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Instead of loneliness: intergenerational home-sharing

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A solution has existed for decades, which addresses two pressing problems: the exclusion of the younger generation from affordable housing and the loneliness and isolation of a rapidly ageing population.

An innovative housing programme is helping organisations match older people with students in a scheme called homeshare.

The concept is simple yet can bridge the generation gap that exists in many parts of the world. On the one hand, there are older people who own properties of a size they bought when several people lived together, but who now need help with everyday activities such as shopping and cleaning.

On the other side are young people who can't afford to rent a decent apartment but who may have some spare time.

The social worker helps to establish the relationship (filling in a questionnaire, housing needs, lifestyle, personality type) and once matched, a detailed contract is signed between the parties. Any conflicts are resolved by a mediator employed by the programme. The strength of the programme lies in the building of social capital, and its basis is mutuality and trust that the parties can rely on each other.

Home-sharing is not a new idea - it was first tried in the US and Spain in the 1980s. But experts have recently begun to see it as a scalable solution to two problems that continue to plague society. While young people are migrating to cities, driving up the cost of rents, the population of the developed world is ageing.

Home-sharing schemes are currently operating in 19 countries around the world. Since 1999, Homeshare International has been a network of home-sharing schemes.

Most schemes offer two types of home-sharing to prospective participants. The first allows the student to live in an elderly person's home rent-free in exchange for help around the house. The second requires the student to contribute money towards household bills, but places less of a burden on his or her time.

Research on home-sharing projects in Spain and the United States shows that participants are overwhelmingly satisfied with the arrangement. The Spanish study reports that 93.2% of elderly people and 98.7% of students benefited in some way from the scheme.

Direct benefits include help with daily living, companionship and the security of having someone in the house, especially at night. It is widely recognised by experts that home-sharing is an effective antidote to loneliness, with the emotional support provided by the companionship often outweighing its material benefits. Other benefits include breaking down barriers between generations and different cultures, and promoting mutual understanding and tolerance.

Other people benefit indirectly from home-sharing. Families of older people talk about the reassurance of having someone in the home with their loved ones to ensure their safety and well-being. Families of young people who share a home say they are reassured that their children live in decent housing and have a surrogate grandparent who takes an interest in their lives.

Public services also benefit. Home-sharing reduces the need for health services; it can also delay the use of costly services such as residential care for the elderly. Home-sharing helps alleviate the housing crisis in places where there is an acute shortage of affordable housing.

Conclusion

Focusing on the elderly shows how expensive it can be to age at home - overheads, home repairs and general living costs are devastatingly high. We can also see that once simple tasks, such as climbing a ladder to change a light bulb, can be challenging for older people. However, many older people also prefer to age in their own homes and avoid institutionalisation for as long as possible. Housing is a human right and we need much more public policy and cross-sector innovation.

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