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To cite this article: Kirsi Juhila, Riikka Perälä, Lotta Sippola, Johanna Ranta & Veera Niemi (18 Jun 2025): Constructing residents' (un)deservingness and rights in the urban housing displacement processes, *Housing Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/02673037.2025.2517084](https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2025.2517084)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2025.2517084>



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Published online: 18 Jun 2025.



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Constructing residents' (un)deservingness and rights in the urban housing displacement processes

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ABSTRACT

This study examines four housing displacement cases in Finnish cities, based on interviews with the residents and other actors involved in the displacement processes. It integrates theories from the housing displacement and deservingness literature. It asks what kinds of discourses on the residents' deservingness and rights to housing and housing-related services are constructed in the interviews. The results demonstrate how binary discourses, namely 'they don't deserve better' and 'they deserve better' are constructed in the interviews, and how the residents' own talk reflects both discourses. The discourses resonate with the CARIN criteria established in previous studies on how people define deservingness, but their construction in the interviews was manifold, and were not confined to certain actors. The discourse that plays a dominant role is highly consequential for spatially vulnerable residents. Involuntary displacement evokes questions about who deserves to live in certain urban spaces and why, and what kind of housing the displaced residents are generally seen as entitled to.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 September 2023



Accepted 2 June 2025

KEYWORDS

Housing displacement; deservingness; rights; discourse; discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Displacement is a phenomenon of urban transformation, that forces people, especially those with low incomes, to move from their homes and neighbourhoods owing to ongoing development (Farha, 2011; Watt & Morris, 2024). It is an intersection of complex economic, political, social and cultural factors, which, despite sometimes having positive effects and intentions, raises questions of social and spatial injustice with negative consequences on the social and physical well-being of affected residents (ibid.). According to Wang (2020, p. 703), 'displacement has become one of the most dominant analytical lenses invoked to understand the impacts of redevelopment on local communities', offering a framework to 'understand the winners and losers of urban redevelopment'.

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The data of this article are based on four housing displacement cases from 2020 to 2022 in two major Finnish cities, where groups of low-income residents were forced to move out of their flats owing to planned demolition or renovation for alternative purposes. Most of the residents had previously experienced homelessness, and being displaced was yet another instance of insecurity in their housing pathways. By applying discourse analysis, we ask what kinds of discourses on the residents' deservingness and rights to housing and housing-related services are constructed in the interviews with the residents and other involved actors, such as landlords and frontline social and health care practitioners.

Research on deservingness, which focuses on who is morally defined as entitled and has a right to receive support from others or the state, has a long history in the social sciences (e.g. Feinberg, 1970; Katz, 1989; van Oorschot, 2000; Tarkiainen, 2022). Based on our empirical data, we demonstrate that deservingness is a key factor in justifying and questioning urban displacement processes. Therefore, deservingness should be studied as a part of these processes. The discourses constructed on displaced residents' deservingness and rights to housing have implications for their future housing paths.

Studies on empirical deservingness originate from quantitative surveys focusing on citizens' welfare deservingness perceptions of which groups are seen and who are not as morally entitled to social benefits in welfare states (e.g. van Oorschot, 2006; van Oorschot *et al.*, 2017). However, a growing body of qualitative studies has analysed how deservingness is constructed in different socio-political contexts concerning certain population groups (e.g. Laenen *et al.*, 2019; Reeskens & van der Meer, 2019; Tarkiainen, 2017; Tošić & Streinzer, 2023). According to Tarkiainen (2022, p. 12) 'the vast majority of previous [qualitative] studies deal with themes of unemployment, migration and health'. This article contributes to this body of qualitative literature by examining the constructions of deservingness concerning the right to housing and related services in urban displacement.

An important link between displacement and deservingness studies already exists. 'Territorial stigma' (Wacquant, 2008) attached to certain neighbourhoods entails a negative moral argumentation of residents, thereby justifying their displacement (Garbin & Millington, 2012; Kirk, 2024). This moral reasoning is related to deservingness by establishing criteria for who qualifies for public subsidised, affordable housing or who should be given priority in terms of housing stability (Gillespie *et al.*, 2021, pp. 1716–1717).

Finnish housing policy provides a specific context for this study. In Finland, the right to housing is not intended to be a contentious issue, as state policy emphasises the principle of universal deservingness. The Constitution of Finland (1999) states that 'public authorities shall promote the right of everyone to housing and the opportunity to arrange their own housing' and that 'those who cannot obtain the means necessary for a life of dignity have the right to receive indispensable subsistence and care'. This principle is implemented through the provision of affordable social housing, housing allowances and supportive housing. Furthermore, during the last two decades, Finland has committed to the 'Housing First' (HF) policy, having one of the most ambitious homelessness policies in the world (Juhila *et al.*, 2023). The HF model was originally developed by the New York-based organisation

'Pathways to Housing' in the 1990s (Tsemberis, 2010). The core principles of the Finnish HF policy's resemble those of the original HF concept. First, everyone has a right to housing; thus, it should not be regarded as needing to be deserved through an individual's own actions. Second, individual choice regarding both housing and related services should be respected (A Home of Your Own, 2017). The uniqueness of the model lies in its strong governmental support and widespread implementation at the municipal level (Juhila *et al.*, 2023). However, as this study demonstrates, discussions on rights and deservingness related to housing and related services persist. Discourse analysis provides a way to analyse these discussions and their relationships to the premises of state-level housing policy and a broader cultural understanding of deservingness and rights.

2. Housing displacement and deservingness

Since the 1960s housing displacement studies in the context of urban development have often been connected to gentrification research. Gentrification is a process in which housing areas in or near city centres are renewed, regenerated or upgraded, attracting wealthier residents and displacing those who cannot afford to live in the newly developed or renovated houses (e.g. Glass, 1964; Lees *et al.*, 2008; Marcuse, 1985). Over time, the concept of displacement has been strongly developed alongside gentrification (e.g. Davidson, 2009; Pull & Richard, 2021; Valli, 2021; Watt, 2022). The concept highlights the relationships between displacement and urban development, specifically in the context of financialised housing markets (Watt & Morris, 2024).

Displacement can start an unstable journey in the residents' housing pathways, leading at worst, to homelessness (Wang, 2020, p. 703). For residents with strong attachment to their homes and neighbourhoods, the experience of displacement, which Atkinson (2015, p. 377) refers to as the process of 'un-homing' (see also Elliott-Cooper *et al.*, 2020, pp. 493–494), can be difficult and can hamper the development of attachments to new living arrangements. The challenge is compounded when there is uncertainty about the stability of the new housing (Juhila *et al.*, 2023; Juhila & Perälä, 2024). In this way, housing displacement is closely related to discussions of housing justice and the right to urban space. According to Pull *et al.* (2021, p. 1), 'it is in the act of displacement that housing injustice finds its prime expression'.

Urban displacement can be justified by highlighting residents' rights to better-quality housing as its underlying motivation, particularly in urban renewal processes that target demolition or renovation of poor-quality housing stock (Watt & Morris, 2024, p. 171). However, the displaced residents' right to return to renovated houses is not necessarily guaranteed (*ibid.*). In addition, neighbourhoods with poor housing quality can carry a 'territorial stigma', where residents are labelled as 'urban outcasts' (Wacquant, 2008) not worthy of better housing, which could contribute to the justification for demolishing or renovating those areas (Lees, 2008). However, the residents themselves may challenge such stigmatisation and experience a strong sense of community in their neighbourhoods (August, 2014).

In this study, we highlight the importance of deservingness in discussions on urban displacement, housing justice and rights to urban space. Streinzer and Tošić (2023, p. 6) clarify the relationship and difference between rights and deservingness:

'Rights to specific forms of distribution represent the juridification and institutionalization of entitlement', whereas deservingness 'refers to the moral assessment of whether these entitlements are legitimate and just or contested and unfair'. Although rights and deservingness are distinct, they are often constructed and applied simultaneously (*ibid.*, p. 7). For example, while people at risk of losing their homes may be institutionally entitled to housing and related services, they are not always considered deserving of them.

One key premise in the current deservingness literature is that questions regarding who deserves what and why are socially constructed. These constructions are based on evaluations of individuals' or groups' characteristics and behaviours, which are influenced by culturally shared notions of moral deservingness (Kreitzer *et al.*, 2022; Tarkiainen, 2022).

Van Oorschot and colleagues (van Oorschot, 2000, 2006; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2015) developed the CARIN criteria, which outline how certain groups' deservingness to welfare and social benefits are culturally constructed and perceived by the public. The deservingness criteria are linked to rights: that is, the more deserving people are perceived to be, the more rights, such as access to welfare services, they are considered to have. Although originally applied in quantitative studies, the criteria have also been increasingly applied in qualitative research to analyse for example, how deservingness to help, support and benefits are assessed in people, who suffer from unemployment, health problems or forced migration (Laenen *et al.*, 2019, p. 9; see examples of these in Tarkiainen, 2022, pp. 12–21). Nielsen *et al.* (2020, p. 114) summarise the CARIN criteria as follows:

1. Control (the less in control of own situation, the more deserving);
2. Attitude (the more grateful, the more deserving);
3. Reciprocity (the more reciprocation, the more deserving);
4. Identity (the closer to 'us', the more deserving); and
5. Need (the needier, the more deserving).

Instead of applying these criteria deductively in analysing our interview data (see Laenen *et al.*, 2019, p. 10), we view them as culturally strong ideas that may be present in the ways in which the housing (un)deservingness and rights of displaced residents are constructed in the interviews. Accordingly, we discuss the CARIN criteria in relation to our discourse analytical research findings at the end of the Results section.

2. Research settings

This multi-setting study examines four housing displacement cases in two Finnish cities between 2020 and 2022. Approximately 350 residents were forced to move from their homes and neighbourhoods, where many had lived for several years.

The first case (A) involved the displacement of approximately 200 residents from an ageing social housing area near the city centre. A municipality-owned social housing organisation decided to either renovate or demolish the buildings to construct new housing on the valuable land. The second case (B) was initiated by another

social housing organisation and affected a suburban block of flats needing renovation with approximately 70 residents. The third (C) and fourth (D) displacement cases affected single blocks of flats that were decided to sell for more profitable purposes, housing 60 and 17 residents. One of them located near a city centre and the other in a suburb. These flats were managed by non-profit organisations offering supportive housing based on permanent tenancies for people with a history of homelessness.

The cases shared several common elements. First, all cases can be conceptualised as structural evictions (Pull, 2020) related to urban development plans. Second, the flats in the settings were part of the affordable social housing provided by municipality-owned or non-profit organisations, which, although not legally responsible, were still morally pressured to relocate the residents after evictions. Third, most of the residents had previously experienced homelessness or unstable housing pathways, making them 'spatially vulnerable' (Lind, 2020) and 'losers of urban development' (Wang, 2020, p. 703), having suffered from 'recurrent displacement' (Watt, 2018; Watt & Morris, 2024, p. 168). Most were low-income single men, living with social security benefits or pensions. Fourth, all the organisations that provided housing in the settings were committed to the 'Housing First' policy, which prioritises offering permanent housing to individuals who have experienced homelessness or are at risk of homelessness. Fifth, the residents had suffered from the 'territorial stigma' (Kirk, 2024; Wacquant, 2008) attached to their neighbourhoods labelled as restless and segregated places before the displacement.

The actual displacement processes took approximately six months to a year to complete. During this time, all residents received legally required notices of the termination of tenancies, alternative, usually rather modest housing was sought for them, and they were relocated. However, a minority of the residents were left homeless in the process, and some passed away before their actual move (Mäki *et al.*, 2023).

3. Data and analysis

The data comprise 71 qualitative theme interviews conducted in 2021–2022, involving 114 participants through both individual and group/pair interviews. All participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the study and assured of safeguarding their anonymity; they signed written consent forms. The research was reviewed by the local research ethics committee.

The research participants represented six groups involved in the displacement cases.

1. Displaced residents,
2. Frontline practitioners, including social workers, social care workers, practical nurses and housing counsellors working in municipal and non-profit organisations,
3. Landlords in municipally-owned housing organisations,
4. Social services managers,
5. Housing planners responsible for municipal housing policy and urban planning and
6. Local politicians responsible for the guidance of social services, housing policy and urban development.

Table 1. Interview data.

	Residents	Frontline practitioners	Landlords	Social service managers	Housing planners	Local politicians
A	20	14	3	9	3	4
B	2	2	2	–	–	–
C	14	21	–	8	–	3
D	3	3	–	2	–	1
Total	39	40	5	19	3	8

The interviewed residents were reached *via* landlords and frontline practitioners. The participants in the non-resident groups were contacted for interviews based on their involvement in the displacement cases. The level of their involvement varied. The residents were naturally at the core of the displacements, and frontline practitioners were in close contact with them throughout the processes. Landlords executed evictions and organised new flats for the residents. The participants in the last three groups were involved from distant positions. Table 1 shows an overview of the representation of the groups among cases A–D.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format and consisted of four themes: (1) the history and practices of the displacement process, (2) the residents' housing pathways before and after the displacement, (3) the community spirit in the houses and neighbourhoods before the displacement and (4) the residents' participation and need for support in the displacement.

The data analysis aims to answer the following research question: *What kinds of discourses on the residents' deservingness and their rights to housing and related services are constructed in interviews with various actors involved in the displacement cases?* Our approach is relational; we don't treat displaced residents or other actors as 'bounded groups' with certain characteristics, attitudes or cultures (see Desmond, 2014). Instead, we focus on how the actors construct boundaries between those deemed deserving and undeserving residents in their interview talk. For this analysis, we apply the ideas of Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) (e.g. Kendall & Wickham, 1999) and critical discursive psychology (CDP) (e.g. Wetherell & Edley, 2014).

Following Foucault's definition, we understand discourses as groups of statements that are organised in relation to one another, forming systems of meaning (Foucault, 1991, pp. 107–108). These discourses produce objects related to certain truths about the social world and shape subjectivities, having 'real consequences for people', in our cases, for displaced residents (Wiggins, 2017, pp. 49–54). According to CDP, different discourses can be constructed around the same issues and may generate counter-discourses. Furthermore, people use these discourses flexibly in their talk and writing (ibid., p. 45). Both FDA and CDP emphasise that discourses are influenced by broader cultural meanings, such as cultural understandings of deservingness and rights to housing.

In practical terms, our analysis began by reviewing the transcribed interviews and identifying all sentences, phrases and descriptions that related to the residents' deservingness. All interviewees engaged in moral discussions that we interpreted as constructing deservingness discourses on housing. These discussions were focused on the following issues: who was responsible for the displacement situations, who was responsible for organising new housing for the residents, whether residents were regarded as entitled to receiving new housing and supportive services and whether there were debatable differences in residents' entitlement.

Table 2. Discourses and statements.

Discourse 1: They don't deserve better.	Discourse 2: They deserve better.	Residents' mixed statements regarding the discourses
Statements	Statements	Statements
They had been in a place they deserved.	They have not had the right to make choices in their housing.	I had no options in choosing a flat or rejecting an offered flat.
They don't have the housing abilities needed in higher standards of housing.	They deserve all the support, help and advocacy needed in finding new housing and a place to live.	I/we don't deserve any better housing.
They don't always accept offered housing or services that would increase their housing abilities.	They all deserve a home of their own and the services that they need.	Some of the residents do not deserve better housing.
They don't deserve better yet, but their housing abilities and deservingness may increase step by step.	They deserve to be seen and heard regarding their housing.	In the eyes of others, I/we don't deserve better housing.
	They have a right to housing and deserve to be treated according to human rights.	I/we deserve to have a new flat arranged.
	Their identity as human beings deserving decent 'housing should be strengthened.	We deserve better housing.

In the second stage, we grouped the identified interview excerpts into 16 statements and organised them into two opposing systems of meaning: the discourses of 'they don't deserve better' and 'they deserve better'. A key difference exists depending on whether interviewees refer to residents as others ('residents as they') or as themselves ('residents as we'). The interviewees' statements about 'residents as they' contain 10 statements (6 in 'they don't deserve better' and 4 in 'they deserve better' discourse), whereas the statements about their own deservingness contain 6 statements (3 in both discourses) (see Table 2).

In terms of frequency, the positive 'they deserve better' discourse appears more often in all interviews than the negative discourse. The positive discourse is most prevalent in the frontline practitioners, housing planners and local politicians' interviews, whereas the negative 'they don't deserve better' discourse is highlighted slightly more in the talk of landlords and social services managers. In the residents' interviews, the emphasis is on self-deservingness ('I/we deserve better'), although there are occasional references to undeservingness ('I/we don't deserve better').

In the following Results section, we first present the two discourses produced by the other participants groups than residents by scrutinising the contents of each statement and by explicating how these statements are interconnected forming the discourses. We then proceed to the residents' own statements. Lastly, we compare the statements of the discourses with the CARIN criteria.

4. Results: deservingness discourses on housing and related services in displacement

4.1. They don't deserve better

4.1.1. They had been in a place they deserved

This statement argues that certain residents had been living in 'suitable' types of flats and neighbourhoods before their displacement, despite the poor condition of

the housing (cf. territorial stigmatisation). Thus, the statement reflects a form of judgement regarding deserving poor-quality housing. This ‘hard’ interpretation is justified by blaming the residents for their disruptive behaviour related to issues such as substance use and difficulties in life management, which prevents them from obtaining better housing conditions: ‘Some of them didn’t have a chance to get a flat elsewhere’ (D: frontline practitioner).

The claim that some residents do not deserve better housing is strengthened by appealing to their past housing pathways, which are associated with recurring problems with housing:

Every single one of the residents here have experienced long-term homelessness or have screwed up [their chances in] multiple flats. They just absolutely don’t have what it takes. (D: practitioner)

The residents’ behaviour and history of homelessness are also used to justify the idea that they should be grateful for even having modest housing and support: ‘And I’ve been like, dang it, guys, how dare you speak like that of the housing counsellors, you guys have been homeless for a long time’ (C: landlord). This statement suggests that the residents should have understood that they do not deserve any better conditions than what they currently have.

4.1.2. They don’t have the housing abilities needed for higher standards of housing

Related to the first statement, certain residents are morally defined as not having the abilities to obtain higher standards of housing after being displaced.

And of course, we don’t offer another flat for all of our tenants. It’s due to multiple reasons, such as not taking care of the flat properly, causing disturbances and having disruptions in rent payment, for example. (B: landlord)

The more often the residents are considered as failing to meet housing standards, the less deserving they are portrayed: ‘because you can’t just keep on being violent and get a new flat over and over again’ (C: social services manager).

At its extreme, it is suggested that, for a certain group, there may not be any suitable housing options at all: ‘We’ve got a bunch of people we cannot house anywhere; we know they have wrecked every previous flat they’ve had right away’ (A: practitioner).

4.1.3. They don’t always accept offered housing or services that would increase their housing abilities

Declining offered flats are interpreted as incomprehensible and ungrateful behaviour: ‘There are a lot of homeless people who do not accept the flats they’re offered and that’s quite shocking’ (B: practitioner). Furthermore, rejecting services aimed at strengthening pre-defined housing abilities is sometimes cited as the reason why some displaced residents end up homeless. In other words, ‘uncommitted’ residents are seen as responsible for not obtaining new housing:

We assessed all the residents [regarding their housing needs] and they were all offered a new place to live. So, the potential homelessness was self-imposed by not cooperating

with us. Not accepting the housing and the support services we offered, refusing to leave [the place], refusing to pay rent and so on. (C: social services manager)

In some cases, rejection is described as a sign of independence. According to this reasoning, residents may need encouragement to see themselves as entitled to housing and services: ‘Maybe they don’t want to bother anyone [...] they want to take care of things themselves’ (A: practitioner). However, regardless of whether rejection is perceived as a sign of ungratefulness or independence, housing is claimed to be deserved only if residents accept the services deemed necessary for successful housing.

4.1.4. They don’t deserve better yet, but their housing abilities and deservingness may increase step by step

The last statement of this discourse underlines that there is always hope, but only if the residents accept support to improve their culturally expected housing abilities ‘step by step’. The lowest step involves the promise of a flat in the future if the resident first initiates contact with social services:

Having seen the lack of some tenants’ housing skills during home visits, I’ve been quite frank with them [the tenants], and I’ve told them that there is no way we [the landlord] would accommodate them in one of our regular blocks and that they’d need a little something to begin with. And I’ve asked them if they’d want me to contact their social worker to see if we could come up with something. (A: landlord)

Because ‘housing skills’ are perceived as increasing gradually, the advantages of a fixed-term rental agreement can be justified. This would place the responsibility on residents to demonstrate their deservingness of permanent housing:

We could move forward from the traditional ‘Housing First’ way of thinking if we hold the clients responsible [for their housing]. The way I see it is that they [the landlords] should make more use of fixed-term rental agreements instead of non-fixed-term agreements to have more committed residents. (C: social services manager)

The responsibility to increase one’s expected housing abilities also implies that making progress and moving forward is recommended, even though the residents would like to continue living in the same place: ‘You just can’t stay here [in the current flat] for the rest of your life and just lie lazy’ (C: practitioner).

4.2. They deserve better

4.2.1. They have not had the right to make choices in their housing

The ‘they deserve better’ discourse counters the first discourse, which tends to blame the residents. In this discourse the residents are described as being in a position where they have not been granted proper rights to housing and services. This lack of choice is reported as already evident when they moved to the poor-quality houses from which they were displaced. Since these houses were their only option, the residents’ right to better-quality housing had been ignored: ‘They haven’t gotten a flat anywhere else because of their bad credit record and rental arrears and all that’ (A: social services manager).

A similar lack of choice was argued to be present in the displacement processes. For example, residents were often given only one option.

Basically, they [the residents] were not given options. It was a brutal game, that's how I saw it. They [the landlords] just told people like, this is where you're going to go, you won't be given another one. (C: social services manager)

Contrary to the undeservingness discourse, the residents' reactions to displacement and lack of rights to make choices on their housing are described as feelings of injustice rather than ingratitude, as well as being treated like punching bags: 'How come we [the residents] are always just being pushed around, time after time [...] how come they didn't find a place for us' (C: landlord).

4.2.2. They deserve all the support, help and advocacy in finding new housing and a place to live

In the positive discourse, the residents' feeling of injustice is defined as legitimate, and actions are demanded to create greater fairness. In particular, the frontline practitioners express their responsibility to provide as much support and advocacy as possible in helping the residents find new homes. It is important to ally with the residents and not leave them alone in an uncertain situation:

Of course, they felt bad about it, but we were able to discuss things and assure them that we'll do everything we can, and there is no need for all this tent talk they kept on having. So yeah, we tried to let them know that we would do anything and everything to help all of them. (A: practitioner)

In the successful cases, where the practitioners had been able to organise housing, the feelings of the residents are defined as touching and grateful: 'And when they [a resident] finally land a flat, it truly is touching in a way, you can see it in their eyes' (C: practitioner).

4.2.3. They all deserve a home of their own and the services that they need

This discourse opposes the narratives that use housing inabilities as justifications for not helping residents obtain housing. Everyone's housing should be secured: 'No demolition should be put in action before all the residents of the area are secured a place to go, and it is made sure that no one is abandoned' (C: local politician).

Practices where the residents' unfortunate housing histories create barriers to obtaining their own accommodation are strongly criticised:

There was this lady I sent off to go sign her new rental agreement, and before her going, I wanted to make sure she had no rental arrears. And she comes back, crying, telling me she had an arrear of one euro and forty cents. For me, it seemed like these people [living in a certain housing unit] were not treated the way they could have been if they were residents somewhere else. (C: practitioner)

In addition, instead of focusing on housing inabilities, the discourse emphasises that everyone should be entitled to the immediate services they need without any conditions.

I still question the demand for being in a good condition and sober to participate in rehabilitative work. Like, you're working in a workshop and you're being tested

[for drugs] and as a punishment [for drug usage] you'll have to stay out [of work] for three months. And actually, after a relapse, what you need is a lot of support and a way to pass the time, but instead they'll kick you out. (C: social services manager)

It is also emphasised that some residents had long been deprived of services that they needed well before the displacement. They had been somewhat forgotten, and the displacement only revealed their difficult situation: 'They [the residents] should have been helped for a long time, for years, but no one has helped them, and they haven't had the capacity to ask for help themselves; they have just been left in the lurch, forced to manage on their own out there' (A: landlord).

4.2.4. They deserve to be seen and heard regarding their housing

The residents are considered deserving not only of housing and services but also of being seen and heard and having a sense of belonging—of being recognised as people. This statement concretely means that those residents previously overlooked and in need of help are now 'found': 'The eviction process revealed the fact that many residents were just sort of abandoned there [...], they were not seen, no one was aware of them' (A: practitioner).

Becoming heard is connected to a human way of encountering the residents: 'All action should be humane and resident oriented' (C: practitioner). The importance of carefully listening to the experiences of the residents is described as a crucial part of this human encounter:

It is such a remarkable thing to feel like you're being heard and taken seriously. Just having the experience that your dreams and wishes are taken seriously is significant, even if all the wishes could not be fulfilled. (A: local politician)

A concern related to the residents' living in new places is their potential loneliness. They may not feel at home in their new flats and may once again become 'invisible', disconnected from the outside world: 'First of all, it's easier to go out and get to know the outside world if you have a home rather than just walls [of a flat] around you; it has to do with participation, too' (A: practitioner).

4.2.5. They have a right to housing and deserve to be treated according to human rights

The 'they deserve better' discourse emphasises everyone's unconditional right to housing. This echoes the principles of the HF model, which are also often specifically mentioned in talk about the right to housing:

Having an apartment should be a basic social right. It should not have to be earned somehow. It's respecting the 'Housing First' policy principles: housing is not something you have to be worthy of. (A: social services manager)

This statement suggests that having and maintaining one's own home should not be linked to the obligation to participate in various activities or accept certain services. Therefore, it is understandable that the residents may decline housing options that come with such conditions:

You know, I do understand why no one is willing to come [to such housing options]. I mean, if you could just have a place of your own, and for once you could just lay back because you're not obliged to participate in certain things to keep it. (C: social services manager)

Although the right to housing is considered a self-evident principle, its implementation is presented as challenging: 'As a politician, it's easy to be committed to it as a value; putting it into action is not always that simple though' (A: local politician). The principle may potentially be compromised by adding elements of the staircase model to it: 'The municipality has allowed fixed-term rental agreements, and they even suggested that we would draw up more of those as well, but we see it contrary to the principles [of the HF policy]' (C: practitioner).

This discourse ultimately connects the social right to housing to basic human rights: 'People deserve certain rights by just being human' (D: practitioner). Violating these rights in the displacement is considered shameful: 'Just think about the way these people have been treated, seriously, and everyone just thinks it's okay' (A: practitioner).

4.2.6. Their identity as human beings deserving decent housing should be strengthened

The last statement of this discourse follows from the previous one, suggesting that the residents are sometimes seen as underestimating their rights and deservingness: 'Here's how they see it: what they have now is the best or the most they can get or are entitled to, and it will not get any better than that' (A: practitioner). This self-underestimation is not viewed as surprising, considering the residents' personal experiences with unjust practices and lack of expectations for any better treatment:

[The residents] were aware of the certain injustice of it [the eviction process]: the piece of land was of great value and they weren't worthy to live on it. (A: practitioner)

Strengthening the residents' identity as human beings who deserve better is thus presented as an important aim:

There was this resident who wasn't willing to take the flat they were offered because they felt like it was too fancy for them [laughs]. We worked with them and persuaded them to take the fancy flat. (A: social services manager)

It is expressed that identity-strengthening efforts should also be undertaken at a collective level. This could be accomplished, for example, by treating the residents as designers of their preferred housing: 'People should have the possibility to participate more in planning their housing' (C: social services manager).

4.3. Residents' mixed statements regarding the discourses

4.3.1. I had no options in choosing a flat or rejecting an offered flat

The residents' talk on the deservingness of housing and related services is formed from statements that use both discourses described above. However, the residents' positions are considerably different from those of the other actors because they are

the ones who had to relocate. The residents' talk can be either personal, focusing on self-deservingness ('I talk'), or collective, considering all the residents ('we talk'). Sometimes, the talk also makes a distinction between deserving and undeserving residents.

The first statement echoes the statements of the second discourse ('they deserve better'), arguing that the residents do not have the right to make choices on their housing. A lack of alternatives is stated as a recurring issue in one's housing pathway, specifically when moving to the flat that was subsequently lost in the displacement: 'And actually it was the only flat I was offered, just that one, so I had no choice but to take it' (A). The process of obtaining a new flat is presented similarly as a 'no choices' situation:

Resident: I was just told to go there, here. They gave me no choice.

Interviewer: Alright. Had you thought of an alternative yourself?

Resident: I dunno, I didn't really give it too much thought. I knew I'd have to leave the place anyway, so I just resigned myself to it, since there was nothing to do about it. (C)

One resident uses the movie *The Godfather* as a metaphor while describing the lack of choices: 'Well, in the movie, someone's got a gun pointed at their head, so the offer they were given was an irrefutable one, they had to choose it' (C). A choiceless situation is described as emotionally stressful and disappointing, as one resident who ended up with an undesirable housing unit relates: 'It was a quite depressing resolution [...] I was so sure I would be given a flat, a place of my own' (C).

Having no opportunities to make choices resonates with the first statement in the 'they don't deserve better' discourse: 'they are in a place they deserve'. The residents claim that they are defined as deserving only housing that somebody else assesses them to be worthy of receiving, which they may not necessarily consider as fair.

4.3.2. I/we don't deserve any better housing

Some of the residents appear to accept the notion that they do not deserve better due to their own behaviour, situations or submission to what they perceive as 'inevitable'. For example, when describing their earlier pathway and reasons for being evicted, one resident says, 'Back then I didn't spend too much time by myself and I got kicked out after a couple of years, but, I mean, I get why, I had been given several warnings for being violent earlier' (C).

Furthermore, having no vision or hope for the future is related to the experience of undeservingness: 'In my current life situation, you've just got to settle for what you've got and what you're given' (A). This type of 'submission' is also claimed to be a common attitude among the residents collectively ('we'):

It's like, you're given an order from above, the higher-ups just define you and command you. When they tell you the area is to be emptied, you don't question it, you just go along like a flock of sheep. As an underdog, you've got no capacity,

no knowledge, no nothing; you are like a sheep. The knowledge and power lie somewhere else. (A)

This statement depicts a structural stand with the use of the metaphors of a flock of sheep and an underdog. It is argued that the collective feeling of undeservingness arises from unequal power dynamics.

4.3.3. Some of the residents do not deserve better housing

On rare occasions, the residents differentiate between those who are deserving and undeserving. This distinction arises when they compare their own behaviour to that of other residents:

As soon as I found out that we had to move out, I got the ball rolling. I got help from them [people working in social services] and I contacted [social security office] myself and I got a new flat almost right away, in less than three months. I got one, 'cause I worked for it myself. Many of my friends didn't do anything about it and now they're homeless, they're such morons. (A)

In the example above, the resident portrays himself as an active and responsible actor who is able to arrange his housing smoothly and quickly after the eviction, whereas some others are presented as passive and, to some extent, as deserving of their homelessness. One resident speculates that this kind of passivity may be due to having had too easy a life:

These guys, they're such snobs, they don't know how to look for a flat, and they'll never get one. So many people in this world who've never had to work for things in life, they've always got off easy. They're like some wannabe artists; they imagine they'll just get things just like that, they've been doing drugs and stuff, and they just expect to get more and more things for themselves. I, however, have been used to working ever since I was a small boy. (C)

Such comparisons align with the 'they don't deserve better' discourse. Deservingness to housing is argued to be dependent on one's behaviour.

4.3.4. In the eyes of others, I/we don't deserve better housing

In contrast to the two examples provided above, the residents' interviews are rich in critical judgments on how their worthlessness is externally imposed—how it is from others' perspectives. For example, others did not recognise that the residents could return to renovated homes: 'I was like what if I want to come back after the renovation, he [landlord] was quiet for a while and then said: look, the rent levels are going to be completely different then' (A).

In some instances, the residents' statements resonate well with the arguments presented in gentrification and displacement research, which highlight how less wealthy people are forced to leave their homes to accommodate the wealthier: 'I guess they'll turn it into a hotel or something, have some high, expensive loft flats being set up there, that's how you throw out the poor and bring in the rich' (C). One resident suspects that there had been 'a bigger plan' behind the displacement:

We're just pawns to them. And what are we, the poor, worthy of, anyway? It all just makes you feel like it was all pre-planned. The houses were just abandoned there to go to rack and ruin, and the landlords had chosen tenants they knew wouldn't care about the state of the flats or taking care of the flats. And eventually, the area would turn into a shabby slum, and it would be easy for the policymakers to justify the demolition of the area. (A)

The resident indicates that certain residents were assigned poor-quality houses because they were assessed as not being worthy of better housing. The living of these 'undeserved' residents in the area was then used as a justification for demolishing and social cleansing of the area (cf. territorial stigmatisation).

4.3.5. *I/We deserve to have a new flat arranged*

Some residents strongly emphasise their rights to housing and thus their indisputable deservingness. A right to housing can be justified by appealing to their good behaviour: '[The representatives of the rental housing company] offered me a flat themselves; they told me I've been a good tenant, always paying rent on time and stuff' (A).

On a more general level, the right to secure another flat is claimed to be a legal principle, and at least arranging it is considered the moral responsibility of those who evicted the residents:

I figured that in cases like this, the landlord's responsibility is to help people out. (A)

I didn't worry too much. I figured they would arrange a new flat for me. There was no question about it; they would arrange new places for everyone, and no one would have to end up out on the streets. (C)

The arguments used in this statement are similar to those in the 'they deserve better' discourse, underlining that the residents need all support, help and advocacy in finding new homes. However, the residents' statements are more absolute, as they place the responsibility of finding new flats on others because they themselves are not to be blamed for the evictions.

4.3.6. *We deserve better housing*

Finally, the residents display anger and bitterness towards their unfair treatment. For example, they criticise how vulnerable residents had been left in poor living conditions without necessary services before the displacement: 'There were some people living in the area who should not have been living there, most of them should have been in nursing homes' (A).

Homelessness is defined as an extreme violation of human rights that no one deserves:

No one should have to sleep rough, ever. I'd rather shoot myself in the head or jump in front of a train or something. I'm not going back out on the street, fuck it. Hell, that's for sure. It's so hard. (C)

This statement conveys that, as human beings, the residents deserved better in the past and will continue to deserve better, which aligns with the 'they deserve better' discourse.

4.4. *Deservingness discourses and CARIN criteria*

Considering that discourses are always influenced by broader cultural meanings, we next compare our findings with the five-level CARIN criteria established in previous studies on how people define deservingness (van Oorschot, 2000; van Oorschot & Roosma, 2015). For the comparison, we selected examples from our data to concretise the connectedness between the CARIN criteria and the discourses and their statements.

The statements from the ‘they don’t deserve better’ discourse portrayed the residents as being in control and therefore responsible for their poor housing situation (criterion 1). For example, they could have taken ‘care of the flat properly’ but did not care to do so. Their behaviour can also be interpreted as displaying an ungrateful attitude (criterion 2), because they did not accept ‘the housing and the support services we offered’. In addition, they did not fulfil their part reciprocally (criterion 3), as they for example ‘refused to pay rent’. Furthermore, the residents were regarded as lacking culturally expected housing abilities, casting their identities deviant and thus far from ‘us’ (criterion 4): ‘You can’t just keep on being violent and get a new flat over and over again’. The discourse indicated that the residents did not deserve better housing *yet* and that the condition for improvement was a commitment to gradually improve their housing abilities, to define themselves more needy (criterion 5): ‘I’ve asked them if they’d want me to contact their social worker to see if we could come up with something’.

The core statement of the ‘they deserve better’ discourse was that the residents had no real possibilities to control their own housing or related services. They had to accept whatever was offered to them (criterion 1): ‘Basically, they were not given options’. Some residents’ attitudes were even described as being excessively grateful (criterion 2): ‘And when they finally land a flat, it truly is touching in a way, you can see it in their eyes’. These critical assessments of the residents’ vulnerable, victim-like positions led to statements that they are needy people, and thus should have received all the support and advocacy in finding new housing, and should obtain supportive housing services with their new homes (criterion 5): ‘They should have been helped for a long time’, and ‘after a relapse, what you need is a lot of support and a way to pass the time’. These demands were justified by appealing to everyone’s reciprocal human rights (criterion 3): ‘People deserve certain rights just being human’. Ultimately, the ‘they deserve better’ discourse resists the endeavours to divide people into deserved and undeserved by differentiating ‘our’ and ‘their’ identities (criterion 4). Hence, the residents’ identities as equally deserving should be strengthened: ‘We worked with them and persuaded them to take the fancy flat’.

The residents’ statements contained elements of both discourses and CARIN criteria. They described themselves as being unable to make choices and thus not owning control of their housing situation (criterion 1): ‘They gave me no choice’. However, the reasons for this lack of control varied. Occasionally, they looked for a reason by constructing their identity as tenant blameworthy and ungrateful (criteria 2 and 4): ‘I got kicked out after a couple of years, but, I mean, I get why, I had been given several warnings for being violent’. They also sometimes blamed themselves for their lack of vision, and having a passive attitude in their own lives

(criterion 2): ‘you just go along like a flock of sheep’. Sometimes, they blamed other residents for such behaviour or attitudes, thus echoing the tone of the ‘they don’t deserve better’ discourse: ‘Many of my friends didn’t do anything about it and now they’re homeless’. However, criticism of this discourse was more dominant. The residents recognised that they are sometimes defined as undeserving, but they rejected this definition as unfair, thus aligning themselves with the ‘they deserve better’ discourse. They defined themselves as deserving to housing, because they have done their own part and thus have the identity of a good tenant (criteria 3 and 4): ‘I’ve been a good tenant, always paying rent on time’. As displaced residents they also constructed themselves as ‘needy’ and thus entitled to get help (criterion 5): ‘In cases like this, the landlord’s responsibility is to help people out’. Furthermore, they displaced mutual solidarity among the displaced residents and defended everyone’s right to housing (criterion 3): ‘No one should have to sleep rough, ever’.

5. Conclusions and discussion

In this study, we first located two contrasting discourses about displaced residents’ deservingness of housing and related services: ‘they don’t deserve better’ and ‘they deserve better’. These discourses were constructed through interviews with various actors involved in four housing displacement cases. We then analysed the residents’ statements about their own deservingness, that reflected both discourses. Lastly, we demonstrated how the discourses resonate with the CARIN criteria. Although binary views of deservingness (deserving/undeserving) are culturally well known, our findings provide new insights into the justification logic regarding housing rights in urban displacement.

Our detailed study of the discourses and their statements reveals that although the results can be compared with the CARIN criteria, the construction of deservingness in the interviews was manifold, situational and relational, and did not follow the criteria in a straightforward manner. Hence, instead of a fixed condition or feature, the actors actively constructed the residents’ (un)deservingness through their interview responses (cf. Streinzer & Tošić, 2023, p. 4; Tarkiainen, 2022, p. 9). However, the discourses were not confined to certain actors or groups of actors. Furthermore, the interviewees defined some residents as both deserving and undeserving, depending on which discourse was applied. This resonates well with the findings of previous qualitative deservingness studies, which, according to Tarkiainen (2022, p. 12), reveal ‘flexible and even contradictory moral reasoning when talking about who deserves help and why’. Flexibility and contradiction were also present in the residents’ own reasoning (cf. Linnanvirta *et al.*, 2019).

The discourses identified in this study are highly consequential for spatially vulnerable residents. As our analysis demonstrates, involuntary displacement from homes and neighbourhoods evokes questions about who deserves to live in certain urban spaces and why and what kind of housing displaced residents in general are deemed entitled to. In particular, the residents expressed feelings of unfairness and injustice, questioning why they should leave the area. In other words, they recognised well the phenomenon of housing displacement in urban development and its core

processes, where poor people are often the ‘losers’ and wealthier people are the ‘winners’ of urban redevelopment (cf. Wang, 2020).

The ‘they deserve better’ discourse approaches everyone’s right to housing in a broader sense than just providing shelter; it includes residents’ emotional attachments to certain houses and neighbourhoods and the value they give for stable housing (see Muñoz, 2018). Concerning ‘real people in the real world’, the discourse evokes critical questions about whether everyone deserves the right to stable housing regardless of their wealth, income or social situation, or whether urban redevelopment should continue to be driven by market-driven logic rather than humanitarian understanding (cf. Lupieri, 2022). As discussed earlier, rights are based on juridical arguments, whereas deservingness is based on moral assessments, but they often intersect (Streinzer & Tošić, 2023). The ‘they deserve better’ discourse receives its strength from moral arguments that emphasise everyone’s rights to housing and necessary related services. The key question is how to translate this kind of morality into real and prevailing policy.

The dominance of the ‘they deserve better’ discourse in the interview talk can be attributed obviously to the Finnish state-level housing policy, which emphasises everyone’s right to housing and the commitment to the HF policy at the local municipal level. However, the use of ‘should talk’ in the ‘they deserve better’ discourse indicates that considerable work remains to be done in safeguarding displaced residents’ housing rights, and making them ‘winners’ of urban development. By ‘should talk,’ we first refer to such talk in the interviews that brought forward the idea that not everything went right in the displacement processes and indicated how things should have gone instead. This talk was present in the expressions that criticised the ways residents were treated and included an expectation that they should have been treated more fairly: ‘It seemed like these people were not treated the way they could have been treated if they were residents somewhere else’. Second, ‘should talk’ was displayed in structural-level statements on the rights not yet fulfilled as expected: ‘Having an apartment should be a basic human right’.

We argue that ‘should talk’ is related to the shortage of adequate and affordable social housing (see Sutela, 2024) that escalates in local displacement processes, where many ‘spatially vulnerable’ people (Lind, 2020) are simultaneously in acute need of housing. The fewer decent social housing options available, the more displaced residents are left without them. Thus, who qualifies and does not qualify for the scarce housing options must somehow be justified. This puts an increasingly large proportion of displaced residents at risk of being defined as undeserving, contesting their deservingness to decent housing, and lower-quality housing options, such as flats in stigmatized neighbourhoods or homeless shelters, are offered instead. This division between displaced residents is ethically unsustainable, as it endangers some people’s right to decent housing.

This discourse analytical study, based on comprehensive interview data, contributes to urban housing displacement studies by demonstrating how the various stakeholders’ constructions of residents’ deservingness play a crucial, yet complicated role in displacement processes. In doing so it also creates a link between the rich literature of urban displacement and deservingness in a way that produces new insights into both research traditions.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Funding

This work was supported by Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland.

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