeast Asia [20]. Yet these communities remain marginal in housing policy scholarship and government documents. These population shifts underscore the need for more responsive and socially cohesive policy design [21]. This neglect of housing echoes a broader tendency in social cohesion debates to privilege normative framings, such as shared values or community responsibility, over current social realities, such as perceived conflict [22], challenges in solving homelessness [23, 24],and spatial exclusion [25, 26].

Guided by a complex systems approach, the analysis uses it as both method and lens. Rather than seeking consensus, the aim is to review transdisciplinary scholarship by treating complexity as a finding rather than a flaw. To do this, a CLD was developed to map how different constructs across housing, policy instruments, and social cohesion scholarship interact. CLDs are well suited to this task because they provide a flexible yet rigorous way of turning fragmented literatures into a visual web of ideas [27–29]

This review is structured as follows. It begins by introducing social cohesion and the debates around its definition. The methodology outlines a multimethod approach combining thematic coding, data structuring, and causal loop diagramming. Thematic analysis is then organised into four themes: neighbourhood dynamics, power and groups, the housing policy mess, and the measurement of social cohesion. Finally, the discussion combines findings from a systematic and thematic review and a CLD that demonstrates the impossibility of this transdisciplinary question by selecting three specific constructs as slices: belonging, perceived conflict, and homelessness, and how they interact within the context of housing policy and social cohesion scholarship. The conclusion discusses the implications for research and policy, highlighting how this review contributes to understanding the complexities of housing policy research.

2 Social Cohesion: Why Definitions Matter

Social cohesion is a foundational yet misunderstood concept in both academic research and policy discourse. It is invoked as a public good, something societies should aspire to, but what it means, how it can be measured, and who it benefits remain debated. While some definitions frame social cohesion as an idealized state of national unity, others use a patchwork of proxies such as trust, inclusion, participation, or shared values. These framings overlap but also diverge in critical ways, especially across disciplines like sociology, political science, and public policy. This review examines these tensions, tracing the evolution of social cohesion theory and highlighting why a clear, context-sensitive definition is essential for both analysis and policy application.

Lockwood [30] traces the theoretical foundations of social cohesion to the late 19th century, highlighting the contributions of Marx, Spencer, and especially Emile Durkheim. Emile [31] theorised social cohesion as the moral glue that binds society together through interdependence emerging from the division of labour, though he remained ambivalent about whether modern differentiation could truly sustain normative integration. Lockwood [30] situates Durkheim and Parsons within the tradition of consensus theory, where social cohesion is seen as arising from shared norms and stable institutions. Later, Parsons integrated social cohesion into his functionalist model of society, where it underpins systemic equilibrium. However, as Mahlert [22] argues, Parsons has been criticised for overemphasising harmony and neglecting structural inequalities. Later, Parsons integrated social cohesion into his functionalist theory of society, viewing it as essential to maintaining systemic equilibrium.

In contrast, Bordieu [32] reframed social cohesion as a form of power embedded in social capital, symbolic resources, and relational networks. Even in his early fieldwork, Bourdieu challenged functionalist assumptions by emphasising the material and environmental conditions that shape social cohesion. His 1958 study of the Mozabite community in Algeria showed how climatic hardship required strong cooperation to sustain the irrigation system [33]. Rather than a product of shared norms, social cohesion was rooted in practical interdependence and structured inequality.

Bourdieu moves away from classical theories by rejecting the view that social cohesion is rooted in normative consensus. Instead, he saw social cohesion as something shaped by people's relationships, social status, and access to influence and success within society [32, 33]. In his view, social cohesion is not inherently equal or inclusive; it can

reinforce the power of dominant groups by maintaining existing social hierarchies. This framing underscores that social cohesion can take different forms across different groups, in ways that remain underexplored. It may foster belonging within groups that produce harmful political outcomes, such as gangs or extremist networks, while simultaneously marginalising those excluded from dominant systems. Rather than viewing social cohesion as inherently positive or unifying, this review approaches it as a contested and uneven process. This distinction is critical: it challenges the normative, value-laden definitions used in policy discourse and adopts a perspective that challenges dominant assumptions, one that recognises social cohesion can also be mobilised in ways that work against broader positive democratic or societal goals.

This perspective reflects debates about the fragmented nature of social cohesion theory.Lockwood [30] argues that social cohesion was treated as something the state could manage in isolation. Today, however, it is seen as emerging from interactions across multiple levels such as micro (people in neighbourhoods), meso (schools or government agencies), and macro levels (government or society as a whole). While some scholars argue that democratic, inclusive policymaking can foster social cohesion [34], others see societies as influenced by opaque mechanisms such as organised crime or obscure online actors difficult to trace but that create political and social harm [13]. As Lockwood [30] notes, the design of policy instruments has similarly evolved, shifting from a state-centric, top-down model to a more fragmented process involving multiple actors, including governments at all levels, private entities, and community-based organisations.

More recent scholars have extended these critiques by arguing that classical models, while appropriate for their time, offer limited guidance in contexts shaped by cultural hyper-diversity, transnational mobility, and globalised media. These earlier frameworks assumed a level of social homogeneity that no longer reflects contemporary societal conditions. Bernard [13] characterises social cohesion as a "quasi-concept" stretched to accommodate shifting policy agendas, and insists that any meaningful definition must grapple with the inherent tension between liberty and equality in democratic settings. Chan [3] similarly calls for greater conceptual clarity, arguing that many studies conflate social cohesion with its causes (like economic opportunity) or its outcomes (like reduced crime), rather than defining it as a distinct, measurable construct in its own right. Similarly, Friedkin [35] argues that as social cohesion has come to include a wide range of dimensions, such as identity, trust, and solidarity, the concept has become overly broad and inconsistently applied, resulting in conceptual drift across disciplines. Building on these critiques, scholars

such as Fonseca [15], writing from a European context, and Spoonley [21], focused on New Zealand, argue that contemporary social cohesion must be rethought to account for the realities of globalised, pluralistic societies. In both cases, they emphasise how intersecting group identities, shifting power structures, and contested notions of belonging challenge earlier, more homogeneous models of cohesion.

Many academic texts are either silent on definitions of social cohesion [36, 37], overly normative [38–40], or idealized to the point of overlooking the tensions that come with diversity and conflict between groups [1, 41, 42]. While aspirational definitions may be inspiring, they fail to reflect contemporary tensions, such as those introduced by growing polarization and post-pandemic political mistrust [21]. This challenge is exemplified in New Zealand's official social cohesion strategy, Te Korowai Whetū (2022), which draws from Jane Jenson's Canadian model developed during a time of neoliberal immigration reform [14, 43]. While useful in the 1990s when the North American Free Trade Agreement, which was going to increase immigration dramatically, critics argue it lacks responsiveness to today's demographic realities, including ageing populations, housing unaffordability, and changing patterns of social participation. In contrast, Chan [3] offers a definition grounded in empirical research that better suits the pluralistic, rapidly shifting context of Aotearoa. It focuses less on symbolic unity and more on tangible conditions, such as institutional trust and trust between groups [44, 45].

Given the theoretical challenges in defining social cohesion across the literature, this review anchors its analysis in a single working definition for two reasons. First, it highlights a definition that this review considers less normative and more relevant to addressing today's political tensions. Second, it establishes a system boundary necessary for developing the CLD. In complex systems theory, defining system boundaries allows for consistent analysis and the identification of key constructs and relationships [28], even within literature that does not explicitly define its work in terms of relationships or specific constructs. The research team must make informed assumptions about underlying constructs that the scholarship does not make explicit. A clear, theoretically grounded definition supports that process. Without such a scaffold, the conceptual drift in the literature would make meaningful synthesis difficult. The goal here is not to resolve every conceptual disagreement but to select a definition that is analytically robust and aligned with the review's working hypothesis: that social cohesion is not inherently positive or normatively stable but shaped by context-dependent actors. To support this, the review adopts the widely cited framework developed by Chan [3], who describes social cohesion as:

> Social cohesion is a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society, as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging, and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioral manifestations [3, p. 290].

Drawing on Chan [3], this framework retains the distinction between horizontal cohesion (trust between groups) and vertical cohesion (trust between groups and the state), while extending it in three key ways to support the present analysis. First, it adopts a group-based lens that foregrounds how social cohesion is patterned by divisions such as ethnicity, tenure, and economic status. Second, it situates social cohesion within the design and implementation of policy instruments, particularly those related to housing, as active forces shaping different social cohesion dimensions such as inclusion, exclusion, and institutional legitimacy. Third, it incorporates both subjective dimensions (e.g., belonging, perceived fairness) and objective indicators (e.g., participation rates, housing access) to reflect the multiple ways social cohesion is experienced and measured across the literature.

3 Methodology

This literature review adopts a multimethodology approach [46], drawing on methods from different theoretical perspectives to address the complex nature of the housing policy instruments and social cohesion literature [47]. Multimethodology, as defined by Mingers [46], involves ”combining more than one method, wholly or in part, within a single research intervention,” and is particularly well suited for ”the analysis of complex situations where there are divergent views about the definition of the problem” (p. 1151).

In this literature review, reflexive thematic analysis is paired with complex systems methods to inform the development of a thematic literature review and a CLD. A systematic literature review using a structured search strategy and clear inclusion criteria (most cited and most recent) provided the empirical base [48, 49]. These texts were analysed using NVivo and reflexive thematic analysis [50], supported by memo-centric coding to surface patterns [51], contradictions, and blind spots. Insights were then translated into a CLD through iterative coding and synthesis [52]. Grounded in complex system theory [53] and concepts such as plasticity and relationality [29], this methodology offers a novel way to review this multidisciplinary field. The coding outputs and CLD backbone are openly available as a dataset [54], deposited in Zenodo https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17050973. This file contains the constructs, coded connections, and feedback loops used to build the CLD,

ensuring transparency and reproducibility.

3.1 Literature Review Search Strategy

To navigate the fragmented and siloed disciplinary literature on housing policy instruments and social cohesion, a structured Literature Review Search Strategy (LRSS) was developed [55]. The LRSS aim is to establish a reproducible system boundary within the rich scholarship spanning sociology, public policy, and housing studies, both within Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally.

To ensure analytical rigour and reproducibility, two primary inclusion criteria were applied during the screening process: the most recent and the most cited articles. These criteria were chosen for both practical and theoretical reasons. First, given ' the fast-evolving nature of global political, economic, and technological contexts, recent publications were prioritised to ensure the analysis reflected contemporary scholarship. Second, citation frequency was used as a proxy for scholarly influence and field relevance, helping to identify works that have meaningfully shaped current debates. This dual approach balanced temporal relevance with disciplinary impact, offering a dataset that was both current and grounded in widely acknowledged scholarship. While other criteria, such as methodological quality or geographic focus, or theory vs. empirical, could have been applied, these were noted at the coding stage rather than used to exclude, to preserve thematic heterogeneity and support broader systems mapping.

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), as articulated by Braun and Clarke [56], was selected for its compatibility with this literature review's transdisciplinary commitment to complex system methods. Given the interpretive work required to identify constructs, assumptions, and relationships within the literature to develop the CLD, RTA provided the necessary methodological flexibility and subjectivity to support this process, acknowledging the researcher's active role in meaning-making. Our position as a reflexive, transdisciplinary research team was not a bias to be minimised but a resource for insight, consistent with Braun and Clarke [56] emphasis on the researcher as "the analytic instrument." This approach also resonated with the plasticity and diagrammatic logic [29], explored later in the CLD, where themes are treated not as fixed codes but as relational. Searches were conducted across Scopus, ProQuest, Index New Zealand, and Policy Commons, yielding over 12,000 initial results. From these, 150 core texts were selected based on the most recent and most cited across subjects from sociology, housing design, and policy. The review found a lack of clear links between specific housing policies and core elements of social cohesion like trust, fairness,

and belonging. This gap, particularly in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, became a key point of entry for this study's methodological and theoretical design.

3.2 Thematic Analysis and Reflexive Coding

Texts were analysed using RFT in NVivo, underpinned by a memo-centric analytic practice [51]. As Mihas [51] described, memo writing served as a primary analytic mechanism, enabling both centrifugal exploration (moving away from pre-structured categories) and centripetal synthesis (drawing together emergent thematic cohesion), which works well when thinking about this literature review from a complex systems lens. For example, centrifugal thinking happened when we noticed unexpected links between urban zoning and ideas about belonging and identity. We then used centripetal thinking to bring those insights back into conversation with existing concepts of social cohesion, helping to shape themes that were both grounded and open to new academic and theoretical possibilities. This ongoing process treated memos as a space for reflection, where uncertainty and complexity weren't problems to solve but sought-out parts of the analysis. This helped keep the method consistent with the literature review, added value, and stayed focused on relationships and complexity.

3.3 Diagramming Complexity Through Causal Loop Modelling

Given the conceptual sprawl and internal contradictions across the literature on social cohesion and housing policy, traditional thematic synthesis alone was insufficient to capture the systemic dynamics at play [29, 57]. To address this, a method grounded in complex systems theory was adopted to visualise how constructs such as trust, belonging, and legitimacy relate to one another across sources [29, 58, 59]. This approach builds on Yearworth [47] who argues that CLDs bring "dynamic sensibility" to qualitative research by allowing causal relationships and systemic behaviours to be surfaced systematically through coding structures.

Initially, four concepts (social cohesion, policy instruments, institutions, and groups) were adapted from Chan [3]. However, as the complexity of the literature became more apparent, this structure proved too limiting. We moved away from predefined concepts and instead used NVivo matrix coding queries to identify key constructs based on patterns of co-occurrence across the literature [47].

Constructs were identified through NVivo coding queries, highlighting co-occurrence patterns between housing policy instruments and dimensions of social cohesion. Rather than

relying solely on thematic "hot spots" or frequency counts, the process focused on relationships between constructs. Notably, constructs related to neighbourhood dynamics, perceived threat, and relational equity emerged across many sources and were mapped into loops. Since most studies did not explicitly describe system-level connections, linkages were inferred through close reading, systems reasoning, and the researchers' knowledge [56, 58]. Ambiguous or overlapping terms were clarified or collapsed to address the conceptual slippage and instability noted in both cross-cultural research [28] and national frameworks such as Te Korowai Whetū [60]. Rather than treating contradictions around inclusion, identity, or trust as flaws, they were seen as signs of complexity, revealing fractures in the scholarship and highlighting areas where further theoretical development is needed [53].

Importantly, contradictions in the literature, such as whether diversity fosters or fragments cohesion [61, 62], or whether economic growth enhances equity [53] or inequity [63], were not treated as flaws. Instead, they signalled points of theoretical tension and uncertainty. Coding saturation was reached when newly reviewed studies reinforced rather than expanded core feedback structures. The resulting model comprises 40 constructs and 60+ feedback loops.

4 Thematic Literature Review

This section presents four themes: (1) neighbourhood dynamics, (2) power and groups, (3) housing policy mess, and (4) measuring social cohesion. These were selected based on the density of the most frequently coded nodes in Nvivo. Each theme represents a distinct but interconnected strand in the housing policy and social cohesion nexus, capturing areas of academic consensus and sites of disciplinary tension or omission.

4.1 Neighbourhood Dynamics

The theme of neighbourhood dynamics explores how the literature claims that housing policies shape the conditions through which people experience social cohesion in the areas where they live. Drawing on Chan [3] definition, where social cohesion is characterised by horizontal and vertical interactions, this theme interrogates how neighbourhoods function as lived environments [64], statistical proxies [42], and policy targets [65]. In the social cohesion literature, neighbourhoods are used as proxy units, with social cohesion inferred from indicators such as knowing one's neighbours or participating in local schools

[66, 67]. In housing studies, neighbourhoods appear as spatial configurations shaped by density, tenure, and design, yet there is limited clarity about how specific policy instruments enhance trust between groups or trust in government within these spaces [68, 69]. Policy texts tend to frame neighbourhoods as sites of intervention, zones where social cohesion can be technically engineered, assumed, or measured. Synthesising insights from the NVivo coding, this theme highlights that neighbourhoods are not neutral containers of social life but debated terrains where belonging, trust, and visibility are continually negotiated.

These differences are theoretical as well as practical; they shape how neighbourhood cohesion is studied, measured, and acted upon across the literature. In housing research, neighbourhoods are both material and emotional terrains, where design, tenure, and spatial form influence belonging and support structures. For example, concepts like "place attachment" and "sense of place" are linked to public housing and placemaking strategies [70, 71] while regeneration efforts are shown to disrupt existing attachments and displace long-term residents [72, 73]. In sociology, neighbourhoods are debated spaces shaped by class, race, and spatial exclusion. Studies emphasise how social cohesion may entrench exclusion or impose majority norms, particularly in marginalised communities [74, 75]. Here, social cohesion is interrogated, not assumed. In policy discourse, neighbourhoods appear as administrative or statistical zones, units of intervention where social cohesion is treated as a measurable output [12, 16, 76]. Each lens captures a partial truth within disciplinary confines, but together they suggest that neighbourhoods are best understood as complex interfaces where power, identity, and infrastructure converge.

Neighbourhood dynamics emerge across the sociology [1], policy [77], and urban design [64] literature as a central mechanism through which housing policy shapes an aspirational definition of social cohesion. Studies consistently identify neighbourhood-level social cohesion as a protective force linked to well-being, housing stability, and informal support [78]. Solidarity, trust, and social networks are shown to buffer against loneliness and material hardship, particularly for low-income families, sole parents, and migrants [45, 79, 80]. These micro-social ties operate as informal systems of resilience, especially in contexts where institutional support is limited or absent.

Yet social cohesion is far from guaranteed. Other studies highlight how housing interventions, especially high-density, formal developments or urban regeneration, can fragment community ties. Koesoemawati [81] and Haigh [82] describe housing environments where neighbours withdrew from communal life, resulting in what were described as "communities

without closeness." Regeneration schemes, even when framed as revitalisation, sometimes fracture long-standing social relationships or displace residents altogether, weakening place attachment and undermining local trust [70, 83]. These cases suggest that spatial design alone is insufficient to generate social cohesion. What matters is how it interacts with cultural familiarity, tenure security, and community histories.

Indeed, the literature points to tenure as a critical, if overlooked, structure of social cohesion [84, 85]. Public housing tenants may experience higher subjective well-being than private renters, but only under conditions of stability, neighbourhood suitability, and local trust [18, 71, 86]. Where these are absent, even well-designed environments can foster insecurity and isolation [1, 87, 88]. Moreover, social cohesion is not always inclusive. As Forrest and Kearns observe, "strongly cohesive neighbourhoods could conflict with one another and contribute to a divided and fragmented city" [1, see p. 23] In this sense, social cohesion can act as a boundary, reinforcing exclusion along lines of race, class, or tenure status. For Māori and Pacific renters, social cohesion is undermined by experiences of stigma, racism, and discrimination, leading to withdrawal from neighbourhood life and diminished trust in both neighbours and institutions [44, 76].

These findings reinforce that bonds to place, familiarity, and cultural resonance are essential to the sense of being 'at home' in a neighbourhood [70, 89–91]. Policies that ignore these affective dimensions risk producing technically efficient policy but with socially fragile outcomes. Some studies extend this analysis by framing neighbourhoods as arenas of civic engagement, where mutual aid, local participation, and place-based organising thrive, but only when underpinned by trust and inclusion [41, 92, 93].

4.2 Power and Groups

Power and groups emerged as a central and under-theorised theme across the transdisciplinary literature [91, 94]. While the concept of "power" is invoked frequently, particularly in discussions of exclusion and group conflict, it is seldom explicitly defined, measured, or treated as a core analytic category. According to Chan [3], social cohesion involves both horizontal and vertical relationships, structured by trust, belonging, and participation. However, the literature rarely interrogates how these relationships are mediated by power, who gets to belong, who is blamed for fragmentation, and how legitimacy is assigned or withheld by institutions. Across the coded material, power surfaced in how particular groups, especially renters, Māori and Pacific peoples, gang-affiliated individuals, and those in transitional housing, were positioned in public narratives, policy interven-

tions, and academic analyses, typically as powerless or dependent, at times pathologised as risks to cohesion, and rarely afforded agency or recognised as active participants in shaping housing outcomes [95–97].

In the sociological literature, power is framed relationally, embedded in discourses of normativity, respectability, and institutional surveillance [42, 98]. Social cohesion is not neutrally distributed but actively mediated by structures of race, class, gender, and settler-colonial power [38]. In this framing, social cohesion is achieved through conformity to dominant norms, where difference becomes a source of risk or disorder. Groups such as youth or low-income renters are often rendered hyper-visible in policy discourse as objects of discipline, while dominant identities remain unmarked and unexamined [99]. These critiques reject the assumption that social cohesion is a universal good, instead framing it as a negotiated and contentious outcome, shaped by unequal power relations, dominant norms, and standard institutional exclusions.

The housing literature, by contrast, tends to approach power indirectly, most often through case studies of regeneration, displacement, and tenure hierarchies. Power becomes visible in decisions about who stays and who moves, whose preferences shape the built environment, and whose voices are heard in redevelopment processes [38, 82, 100]. This research demonstrates that spatial arrangements and tenure systems reproduce inequality, often privileging homeowners over renters and long-term residents over newcomers. Regeneration is frequently framed as progress or renewal, yet it often displaces marginalised communities under the guise of modernisation or safety.

In the policy literature, power is frequently depoliticised. Social cohesion and housing stability are presented as universally beneficial goals achievable through technical intervention [21, 101, 102]. Several studies draw on Schneider [103] theory of target population construction to show how groups such as Māori and Pacific families, especially those associated with gangs, are framed as morally suspect, while Pākehā residents (New Zealanders of European descent) are positioned as deserving and at risk [99]. Public discourse around gang housing, for example, racialises Māori men as threats to safety, justifying surveillance and displacement while casting white residents as in need of protection. Such narratives reproduce settler-colonial logic beneath the rhetoric of fairness and social cohesion.

Even within participatory or co-design models, power often remains unbalanced. Several studies note that community development initiatives presume shared voice or equal input, despite marginalised groups frequently lacking real influence [70, 104]. Māori participants, in particular, were sometimes included in consultation processes that failed to

uphold Treaty obligations or deliver meaningful tino rangatiratanga [95, 105]. In these contexts, participation is symbolic rather than transformative, used to legitimise decisions already made.

The literature also reveals important contradictions. While some studies celebrate participatory housing or co-designed planning as inclusive governance [106], others frame these same processes as tokenistic, especially when Māori and Pacific involvement occurs only after design choices are finalised [98]. "Community" itself becomes a controversial idea, used to justify both investment in place-based social cohesion and the policing of so-called anti-social behavior [107]. These contradictions imply that social cohesion is not a neutral endpoint but a political construct that reflects unresolved tensions in pluralistic, postcolonial societies.

4.3 Housing Policy Mess

The "housing policy mess" theme encapsulates the entrenched tension between housing's omnipresence in public debate and its lack of conceptual coherence. Across headlines, manifestos, and government action, housing is a perennial "crisis," endlessly recast as a problem of supply, cost, taxation, or governance [98, 108]. Yet, this visibility conceals an unresolved fragmentation: there is no consensus on what constitutes the housing problem, who suffers its consequences, or which solutions count as legitimate [16, 86]. Scholars have noted that this fragmentation is not unique to New Zealand; complex, multidimensional housing systems resist neat categorisation, particularly where multiple disciplines, competing political ideologies, and layered inequalities shape both policy and perception [1, 98]. This conceptual and practical messiness is therefore not a shortcoming of scholarship or policy, but a fundamental characteristic of the field, a core finding that validates the need for more systematic analysis [11, 12].

Importantly, this lived complexity is not unique to New Zealand. International case studies reinforce that "housing mess" is endemic. For example, the Norwegian Refugee Council's Urban Shelter Programme in Jordan, one of the most widely studied humanitarian housing interventions, demonstrates how incentives for local landlords can both solve immediate shelter crises for refugees and temporarily foster trust and mutual benefit between native and refugee communities [38]. Yet these gains are precarious, remaining highly vulnerable to political shifts, resource constraints, and broader social tensions. Evaluations of the programme highlight that while secure, subsidised shelter and formalised rental agreements can facilitate short-term improvements in both vertical (trust in institutions) and horizontal

(trust among neighbours) cohesion, longer-term effects are tenuous and easily disrupted by changes in national policy, funding priorities, or local grievances [38].

Similarly, the evidence base on mixed-tenure and mixed-density housing is highly nuanced. While such policies are widely assumed to enhance social cohesion by integrating diverse income and tenure groups, empirical studies from Australia, Europe, and the UK show that outcomes are deeply contingent: in some contexts, mixing may foster greater social connectedness, but in others, it can reinforce internal stigmatisation, property-based hierarchies, and conflict across social boundaries [73, 91]. Some research finds that design choices, such as clustering social housing separately, providing distinct entrances, or failing to address underlying power dynamics, can actually exacerbate division and diminish trust or belonging rather than ameliorate it [70, 109]. Moreover, there remains a lack of consensus on whether mixed-tenure models intrinsically build cohesion or simply add additional sites for contestation over identity, deservingness, and space [1, 98].

Chan [3] and subsequent research in social cohesion [30, 41] have highlighted the limitations inherent in policy interventions, emphasising that social cohesion is not an automatic or guaranteed outcome of technical fixes or increased housing supply, but is a process negotiated through interactions of inclusion and exclusion. In the context of New Zealand, this difficulty is illustrated by ongoing struggles with tenure insecurity, systemic inequities, and persistent cultural marginalisation, particularly among Māori and Pacific peoples [20, 98, 110], demonstrating how efforts designed to promote social cohesion dimensions are entangled with these underlying issues. These factors shape individual experiences of housing and influence social cohesion within communities, impacting trust, participation, and the realisation of social rights [70, 111].

Across the housing scholarship, different disciplines bring distinctive assumptions and epistemologies that shape how housing policy is framed and implemented. In the field of public health and housing studies, the emphasis tends to be on material outcomes, such as the quality, affordability, and security of housing, and their direct connections to health, wellbeing, and, at times, neighbourhood ties. This body of work highlights how homeownership, rental precarity, and tenure insecurity both reflect and reproduce patterns of social stratification, with policy discourse often reverting to moral distinctions between the "deserving" and "undeserving" [76, 86, 110].

By contrast, in the policy and economic literature, housing is more often conceptualised as a technical system to be optimised for affordability, supply, or efficiency. Within this framing, programmatic success is typically measured in quantitative outputs such as units

built, price-to-income ratios, or vacancy rates, with far less attention given to the social meanings or embedded power relations that shape who benefits from these measures. In this view, social cohesion is rarely made an explicit policy goal; rather, it is treated as an assumed by-product of market efficiency or managerial reform [11, 16].

Meanwhile, urban planning and design research foregrounds what might be called the inherent "messiness" of the spatial and organisational dimensions of housing policy. Here, debates about density exemplify the tensions in the field: higher-density living is alternately celebrated as a catalyst for neighbourhood vibrancy and castigated as a driver of social alienation. Yet much of this discussion overlooks the decisive role of design and management practices in determining whether density fosters interaction or entrenches segregation. Research in this tradition underscores that spatial configuration, street layout, and the positioning of public and semi-public spaces can tilt outcomes towards either social connection or fragmentation [1, 81]. Taken together, these perspectives show that housing policy cannot be understood through a single lens.

Against this backdrop of fragmentation in housing policy and practice, several cross-cutting patterns emerge which help to anchor the complexity and point to recurring concerns. The first concerns affordability and inclusion. Policies such as rent controls, subsidies, and affordable housing programmes. For example, the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit is often positioned as a tool to build cohesion, yet its effects on belonging, trust, or participation remain context-dependent and, in many cases, insufficiently theorised [67, 98]. Affordability in this sense is not reducible to the cost of shelter; rather, it mediates access to networks, social participation, and opportunities to contribute to community life [16, 111].

A second common thread relates to tenure security and stability. Secure rental arrangements and pathways to homeownership are consistently associated with greater residential stability and, through this, increased opportunities for the formation of social networks and civic engagement [16, 19]. However, stability cannot be taken as an automatic driver of cohesion, as evidenced by the continued marginalisation and stigmatisation of certain groups, who may remain excluded or silenced within their communities even when adequately housed [20, 98].

Closely related is the potential of inclusive and culturally grounded housing models to redress historical and structural harms. Mixed-income, intergenerational, and culturally specific models such as papakāinga for Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand are frequently cited for their ability to foster inclusion, belonging, and reciprocity. Yet, the literature issues strong cautions: without deliberate incorporation of community voices and sustained at-

tention to power asymmetries, such interventions risk becoming superficial, symbolic, or even counterproductive [21, 112, 113].

A fourth pattern centres on urban design and accessibility, reflecting the spatial conditions under which cohesion is either enabled or undermined. Design features such as walkability, well-planned defensible space, and the provision of well-located public amenities are often cited as prerequisites for fostering everyday interaction and mutual surveillance [81, 114]. The question of density illustrates the contingent nature of these effects: while higher density, when intentionally designed, can support vibrant social exchange, it can also entrench segregation, anonymity, or conflict if implemented without attention to accessibility, quality, and the lived practices of residents [41].

Finally, there is a consistent emphasis on community engagement and legitimacy in the policy process. Across diverse settings, the degree to which communities are actively involved in housing policy design and implementation emerges as a key determinant of both the perceived legitimacy and the actual effectiveness of interventions [70, 115]. Where communities perceive themselves to be excluded from decision-making – or where policy processes fail to account for cultural fit or historical injustices, as in the case of Māori–Crown relations, patterns of distrust and fragmentation tend to deepen [92, 98].

This messiness demonstrates that housing policy arenas are not merely technical or managerial domains but active sites of political, ideological, and social struggle [1, 98]. The absence of clean, positive outcomes is not evidence of policy failure per se but a reflection of the controversial nature of housing's role in shaping, enabling, or obstructing social cohesion through different policy instruments, where choices about who is responsible for what and who is entitled to what come into political focus.

4.4 Measuring Social Cohesion

While policy frameworks and academic models call for measurable indicators, scholars question whether current approaches reduce cohesion to static metrics or inadequate proxies [62, 74]. In policy literature, social cohesion is commonly operationalised through dashboards tracking well-being, inclusion, participation, and trust. New Zealand's Te Korowai Whetū framework, for example, combines subjective and objective indicators and incorporates diverse stakeholder voices, including Māori, Pacific, and disabled communities [14].

These indicators include trust in institutions, sense of belonging, and perceptions of safety, dimensions widely accepted as proxies for social cohesion. However, policy actors acknowl-

edged the limitations of current measurement tools. Many indicators lack the granularity to capture intersectional disadvantage or reflect cultural meanings of social cohesion that fall outside dominant paradigms [14, 71]. For example, standardised national surveys struggle to represent the experiences of multi-ethnic or intergenerational households or the particular forms of exclusion experienced by renters, youth, or disabled people [14, 102].

The literature was more critical of the project of measuring social cohesion. Bernard [13] argued that social cohesion had become a "quasi-concept," overextended, politically co-opted, and used to obscure structural conflict under the language of harmony. Chan [3] similarly cautioned against confusing the causes and effects of social cohesion, noting that many indicators measure associated outcomes rather than social cohesion itself. This critique is reinforced by Friedkin [35], who argued that the multidimensional nature of social cohesion, including psychological attachment, trust, and collective efficacy, makes any attempt at clean quantification reductive. For these scholars, measurement does not represent social cohesion; it reshapes it, in ways that obscure conflict, difference, and power.

From a housing perspective, social cohesion was often inferred through spatial or relational proxies, such as neighbourhood satisfaction, tenure mix, or levels of resident interaction. Some studies, such as Baek [45], linked perceived social cohesion in subsidised housing to reduced loneliness and increased well-being. However, other research critiqued the assumption that social cohesion could be deduced from static features like density or design. For instance, while formal housing developments might report high levels of satisfaction, this often masks deeper experiences of isolation, marginalisation, or surveillance, particularly for renters, young people, or gang-affiliated tenants. These contradictions raise questions about the adequacy of current indicators to capture dynamic or negative forms of social cohesion, such as conformity under pressure, exclusion masked as harmony, or surveillance justified in the name of community.

These disciplinary framings highlight a core tension. In policy contexts, social cohesion must be rendered legible through data, dashboards, and evidence-based funding. Yet in academic and lived realities, social cohesion is messy, emerging through processes that defy simple measurement. This tension is not easily resolved. While measurement offers legitimacy, comparability, and policy traction, it can also flatten the complexity it seeks to represent. Several scholars have called for reflexive measurement approaches, ones that acknowledge their political assumptions, involve diverse communities in indicator design, and treat social cohesion not as a fixed variable but as an evolving system of relationships, feedbacks, and contradictions [14, 116].

5 Discussion

This section interprets the findings in light of the broader literature on social cohesion and housing policy. The aim is to consider how the CLD reshapes existing debates and what insights emerge from the thematic analysis. The aim of this discussion is to return to the literature after constructing the CLD, drawing on the memos that shaped the thematic analysis and integrating different strands of the review to reach more meaningful conclusions. Because the literature produced diverse and often competing results, this section offers reflections that connect themes with underlying assumptions, with the insights revealed through the CLD. First, the CLD is examined through three representative feedback loops—belonging, homelessness, and conflict, that illustrate the broader systemic dynamics identified. Second, the literature review is revisited through the lens of assumptions and theoretical tensions that emerged after conducting both the CLD and thematic analysis, revealing how these methodological approaches illuminate aspects of the housing and social cohesion scholarship that linear analysis might miss.

5.1 What the CLD Reveals

Constructing the CLD enhanced the literature review from a traditional thematic analysis into a complex system map that reveals how constructs interact, reinforce, and contradict each other across transdisciplinary boundaries [57]. The CLD traces how different constructs identified in the literature review interact and are theorized within an interdisciplinary scholarship. The CLD makes visible the underlying architecture of the literature, and it resists the logic of disciplinary separation; instead, it embraces the complexity of interdisciplinary inquiry, allowing new insights to emerge through connection and contradiction rather than filtering and simplification [27].

Beyond its analytical value, the CLD offers broader methodological applicability [52]. It provides a way to engage with complex social phenomena that are hard to define and measure, such as social cohesion and policy instruments [117, 118]. These problems are not easily captured through linear or categorical approaches [119]. As such, it holds promise for academic research and more relevant policy design, where understanding systemic interdependencies is crucial. In the context of housing and social cohesion, the CLD helps identify leverage points, unintended consequences, and areas of conceptual ambiguity that might otherwise remain hidden or under-explored, a potential that systems mapping scholars have noted in relation to complex social problems [120, 121].

The full model contains more than seventy loops. Given this scale, it is neither necessary nor analytically productive to present every loop in detail [122]. Instead, what follows is a deliberate selection of examples chosen to illustrate the analytical power and interpretive potential of the CLD [47]. Presenting the model through selected loops and constructs, centred views, as recommended in system dynamics and problem-structuring literature [57, 120] offers interpretable slices of the wider system while providing sufficient evidence to demonstrate the dynamics at play.

The CLD developed through this review is both a method and an output, what Freeman [29, p. 61] might describe as a way to ”represent discoveries, processes, procedures, explanations, and causal or noncausal sequences and relationships”. It brings into focus the conceptual ambiguity of a literature that spans sociology, political science, urban design, and public policy. All seeking to understand the interface between housing policy instruments and social cohesion.

The full model, shown in Figure 1 is dense. With more than forty constructs and over seventy loops, the diagram reflects the scale of the literature review and the epistemological diversity of the scholarship it integrates. This approach aligns with what Montuori [122, p. 45] calls the “ecology of ideas” inherent in transdisciplinary literature reviews. The CLD places the reader within a web of interconnected perspectives; it embraces the richness of cross-disciplinary thinking, allowing new insights to emerge through connection rather than separation.

Each functions as a lever of change: belonging activates trust [123] and dampens threat perceptions [124]; conflict destabilises social cohesion through institutional exclusion [62, 125]; and homelessness exposes the structural conditions that undermine stability and participation [18].

One of the most central constructs of the CLD is belonging, one that activates and shapes multiple feedback loops across the model. The construct diagram for belonging (Figure 2) reveals its centrality: it is densely connected to constructs such as vertical cohesion, perceived threat, health, participation, and housing stability. These connections reflect how belonging is theorised as something relevant to subjective dimensions such as the perception of being part of a group [97], to how diversity reduces a sense of belonging [61], to how housing affordability policies can enhance a sense of belonging [18]. Across the literature, belonging is consistently framed as a goal [30], something that emerges through trust, recognition, and participation [14], but also something that can be withdrawn or denied through exclusion, stigma, or displacement [126]. In the context of housing, be-

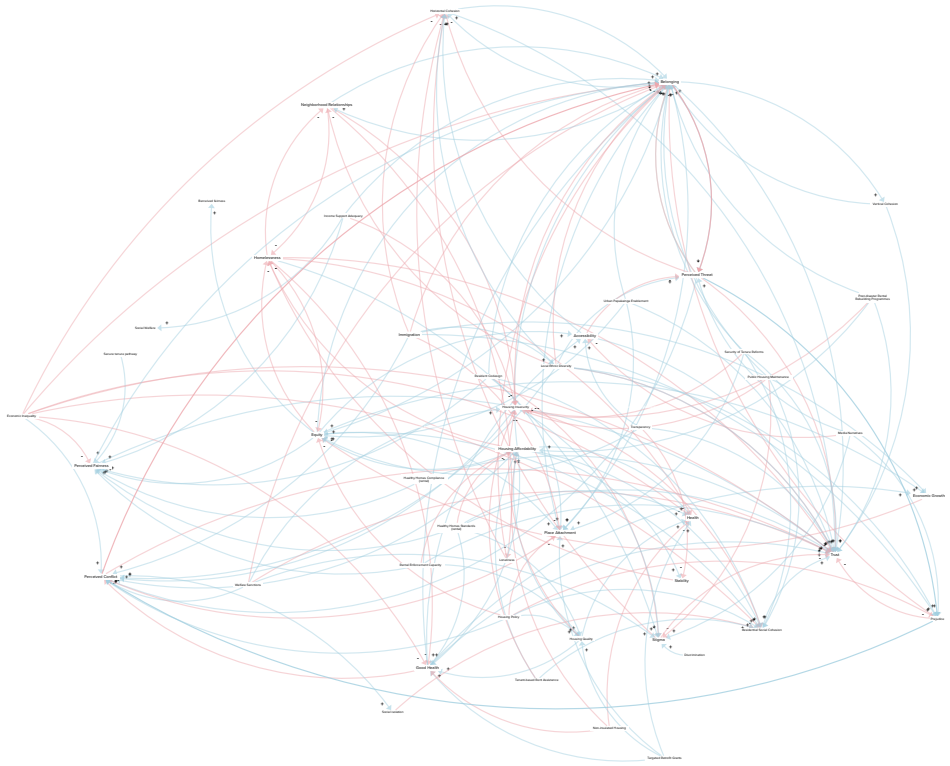

Figure 1: Full causal loop diagram of transdisciplinary literature.

longing is often tied to place attachment, cultural identity, and the ability to participate meaningfully in neighbourhood life [42, 107].

To begin unpacking the wider complexity of the CLD, we turn to two deceptively simple loops: Figure 3 and Figure 4, each centred on the construct of belonging, discussed above. Despite their minimal structure, these loops reveal how belonging operates as a cause that can increase institutional trust [127] or, if it is not addressed, could cause perceived threat between groups [128] . Figure 3 shows a direct reinforcing relationship between belonging and vertical cohesion, defined here as trust between groups and the state. When individuals feel a sense of belonging, they are more likely to trust institutions, perceive government actions as legitimate, and participate in civic life. This loop reflects Chan [3] emphasis on vertical cohesion as a core dimension of social cohesion and aligns with literature showing that certain housing policy instruments such as warm housing can foster institutional trust [71, 129].

In contrast, Figure 4 shows a balancing feedback: when perceived threat increases, belonging decreases [128], and lower belonging in turn reduces perceived threat [130]. This circular interaction dampens extremes, stabilising the relationship between belonging and threat. Conversely, fostering belonging moderates threat perceptions, reducing intergroup

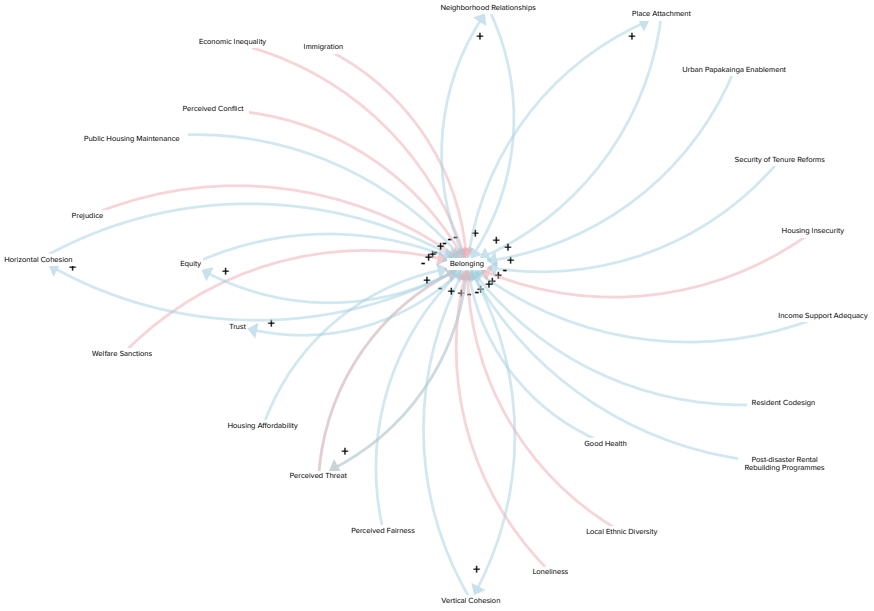

Figure 2: Construct diagram for Belonging showing its connections across the CLD.

conflict and enhancing horizontal cohesion, trust between groups. This dynamic is relevant in contexts of ethnic diversity and housing insecurity, where exclusion can quickly escalate into real conflict [74].

Figure 3: Belonging reinforces vertical cohesion (trust in institutions).

Figure 4: Belonging reduces perceived threat, enhancing horizontal cohesion (trust between groups).

While the earlier loops emphasised belonging, a social cohesion dimension within the CLD, Figure 3 and Figure 4 explore the other side of the literature review, housing elements. These loops show how homelessness and equity intersect with belonging and health. In both loops, homelessness erodes belonging and weakens health, while equity works in the opposite direction, strengthening both. Together, they highlight that social cohesion is about more than just generating trust or emphasising shared values [38]; it is about investing in infrastructure such as providing housing.

Figure 6 presents a balancing feedback structure: homelessness erodes a sense of belonging, which in turn improves equity and health. This loop reflects a well-documented dynamic in housing and public health literature: stable housing fosters a sense of place,

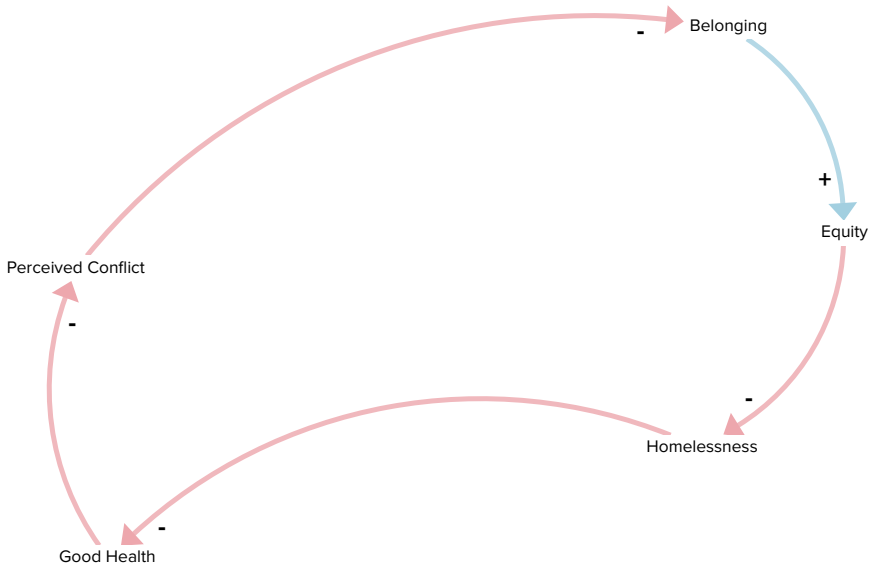

Figure 5: Housing insecurity, stigma, and homelessness erode belonging and health.

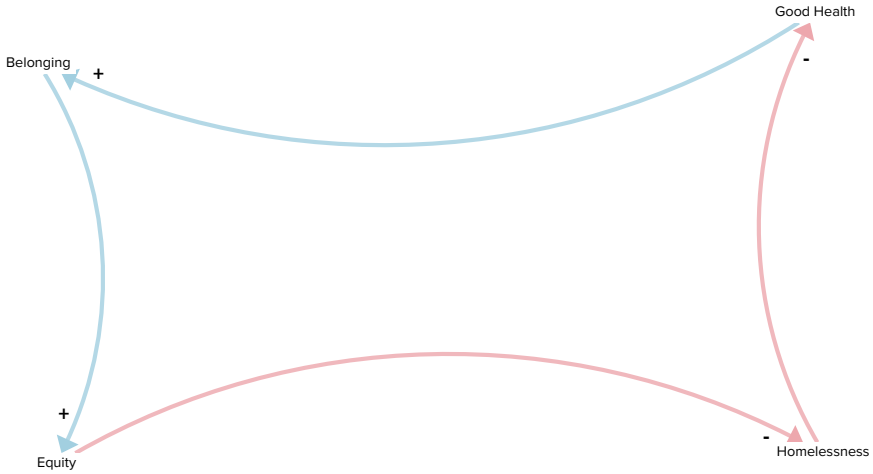

Figure 6: Belonging reduces homelessness, improving equity and health.

reduces psychosocial stress, and supports both physical and mental wellbeing [100, 131]. Belonging here is not just a feeling; it is a condition shaped by access to shelter, safety, and fairness [123]. When housing systems support belonging, they dampen the destabilising effects of homelessness and inequity, reinforcing system stability.

Figure 5, though more complex, reinforces this insight by showing how housing insecurity, stigma, and homelessness interact to erode belonging and health. This loop highlights the compounding effects of exclusion: when individuals experience housing insecurity, they are more likely to be stigmatised, which further undermines their sense of belonging and contributes to poor health outcomes. The loop reflects findings from studies on Māori and Pacific renters, who often face discrimination and spatial exclusion, leading to withdrawal

from neighbourhood life and diminished trust in institutions [98, 124].

Together, these loops underscore that belonging is not only a subjective element, it should be seen as something achieved through investment in infrastructure, such as housing; there is a cost to it. It is shaped by housing policy instruments that determine who is housed, how, and under what conditions. These loops also reinforce the argument that social cohesion cannot be strengthened through aspirational policy goals alone; it requires material interventions such as expanding public housing to reduce homelessness and crowding, strengthening security of tenure in rental markets, ensuring healthy, warm, and dry homes, and investing in neighbourhood regeneration that builds safety and social capital [19, 132].

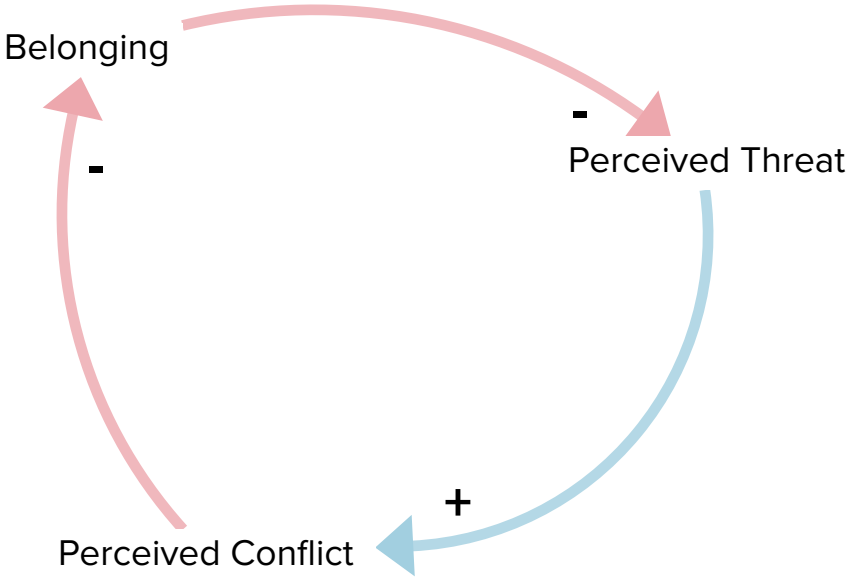

Figure 7: Perceived conflict, threat, and belonging.

This section below will highlight the perceived conflict construct, showing a loop and a construct within the CLD. Figure 7 and figure 8 highlight the destabilising role of conflict and perceived threat. The construct 8 highlights how conflict narratives interact with debates about health [133], place attachment [44] and welfare policies [134], and how Māori and Pacific communities are often framed as "threats" in housing discourse [128].

Kate [125] extend this insight in their study of refugee communities, showing that conflicts are not inherent to diversity but emerge from structural mismatches between communities' culturally embedded conflict-resolution practices and the host society's monocultural

Figure 8: Perceived Conflict

institutions. Their findings underline that perceptions of refugees as "sources of disorder" arise less from cultural incompatibility than from institutional failures to accommodate plural ways of managing disputes. When read against the CLD, this suggests that "perceived conflict" is not a neutral attitudinal variable but a systemic effect: it is produced through the interplay of inequality, housing insecurity, and institutional exclusion, and then amplified through narratives of cultural threat.

Figure 7 shows a reinforcing feedback between perceived conflict, threat, and belonging. When individuals perceive conflict, whether over housing, identity, or allocation of resources, they are more likely to feel threatened by other groups [82]. This perceived threat reduces trust, weakens a sense of belonging, and erodes horizontal and vertical cohesion [135]. The loop shows how housing debates often become proxies for deeper struggles over autonomy, legitimacy, and recognition.

For example, opposition to densification is frequently expressed through technical planning and fear of cultural displacement, particularly among communities that already feel excluded from decision making. This dynamic aligns with research showing that legitimacy and perceived exclusion are central determinants of whether housing interventions are accepted or resisted [70]. At the neighbourhood level, densification and housing change can generate vibrancy but also trigger conflict, segregation, and alienation when institutional trust is weak [42].

Similar dynamics are observed in heritage and urban planning debates, where intensification can produce new social and economic value but also heighten environmental pressures, resource consumption, and the dilution of cultural identity. As Li [136] observe, "there is an increase in environmental pressure, excessive consumption of resources , and a dilution of the intrinsic historical value of heritage sites when they become popular leisure destinations" [137, p.197]. These struggles are further compounded by the ways housing debates become racialised and politicised, with particular groups stigmatised as "threats," a process that legitimises exclusionary policy and obscures underlying struggles over belonging and power [99].

Figure 9 focuses on the relationship between stigma, housing insecurity, and horizontal cohesion. It shows how stigma, particularly when attached to homelessness or marginalised tenures, functions as a boundary-making device. This legitimises surveillance, exclusion, and "social policing" of tenants, which corrodes neighbourhood relationships and reduces trust between groups [138, 139].

In settler-colonial contexts, these narratives often intersect with race and gender, framing Māori (and especially Māori women) as risky or undeserving, thereby normalising punitive tenancy control and public suspicion [99]. In the loop, this appears as a reinforcing mechanism: stigma reduces everyday contact and reciprocity, weakening horizontal cohesion (bonding/bridging ties), which in turn makes stigmatised groups more vulnerable to housing insecurity.

What is easy to miss is that the "fuel" for the stigma–insecurity spiral is developed through formal institutional norms such as competing policies in housing like wanting to have affordable housing, whilst also having sustainable housing [138]. New Zealand evidence shows persistent inequities in damp, cold, and crowded housing, with Māori and Pacific peoples disproportionately exposed [140]. These conditions are not neutral; they concentrate housing stress in already-stigmatised groups, making stigma appear commonsensical and further weakening neighbour trust [76]. In terms of the CLD, the material environment loads the loop with positive feedback: worse conditions create more visible "difference"/stress, that then creates more stigma, that creates thinner neighbourhood ties, which increases greater insecurity [76].

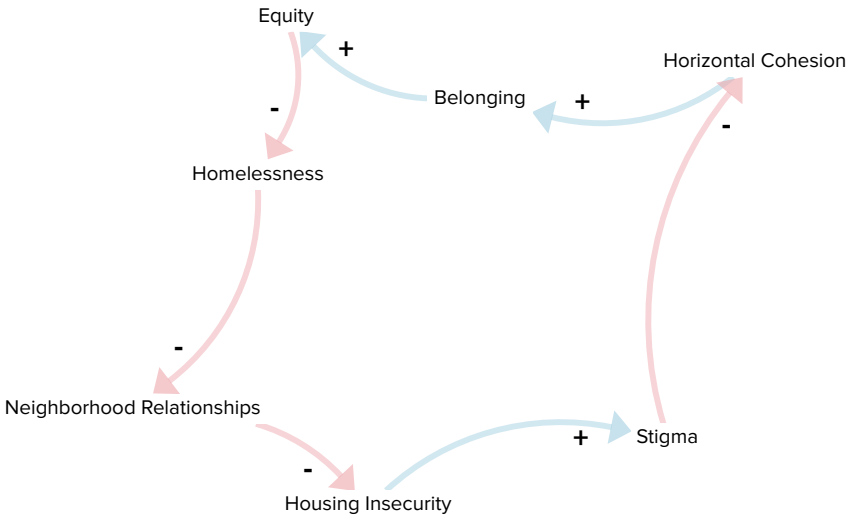

Figure 9: Stigma, housing insecurity, and equity.

Figure 10 highlights how loneliness is not simply a matter of individuals to manage, but a systemic outcome of housing conditions, neighbourhood relationships, and wider patterns of equity and exclusion. Research on subsidised housing shows that perceived social cohesion can act as a protective factor against loneliness, particularly for older immigrants and low-income groups, yet limited social networks and discrimination often heighten their risk of isolation [100]. In Aotearoa New Zealand, baseline indicators confirm that although many people report strong belonging and supportive social networks, loneliness is increasing and is experienced disproportionately by Māori, Pacific peoples, people with disabilities, migrants, and those in low-income households [88, 141].

This loop surfaces the hidden tension between neighbourhood cohesion and exclusion: housing can generate opportunities for local interaction, but overcrowding, insecure tenure, and homelessness corrode horizontal cohesion and weaken trust among neighbours [76, 79]. Engagements for the Te Korowai Whetū strategy emphasised that people who feel excluded from their communities, or who lack recognition of their intersecting identities, may act in ways that undermine social cohesion, reinforcing cycles of alienation and stigma [105]. Seen through the CLD, loneliness emerges as both a signal and a symptom: it signals systemic inequities in housing and access to supportive environments, and it is symptomatic of deeper failures of recognition, legitimacy, and participation.

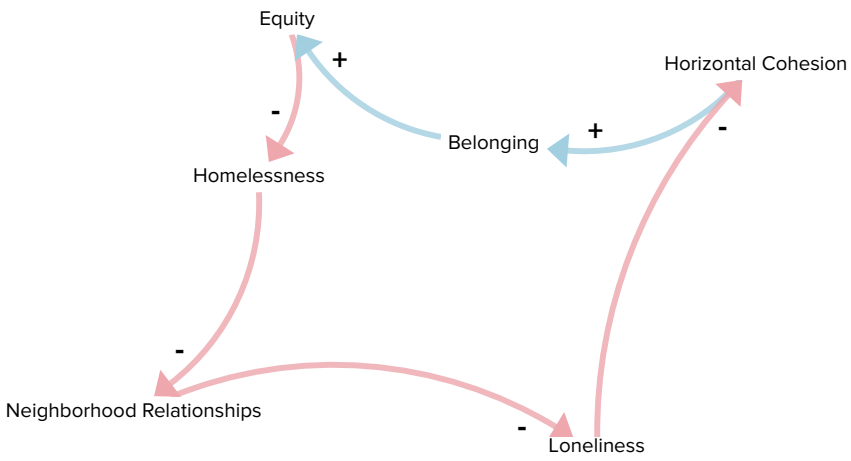

Figure 10: Loneliness, belonging, and homelessness.

5.2 Revisiting the Literature

The idea of social cohesion has generated conceptual uncertainty since Durkheim acknowledged in 1893 that it lacked a clear definition or means of measurement [142]. This review shows that the problem persists: social cohesion is framed, analysed, and politicised in ways that often obscure more than they reveal. In hyper-pluralistic societies, the absence of shared values makes the appeal to "lost traditions" unsustainable and even risky, as attempts to impose unanimity can undermine the very pluralism that sustains democratic life.

By developing a CLD as a tool, there is an opportunity to revisit the literature. Much of the scholarship continues to rely on abstract or normative definitions for social cohesion, treating it as an aspirational end-state rather than a complex systems process [63, 75]. By situating these definitions within a system of constructs and feedback loops, the CLD underscores how different disciplinary contributions highlight only fragments of a larger whole. For example, while sociological accounts emphasise trust, belonging, and social capital [3, 45], housing studies focus more directly on affordability, tenure security, and neighbourhood effects [19, 86]. Neither field alone captures the interactive mechanisms linking housing policy instruments to social cohesion. Revisiting the literature through this systems lens clarifies the areas of alignment, the silences, particularly around the mechanisms through which instruments produce distributive and symbolic effects [143, 144].

The breadth of material amassed under this theme, spanning 97 NVivo-coded pages, re-

flects both the importance of housing in debates about social cohesion [98, 111] and the lack of agreement about its boundaries, drivers, and implications [70]. The complexity identified is well established in complexity theory and systems analysis [122], which recognises that highly interconnected or "messy" systems resist reduction to simple, linear explanations. Rather than viewing fragmentation and conceptual overload as methodological shortcomings, the complex systems literature treats the act of mapping and narrating complexity itself as a valid scholarly outcome. As Bryne [145] and McGill [146] argue, the impossibility of a finite summary and the presence of unresolved tensions in a literature review warrant an approach that makes visible the uncomfortable terrain. Classic work in the field emphasises that, especially in domains such as housing and social policy, analytic frameworks must be capable of holding together contradiction, uncertainty, and plurality, rather than striving for deceptive simplicities or closure [145, 147].

In other jurisdictions where housing pressures and social cohesion debates intersect, similar mapping could reveal the assumptions underpinning policy debates and help identify leverage points for policymaking using innovative models to design [119, 148]. Moreover, by making explicit the interactions between housing policy instruments and social cohesion literature, the model provides a tool that can travel across contexts, while still requiring adaptation to local histories, institutions, and cultural perspectives [63, 149].

6 Conclusion

This review has traced the transdisciplinary scholarship on housing policy instruments and social cohesion and synthesized it into a CLD. Substantively, the thematic literature review surfaced four key strands. First, Neighbourhood Dynamics revealed how belonging, trust, and visibility are discussed at the local level, shaped as much by tenure security, stigma, and regeneration as by design and density. Second, Power and Groups highlighted how social cohesion is always entangled with inequality and exclusion, showing how dominant norms, institutional narratives, and racialised discourses shape who belongs and who is framed as a threat. Third, the analysis of the Housing Policy Mess underscored the endemic fragmentation and contradictions within housing, where interventions produce unintended consequences and conceptual ambiguity. Finally, Measuring Social Cohesion exposed deep epistemological and political tensions, as attempts to quantify social cohesion often flatten its richness.

Methodologically, this project advances how we conduct literature reviews of complex,

transdisciplinary topics. By combining NVivo-based reflexive coding, Excel as a transparent data backbone, and Kumu for systems mapping, it demonstrates a reproducible workflow for moving from text to system map. The decision to publish the coding outputs and CLD backbone as an open dataset further strengthens the transparency and rigour of this approach, offering other scholars a resource to adapt, contest, and extend.

For scholars, this synthesis highlights the value of interrogating policy instruments not only as technical fixes but as mechanisms that shape both material conditions and symbolic perceptions. For policymakers, it underscores the risks of adopting cohesion as a policy objective without grappling with the exclusions and contradictions embedded in existing frameworks.

Ultimately, the CLD does not resolve the tensions within the literature but renders them visible, supporting a more reflexive and context-sensitive approach to research and policy. This willingness to publish a working model, one that raises as many questions as it answers, is itself a scholarly contribution. In a rapidly changing, post-colonial society such as Aotearoa New Zealand, such visibility is critical. It opens up space for plural understandings of how we define, measure, and understand the idea of social cohesion, while identifying leverage points where housing policy instruments may either erode or foster the conditions necessary for a stable and equitable future in liberal democracies grappling with how to govern pluralistic societies through different policy instruments.

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