

Equity Inequity: Housing Wealth Inequalities, Inter and Intra-generational Divergences, and the Rise of Private Landlordism

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ABSTRACT

There is much evidence of rising inequalities across advanced economies. This paper argues for the special position of housing equity in inequality dynamics while challenging a persistent 'ideology of homeownership' as a widespread and equalizing mechanism of asset accumulation. Contemporary processes of diminished homeownership access contrast to the continued attractiveness of real estate among those with capital and recent growths in private landlordism. The research presents an explorative examination of the housing wealth dimension of inequality through the British case and assesses empirically the dimensions of: equity concentration, inter and intra-generational divergences, and the role of private landlordism. The research points to the starkly concentrated nature of housing equity and significant trends towards increasing disparities, with especially disadvantaged prospects among younger cohorts. The recent emergence of a substantial secondary rental-property market presents a further key dimension of wealth concentration. The research underscores the fundamental inequality of housing equity and brings into question rooted ideologies of housing-asset-based economic security in an era of individualized welfare responsibility.

KEY WORDS: Housing equity, Wealth inequality, Intergenerational inequality, Private landlords, Ideology of homeownership

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that many advanced economies have found themselves in a period of rising inequalities. Piketty's (2014) *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* has put both an academic and public spotlight on economic inequality. Evidence out of the United States has pointed to a steady rise stretching back to the end of the 1970s (Saez and Zucman 2014), where the share of income from the top 10% of households rose from under 35% to nearly 50% in the 2010s and wealth shares from 65% to over 70% (Piketty 2014). Recent analyses, have only pointed to even sharper exacerbations of divergence in many countries in the post Global Financial Crisis (GFC) years. While lower and middle-class households saw evaporating financial opportunities, the very top earners regained much of their wealth during the so-called 'recovery' where, in the US, up to 95% of accrued gains went to the top one percent (Stiglitz 2012). Similar trends have been identified to varying degrees across OECD nations (Nolan et al. 2014) with Anglo-Saxon countries displaying particular congruity in steadily rising inequality since the late 1970s or 80s (Hills 2010).

While income and total wealth have been the focus of much recent inequality research, Piketty's analyses and the subsequent academic debate, have put a spotlight on one specific – and contentious – dimension of wealth: housing. Rognlie (2014a; 2014b; 2015) and Bonnet et al. (2014) have taken issue with Piketty's interpretations of capital for neglecting to adequately deal with the primacy of housing in driving capital shares. While Rognlie (2015) rightly identifies the central role of housing in recent wealth dynamics (going so far as to propose a retitling of Piketty's seminal work to *Housing in the Twenty-First Century*), the author prematurely dismisses property wealth as being of lesser importance to inequality. Allegré and Timbeau (2015), however, rebut dismissals of the role of housing (i.e. Rognlie 2015; Bonnet et al. 2014) asserting its real importance as a store of wealth for current and, through bequests, future generations. In contexts of rising housing prices combined with divergence in access to ownership, housing wealth becomes a clear dimension of rising inequality (Allegré and Timbeau 2015) – conditions reflected across many advanced economies in recent decades. These debates on the role of housing capital, rather than dismissing inequality trends, emphasize a refocus on the central dimension of housing in understanding contemporary inequality.

Recent institutional and socio-economic developments have further reinforced the importance of housing wealth. Welfare residualisation and shifts towards asset-based welfare have implicitly or explicitly emphasized the role of housing wealth towards individualized economic security (Doling and Ronald 2010). At the same time, labour and housing market changes alongside reduced state support have created unfavourable conditions for younger adults in purchasing onto the housing ladder (McKee 2012; Lennartz, Arundel, and Ronald 2015). While many of these trends stretch back several decades, the recent economic crisis has intensified likely drivers of diminished housing wealth attainment for many younger, lower-income and more precarious households. On the other hand, housing price gains over the long-run and recoveries post-GFC have led to additional wealth accumulation among those most successful on the market. Particularly striking is the recent growth of secondary properties in some countries as investments to accommodate a growing class of – mainly younger – renters (Kemp 2015). Nonetheless, the role of property wealth in stratification and the effects of recent institutional and socio-economic changes on inequality dynamics have not been suitably understood or empirically evaluated.

Much existing literature on housing wealth distribution in what may be called advanced ‘homeowner societies’ (Ronald 2007), was published under considerably different contexts at the turn of the century (see Hamnett 1991; Hamnett 1999; Forrest, Murie, and Williams 1990; Hancock 1998; Henley 1998). While there has been recognition of inherent inequalities (see Henley 1998), past research has often focused on the historical role of growing homeownership in diminishing wealth disparities and the more widespread distribution of housing equity¹ compared to other assets (Hamnett 1999; Hancock 1998). This has resulted in optimistic outlooks towards potentially diminishing housing wealth inequality (Hamnett 1991) and the role of housing assets in creating widespread wealth accumulation (Hancock 1998; Malpass 2008). Past contexts of strong economic and labour conditions, socio-political backing for homeownership, alongside supportive policies led to a ‘golden age’ of increasing homeownership rates across Europe and North America – albeit differing in precise timing and conditions (Kurz and Blossfeld 2004; Forrest and Hirayama 2009; Conley and Gifford 2003). These circumstances contributed to an optimistic ‘ideology of homeownership’ as a widespread and democratic means of

economic security and wealth accumulation. Early analyses of housing and inequality under homeownership expansion endorsed its equalizing capacity as a mechanism for the democratization of wealth (Atkinson 1983; Atkinson and Harrison 1978) with the ideological-political landscape subsequently remaining one of essential consensus in the commitment to homeownership and the superiority of the market (Forrest and Hirayama 2009). Recent interpretations of the role of housing in inequality perpetuate the view of a 'broad ownership' of housing (Rognlie, 2015) and motivate claims that house value dynamics have inequality effects which are of a second order or even 'redistributive' in nature (Bonnet et al., 2014:9). In these contexts of expected homeownership expansion, those not entering owner-occupation have often been overlooked (e.g. Hamnett 1999). The contemporary reality, however, reflects instead decreasing homeownership access across many advanced economies (Lennartz, Arundel, and Ronald 2015) undermining assumptions of broad ownership diffusion. This paper contends that continued optimism may be biased by lag effects of specific historically favourable periods. Furthermore, the very fact that property remains the largest asset for most households only strengthens the need for a holistic consideration of equity outcomes and inequality trends including non-homeowners as well as more or less successful players on the property market. Finally, while key to current and potential future economic security and capital accumulation, the crucial intergenerational dimension of housing equity through inheritance or intra-vivo transfers only underlines its centrality in the longer-term reproduction of inequalities.

In understanding the housing dimension of inequality, there both appears to be significant congruities among many advanced economies as well as specific contexts where housing dynamics have been the most salient. Anglo-Saxon countries seem to especially stand out in both trends of worsening inequalities (Hills 2010; Piketty, 2014) and the special role of housing in what may be termed advanced 'homeowner societies' (Ronald 2007). The UK provides a prominent case where an arguably entrenched ideology of homeownership as a broadly distributed asset is increasingly confronted by the reality of divergent housing opportunities and uneven equity accumulation. These housing wealth processes are interconnected as both reflecting and potentially exacerbating other dynamics of inequality. In many recent measures of inequality among countries of Western Europe and North America, the UK stands out as second only to the US (Stiglitz 2012; Dorling 2014). The outcomes of the GFC

and subsequent austerity policies saw evidence of widening gaps between the lowest and highest-paid with especially limited economic opportunities for the youngest cohorts (Hills et al. 2012; McKee 2012; Forrest and Hirayama 2009). While within the UK recent public attention to housing dynamics of inequality has grown, the British case provides key insights for processes that appear across many advanced economies to varying degrees (Lennartz, Arundel and Ronald 2015; Nolan et al. 2014; Piketty 2015), yet have received little international attention.

Research

Considering the changing contemporary socio-economic reality of advanced homeowner societies and the lack of a housing focus in recent inequality literatures, this paper echoes the plea of Dorling (2014) in arguing for a better understanding of the housing wealth dimension of inequality dynamics. While there is little realistic sense in arguing for absolute equality (Stiglitz 2012, Piketty 2014), there is a compelling need to consider the extent that high levels of inequality are justifiable and, most importantly, scrutinize shifts towards worsening wealth disparities.

The paper first sets out by arguing for the special position of housing and why it matters for contemporary inequality dynamics. The research then outlines the key current processes behind potentially increasing housing wealth disparities across advanced economies. Lastly, the study turns to the British case as a prominent example of dynamics of housing wealth inequalities in an advanced homeowner society and empirically investigates through an exploratory lens the following key questions: *To what extent is housing equity a widespread or strongly concentrated asset and what are the recent trends in housing equity inequality? What are the dynamics of inter and intra-generational housing equity inequality? And what role do secondary rental property investments play in housing wealth concentration?*

2. Why does housing equity matter?

In this paper, the argument is made for the special position of housing property in the dynamics of wealth inequalities. Simply speaking, housing equity can be considered as one component of the economic portfolio of households, which includes income

stream, other financial savings and further capital wealth, such as stock investments and business holdings – net of total debts. Previous studies in economics and social stratification have focused on income inequalities as well as divergences in total wealth holdings (see Vitali, Aasvee, and Furstenberg 2014; Piketty 2014; Atkinson, Rainwater, and Smeeding 1995). While other assets may be of importance, it is proposed that housing plays an essential role that deserves particular attention in understanding the dynamics of societal inequalities for the following crucial reasons.

2.1 Housing as the largest financial asset

Capital returns from stocks and other business holdings have received much attention in analyses of inequality as they often display extreme concentrations among the most wealthy. The fact that property wealth often remains a more ‘equally’ distributed asset than others, such as income, stocks or business holdings (Appleyard and Rowlingson 2010) has to some extent falsely shielded it from scrutiny as an explicit dimension of inequality. However, it is also precisely because other asset holdings have never represented any significant source of wealth for the vast majority of households that they are less significant to the economic prospects of most (Saez and Zucman 2013; Kurz and Blossfeld 2004). On the other hand, housing commonly represents the largest financial asset held by most households (Rowlingson and McKay 2012).² In advanced homeownership societies, owning property has been a widespread achievement, albeit most notably during certain cohort periods, and thus for many households acts – or is perceived to – as an essential vehicle for storing and accumulating household wealth (Doling & Ronald 2010). Especially in the Anglo-Saxon liberal countries of the UK, the US, Canada and Australasia, homeownership has reached very high peak shares ranging from 64 to over 70% in recent decades (Ronald 2007). Considering a majority of households in such ‘homeowner societies’ are financially engaged with the housing market, yet with very differentiated outcomes, it is clear that housing prospects are key to economic inequality.

2.2 Does housing equity matter as household wealth?

In arguing for the centrality of housing in inequality dynamics, there are two key critiques that should be addressed. The first centres around the fact that housing

equity represents a financial asset that is considered more difficult to quickly or fully capitalize – being infrequently sold or traded – and therefore equity values ‘on paper’ may not reflect real accessible wealth (Bonnet et al. 2014; Buiiter 2008). It is true that there are various reasons why a household may not realize housing wealth even in periods of some need, from a reluctance to sell because of attachment or the difficulty of realizing a suitable alternative dwelling. Dismissing housing wealth because of the difficulty of quick capital realisation is, however, shortsighted. The fact is that when it comes to real outcomes of inequality, housing wealth *matters* both in the present and, even more so, over the longer-term. While not as liquid as other capital, housing wealth can still be leveraged and, in some cases, act as a catalyzing agent for the accumulation of more capital. These include more abstract notions of savings from imputed rent (Richardson and Doling 2005; Tunstall et al. 2013) and indirect benefits of higher housing quality which may act as a better locus of intra-family exchanges of welfare support (Druta, forthcoming) or better locational access to superior job markets and schools (Sherraden 2002; Dorling 2014). More directly, mechanisms of equity release can leverage housing wealth for other household investments (Lowe, Searle, and Smith 2012). Beyond numerous implications in the short and medium terms, housing equity can play an even more essential role over the longer-term in reproducing inequalities over generations through transfers of housing wealth via inheritance; especially when housing values rise alongside discriminant access (Allegre and Timbeau, 2015). This is in addition to ‘intra-vivo’ transfers from parents whether indirect support or leveraging equity to help offspring purchase their own home as a normalized means by which housing pathways are reproduced over generations (Druta, forthcoming).

2.3 What about alternative tenures and forms of savings?

A second critique regarding the focus on housing equity is the contention against placing too much supremacy on owner-occupation and that rental tenures can provide a suitable alternative means of dwelling. While rental may indeed provide comparably adequate shelter – with potential benefits in terms of short-term flexibility (Kemp and Keoghan 2001) – this neglects the aforementioned medium direct and indirect benefits that can be leveraged through ownership and equity. Furthermore, in many countries – especially more (neo-)liberal contexts such as the UK – social rental

housing has become increasingly residualized and difficult to access (Henley 1998; Kemp and Keoghan 2001). While it may provide affordable housing to an important minority,³ the buffering subsidy of below-market rents in no way counteracts the type of housing wealth concentrations at the higher end of the spectrum. Private rental options, on the other hand, often suffer from issues of affordability and precarity (Kemp 2015).⁴ While tenants are clearly excluded from accumulating housing wealth, it can be contended that alternative tenures may ‘free-up money’ for other investments thereby balancing out potential accrued property gains. However, this does not appear to be empirically supported where, as previously mentioned, other financial savings are of little importance to a vast majority of households (Kurz and Blossfeld 2004). If foregoing home purchase allowed adequate substitute investment, it could be expected that including other financial wealth and savings would temper inequalities, however, there is evidence for the opposite effect.⁵ In terms of the vast majority in such homeowner societies, there simply is no evidence of a clear substitute mechanism of saving and capital accumulation. This is further reflected on the macro-scale by the preeminent growth of housing wealth in the share of capital across many economies (Piketty, 2014; Rognlie, 2015; Bonnet et al., 2014). Lastly, when it comes to a fundamental longer-term perspective on the dynamics of inequality, housing equity is essential in considering reproductions of stratification across generations – a degree of inheritable wealth lacking for most non-homeowners.

2.4 Housing and asset-based welfare

Further underscoring the salience of homeownership and housing wealth is the erosion of traditional state support and the attendant promotion of ideals of an individualized ‘asset-based’ welfare. In the face of a rollback in state welfare in many advanced economies, accumulating private housing equity has become a major means towards financial security (Doling and Ronald 2010; Saunders 1990; Conley and Gifford 2003). Widespread homeownership was either explicitly or implicitly promoted as a means of shifting welfare responsibility onto private households and the market (Forrest and Hirayama 2009), especially in leveraging property equity for retirement (Tunstall et al. 2013). Housing was seen as the most suitable means of government supported saving (Doling and Ronald 2010) with Malpass (2008) declaring homeownership as the ‘cornerstone’ of the new welfare state. The

interrelated residualisation of welfare support and the promotion of individualized asset-based welfare has sharply increased the salience of housing equity, while those that have been shut out or fared worse on the housing market are left with increasingly diminished alternative resources.

3. Processes of Increasing Housing Inequality

Essential to understanding the housing wealth dimension of inequality is recognizing the contemporary processes that may be stimulating growing divergences. Inequalities arise both from drivers that limit access to property ownership as well as processes that increase equity differences among homeowner households. Three principal dynamics can be identified as impacting on housing wealth disparity: a) reduced purchase onto the housing market, b) on-going financialisation of the housing sector, and c) housing stock concentration such as through private landlordism. The following sections outline these key processes affecting contemporary housing inequality across advanced economies with a special focus on the British situation.

3.1 Reduced First-Time-Buyers

A primary process with which housing wealth disparity has grown in recent years has been through the reduced flow onto the housing market of younger generations resulting in a progressive concentration of equity among previous cohorts. In most advanced economies the recent trends have clearly indicated a reduced access to homeownership among younger adults and those of lower socioeconomic status (Lennartz, Arundel, and Ronald 2015; Kurz and Blossfeld 2004) – exemplified in labels for young adults such as ‘generation rent’ (see McKee 2012) or ‘failure-to-launch households’ (Mykyta 2012). As outlined below, a variety of factors have reduced ownership purchase reflecting the interrelated nature of different dimensions of inequality with significant potential effects on housing wealth accumulation.

A primary driver of reduced first-time buyers has been labour market changes especially affecting younger adults and those with lower educational status. Longer-term trends of economic restructuring towards ‘flexibilization’ and ‘individualization’ have undermined elements of economic certainty that existed under previous Fordist

conditions (see Beck 1992; Giddens 1999). The results have been higher youth unemployment, underemployment, contract insecurity or increasing disparities in labour outcomes within advanced economies (see Buchman and Kriesi 2011; McKee 2012; Nolan et al. 2014). There is evidence of a decrease in relative incomes of younger people over the longer term (Andrew and Pannell 2006), while recent labour market difficulties have most affected younger generations and those already in more precarious positions (Hills et al. 2012; Clapham et al. 2010; McKee 2012).⁶ Compounding labour precarity, the increased pressure for a better-educated workforce combined with government cuts and rising educational costs have meant large debts upon graduation, especially among those of more disadvantaged backgrounds (Buchmann and Kriesi 2011; Hills et al. 2012). Increased education indebtedness has hindered traditional adulthood transitions, including into owner-occupation (Arundel and Ronald 2015). Furthermore, many countries have witnessed a rolling-back of the welfare state from the 1980s onwards (Forrest and Hirayama 2009). This trend has continued across Northern Europe and has especially intensified post-GFC as austerity ideology has dominated. Recent British government pledges have been to implement unprecedented cuts to social expenditure towards GDP shares not seen since the 1940s (Kemp 2015) with austerity measures especially disadvantaging lower-income and younger households (Hills et al. 2012).⁷ Alongside this increased economic precarity, house prices have not significantly dropped (and commonly continued rising) in many countries, reducing housing affordability (Resolution Foundation 2013). Further reductions in housing starts post-GFC in many countries helped limit a clear ‘correction’ in house prices (Kemp 2015) with the average savings and costs needed for home purchase moving beyond the capacity of many – particularly younger – households (Resolution Foundation 2013; Doling and Richard 2010).⁸ While access to homeownership has been strongly connected to the availability of mortgage credit (Aalbers 2012; Aalbers and Christophers 2014), the post-GFC period additionally saw stricter lending practices shutting out those with little savings or unstable labour conditions (Lennartz, Arundel, and Ronald 2015).

These concomitant forces have made smooth entry onto the housing ladder difficult or out-of-reach for many. The result has been an increasing delay in leaving the parental home and subsequently unstable housing careers with little opportunity for property investment (Arundel and Ronald 2015; Arundel and Lennartz 2015;

Hochstenbach and Boterman 2014; Forrest and Yip 2012). Recent analyses show significant decreases in homeownership access for 18-34 year olds across all core European countries from 2007 to 2012 with especially significant declines where market-based homeownership sectors had been most heavily promoted, such as the UK (Lennartz, Arundel, and Ronald 2015). While it may be possible to describe a past 'golden-age' of homeownership which left many of the baby-boomer generation in possession of substantial housing wealth (Kurz and Blossfeld 2004; Forrest and Hirayama 2009; Conley and Gifford 2003), current conditions seem to be converging towards quite the reverse among recent cohorts.

3.2 Financialization of Housing

While more multifaceted in impacts, it is impossible to understand housing wealth disparities as divested from underlying shifts towards an increasing financialization of the housing market and its integration into global circulations of finance. These trends impact in complex ways both access to homeownership as well as divergences among those successful in accumulating substantial property portfolios and those struggling on the housing market. Housing – as a new frontier of late neoliberalism – has witnessed a fundamental commodification alongside a transformation of mortgage systems from a 'facilitating market' for homeowners to increasingly facilitating global investment (Aalbers 2008). The outcomes of the financialization and commodification of housing have been felt with special intensity in those countries combining strong neo-liberal agendas with a committed ideology in homeownership, such as the UK and US (Relink 2013; Ronald 2008). These trends saw the concomitant divestment of support for state-subsidized housing or rent control policies along with the expansion of mortgage credit as the default means to housing access (Aalbers 2008; Aalbers and Christophers 2014; Saunders 1990; Lennartz, Haffner and Oxley 2012). While the credit boom did, on the one hand, allow entry to homeownership to lower income households, it achieved this through extending loans to increasingly risky borrowers usually at higher costs – so-called 'subprime' mortgages often hidden behind opaque agreements – which exposed the most precarious buyers to high levels of financial risk. The financialization of housing led to diminished alternative pathways of housing and a growing attractiveness of property as an investment vehicle, the outcomes of which were a boom in housing

prices in many contexts, a strong increase in the exposure to risk for many, and an integration of this risk into global circuits of capital and finance (Aalbers 2008). Rolnik (2013, 1059) argues that:

The commodification of housing, as well as the increased use of housing as an investment asset integrated in a globalized financial market, has profoundly affected the enjoyment of the right to adequate housing across the world.... towards the abandonment of the conceptual meaning of housing as a social good, part of the commonalities a society agrees to share or to provide to those with fewer resources: a means to distribute wealth.

On a macro-scale, Stiglitz (2012) argues that the increased availability of credit means that those holding assets that can be used as collateral, especially property, see them increase in value thus constraining affordability for many while disproportionately advantaging the wealthy. A more globally interlinked and thus increasingly volatile housing market intensifies disparities between those respectively advantaged or disadvantaged by timing and ability to leverage capital and credit (Doling and Ronald 2010; Forrest and Hirayama 2009). Volatility, returns and financial risk are further increasingly divergent across housing subsectors (Larsen and Sommervoll 2004) or in terms of geographic space (Marciniczak et al. 2016). At the global scale, the search for returns through prime real estate have seen the flow of capital into specific hotspot markets, such as London, exacerbating local affordability while often rewarding those with the ability to play on the international property market (Kemp 2015).

3.3 Multiple Property Ownership and the Growth of Private Landlordism

A final process that intensifies housing wealth disparity is reflected by further concentration of existing housing stock, namely through multiple property ownership. A counterpoint to the increasingly reduced opportunities of homeownership access and the growing financialization of housing is the flipside of 'generation rent', or what has been termed 'generation landlord' (Ronald, Kadi and Lennartz 2015). The British situation provides a particularly salient case of growing landlordism. The accumulation of secondary properties for rental has been dramatic over recent years with estimates of landlords in the UK growing from about 558,000 in 1991 to over 2.12 million in 2012 (Ronald, Kadi, and Lennartz 2015). The revival of private

landlordism has been propelled by mortgage sector developments with, in the UK, the Buy-To-Let (BTL) loans being at the fore. Neo-liberal processes of financialization saw international capital markets, securitization products and the global oversupply of credit lead to a search of new sources of borrowers which, in the UK, explicitly included products geared towards private landlords (Schwartz and Seabrooke 2009). BTL mortgages became relatively cheap and easy to access for those that had the necessary capital to meet higher loan-to-value requirements. BTL grew rapidly in the UK from the early 2000s reaching over 10% of loans in the pre-crisis peak and with only a short-lived slump post-GFC (Kemp 2015). Following the crisis, financial policy measures boosted credit availability at attractive interest rates,⁹ but combined with stricter post-GFC lending criteria, these loans went out to home-buyers already in better financial positions and especially in the form of BTL mortgages (Cunliffe 2014 in Kemp 2015). Lower interest rates and yields on government bonds, bank deposits and pension annuities, increased the relative attractiveness of investment in real estate and rental properties for those who had available capital (Green and Bentley 2014). Compounded by a continued under-supply of housing and rolled-back investment in social housing provision, these interventions saw house prices not falling as much as expected in the crisis aftermath (Whitehead and Williams 2011; Williams 2011). The result was that, while entry to the property ladder became more difficult for many, investment by existing holders of (housing) wealth in secondary rental properties became increasingly easy and attractive. Despite recognition of an acceleration of secondary property investment, the broader impacts that these dynamics have had on housing wealth concentration have been mostly neglected.

4. Housing equity inequality dynamics: the British case

Having identified in the previous sections the primary – and interrelated – processes behind housing wealth divergences across many advanced economies, the following turns to an empirical evaluation of evidence of housing wealth inequality outcomes. Taken together, these various interrelated processes appear to follow generational cleavages where younger cohorts increasingly face reduced opportunities. While, at the same time, further dynamics of financialisation, interaction with other dimensions of inequality and concentration of housing stock may also create important intra-generational disparities. The British case provides a key example of a context of both

clearly rising inequality (Stiglitz 2012; Dorling 2014), welfare residualisation and an embedded ideology of homeownership alongside its (perceived) centrality towards privatized economic security (Kemp 2015; Forrest and Hirayama 2009). The British context is at the forefront of processes affecting housing wealth inequality across many advanced economies – with notable congruity across Anglo-Saxon nations (Hills 2012). While there has been recent British media attention, there remains a dearth of academic empirical analysis or understanding of such property wealth dynamics on the international stage. Looking at Great Britain, results to the three empirical research questions are presented. While the research remains exploratory in nature and recognizes the limitations of such a macro-level investigation, it establishes an empirical basis for reassessing ideological notions of the widespread nature of housing wealth through a contemporary investigation of the three dimensions of: total housing equity concentration, inter and intra-generational trends, and the recent rise in landlordism.

4.1 Data and Methodology

The empirical component makes use of the Wealth and Assets Survey (WAS): a large-sample survey across Great Britain¹⁰ specifically designed for gathering data on wealth and income across individuals and households. It was conducted in three waves – 2006-8, 2008-10, and 2010-12 – providing an invaluable picture of conditions prior to the crisis, in the immediate post-GFC years and into the recent so-called recovery. The WAS included a sample of between 20,000 to 30,000 households per wave.¹¹ The analysis was conducted at the household level with individual attributes, such as age, based on values from the head of household or principal household reference. The main measure of housing wealth is calculated as net housing equity, representing all reported property values minus all outstanding mortgage debts. Landlord households were those that own secondary properties from which they reported rental income. Appropriate weighting variables were used to correct for sampling biases and monetary values were corrected for inflation using Bank of England rates when comparing across waves. Where changes in shares of equity are calculated, *t*-tests were conducted and statistical significance is reported in figures.

4.2 Total Housing Equity Concentration and Trends

Considering the ideology of the democratization of housing assets in advanced homeowner societies, the first fundamental question to consider is: *to what extent is housing equity a widespread or strongly concentrated asset?* Looking at the distribution of total housing equity values in three periods of 2006-8, 2008-10, and 2010-12 (see Figure 1) provides a clear picture of contemporary housing equity inequality across British households.

The first striking feature is the degree of concentration of housing equity among the top decile in contrast to a considerable portion of households who have either negative, nothing, or close to zero in terms of net housing wealth. The share of housing equity among just the top 20% consistently represents over 60%, while the top 40% hold over 85% across the 2006 to 2012 period. While equity (as net value after owed mortgages) reflects best the current housing wealth of a household there is a clear argument to be made that there is a natural degree of necessary inequality considering that equity is built up slowly over the life-course as the mortgage matures. To take this into consideration, the distribution of total housing *values* without subtracted mortgage debt subtracted was also examined. Even looking at measures of total housing value distribution there are persistently high degrees of wealth concentration holding true either across total population, or only among those aged 50 plus, expected to have mostly already entered homeownership and ‘traded up’ to their final residence.¹² This further undermines potential notions that the measured inequality could be mainly a reflection of differences in mortgage stage and evidences real concentrations of wealth across both housing equity and total values.

[INSERT FIGURE 1]

Beyond the absolute degree of housing wealth concentration, the next essential consideration is *whether recent trends are moving toward decreasing or increasing housing wealth inequality?* While Figure 1 reflects reduced access to homeownership as well as the crisis effect in terms of some decreases in total equity values (especially from 2006/8 to 2008/10), changes in the distribution of equity are of most importance for inequality considerations. The analysis demonstrates that on top of some decrease of equity across deciles, a steady divergence is evident with a clear growth in concentration among both the top 40% and top 20% holders of housing equity. Growing inequality is apparent across the three waves with a significant increase since the GFC. The ratio of average equity among the top decile compared to the full bottom *half* of households reveal multiples increasing from 30.75 in 2006/8 to over 35 times in 2010/12. These examinations of total housing equity levels in Great Britain clearly reflect the unequal distribution across households and fundamentally undermine notions of housing as a democratic or widespread asset. Beyond this, the recent trends reveal a clear exacerbation of such housing wealth inequalities.

4.3 Dynamics of Inter and Intra-generational Inequality

While there are limitations in predictive power considering length of years in the data, untangling some of the age group dynamics helps to further uncover the interplay between and within cohorts, especially impacts on young adults likely facing most the consequences of changing socio-economic contexts. The second consideration is thus: *what are the dynamics of inter and intra-generational housing equity inequality?*

As noted, there are certain generations that particularly benefitted from a period of favourable labour market conditions, housing affordability, supportive policies and subsidized transfers of public housing. Adding to studies that have pointed to generational homeownership rate variation (see Kurz and Blossfeld 2004; McKee 2010; Forrest and Hirayama 2009), the analysis shows clear concentrations among certain British cohorts in measures of equity and housing value (see Figure 2). Excluding non-homeowners emphasizes the cohort differences even only among homeowners while further considering housing values provides an estimate of potential housing equity that takes into consideration natural mortgage payment cycles.¹³ The results show a significant bulge among the middle cohort with those

born in the post-war decades displaying the most success compared to both younger and older households. This cohort difference is apparent even among only homeowners and for both equity as well as housing value estimates.

[INSERT FIGURE 2]

Adding to this, a differentiated examination of housing equity development among younger adults aged 20-39 (see Figure 3) reveals an even more striking pattern. The most remarkable development among younger age cohorts in Great Britain has been a dramatic reduction in housing equity holdings, which have steadily diminished across all deciles. This echoes the reduction of younger adults' entry into homeownership in the face of pressures of labour and economic precarity, educational debt, continued high housing prices, austerity measures, and restricted credit access (see Lennartz, Arundel, and Ronald 2015). On top of the already striking widespread decrease in equity accumulation, there is also a significant increase in shares of housing wealth concentrated among the top 20% and 40% of young adults. Comparing the pattern among only young adults to all households (shown in Figure 1) reveals clearly their especially disadvantaged position with much sharper decreases in equity. The results here visibly point to growing intergenerational inequalities in net housing wealth. However, beyond this, there is a significant growth in differentiation of equity accumulation among younger adults – echoed across other age groups¹⁴ – pointing to simultaneous increases in *inter* and *intra*-generational inequalities.

[INSERT FIGURE 3]

Figure 4 further considers housing equity in relation to income across both younger and older households for the final wave 2010-12. The broad picture revealed is that housing equity is clearly also concentrated among higher income households; further questioning any redistributive function of housing assets at the macro-level. Nonetheless, there are measures of equity across all income deciles, reflecting at least some circumstances where housing wealth is possibly counterbalancing income poverty. Cases where homeownership wealth compliments otherwise low incomes have been shown to be a very small fraction of the population and primarily limited to among lower-income pensioners (Orton 2006; Sodha 2005; Rowlingson and McKay 2012; Hancock 1998). The intergenerational dynamics between younger and older heads of household in Figure 4 support the likelihood that these cases are principally found among older cohorts, likely pensioners or those that accessed housing through historically favourable conditions.¹⁵ On the other hand, the analysis shows equity among younger adults even more concentrated among higher-income groups, again reflecting the likely stronger significance of income as a determining factor for homeownership access among recent generations. The empirical analyses of housing equity distribution and equity over income reflect fundamental patterns of existing – and increasing – *inter* and *intra*-generational inequalities in housing wealth in Great Britain. These are very significant results both for the immediate realities of economic inequities as well as in terms of what reduced and diverging wealth accumulation among younger generations means for the future exacerbation of inequalities as a housing-equity-disadvantaged generation ages in an era of increasing individualized responsibility for economic security.

[INSERT FIGURE 4]

4.4 Landlordism and Housing Equity Inequality

The third empirical investigation considers the inequality dynamics of recent growths in landlords and the circulation of capital in rental property markets. As the flipside to ‘generation rent’ among younger cohorts, the British housing market has witnessed a very significant growth in landlords over the last few decades with an especially rapid increase in the post-crisis years (Ronald, Kadi, and Lennartz 2015). Many of these new landlords have been small-scale rather than large investors¹⁶ with primary motivation for rental property investment reported as for retirement needs, tending to paint a picture of a relatively disadvantaged pensioner ‘landlord’ whose rental income might overcome deficiencies in income or other wealth (Lord, Lloyd, and Barnes 2013). However, there is little serious evaluation of who these landlords represent and crucially to what extent the boom in rental properties (i.e. through BTL) is a force for redistribution or rather an intensification of existing wealth inequalities. Considering these significant dynamics, the analysis investigates the key question of *what role secondary rental property investments play in housing wealth concentration?*

Looking at the results from the WAS data (Figure 5), a very striking pattern is revealed in terms of British landlords in relation to the spectrum of existing housing wealth distribution. The highest proportions of landlords are very clearly found among the top decile of housing equity holders, with very low levels of landlordism anywhere below the top two deciles. The included table represents the concentration of counts of landlord households among these equity deciles and reveals that over 65% are concentrated in the top 20% of housing wealthy households – an even higher degree than total housing equity – and over 80% among the top 40% throughout the 2006-12 period. While there is little clear change in the distribution of landlordism

over recent years, the absolute levels of concentration represent itself a very significant finding. The skew of the distribution means that roughly half of all landlord households in the UK are found within the very top decile of housing wealth. This undermines characterizations of BTL loans and landlords being a more marginal group able to leverage rental assets to balance out otherwise meagre wealth holdings – a.k.a. ‘mom and pop’ investors. The pattern rather points to concentrations of rental property owners among those already most successful on the housing market.

[INSERT FIGURE 5]

To further untangle the extent of landlordism as a dimension of economic concentration, the analysis examined the distribution and average rental returns with regards to household income levels (pre-rent) in the most recent wave (see Figure 6). Although slightly less steeply concentrated than housing wealth, the results again show a clearly skewed distribution with a very large proportion of landlords especially within the top income decile. While some landlords are evident across quantiles – potentially reflecting some pensioners supplementing low-incomes with rental revenue (Lord, Lloyd and Barnes 2013) – the proportion is minor. Looking at average rental income, the results are even more striking with returns generated from rental properties being even more disproportionately concentrated among the top decile. The picture here provides empirical evidence that landlords are very likely to be among income-rich households and those landlords are also the ones more likely to generate higher returns. The analysis substantiates the role of increased capital circulation in the British rental property market as a significant driver of continued wealth concentration and growing economic inequalities.

[INSERT FIGURE 6]

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The paper argues for a necessary recognition of the special position of housing wealth in contemporary dynamics of inequalities and a reconsideration of engrained ideologies surrounding the widespread and redistributive nature of property equity. Processes of reduced access to homeownership related to growing labour and economic precarity, austerity policies and educational indebtedness increasingly diminish opportunities for equity accumulation among many – especially more precarious and younger – households (Lennartz, Arundel, and Ronald 2015; Kemp 2015; McKee 2012; Buchman and Kriesi 2011; Hills et al. 2012). Broader trends in financialization and credit markets have likely both buoyed house prices while complicating affordability and increasing exposure to financial risk; thus exacerbating divergences between those more or less successful on the property market (Forrest and Hirayama 2009; Larsen and Sommervoll 2004; Aalbers 2008). While housing equity continues to become more salient in the face of state welfare residualisation (Doling and Ronald 2010; Rolnik 2013; Ronald 2008), the evidence seems to point to many of these same forces driving increasing housing wealth concentration and undermining the very ideologies behind widespread asset-based economic security.

The results of an exploratory examination of the British case clearly point to the unequal nature of housing equity. The empirical evidence points to the starkly concentrated nature of contemporary property wealth and, crucially, significant trends towards increasing equity concentration. These inequality trends are further playing out at both *inter* and *intra*-generational levels with trends in decreasing equity especially pronounced among young cohorts alongside growing divides between more or less successful households within age groups. On the other end of the spectrum, capital circulation in the secondary rental property market and the rise of landlordism is presenting a fundamental dimension of further increased housing wealth concentration for those with higher (housing) wealth and incomes.

While tackling fundamental dimensions of housing equity distribution, the caveats to such a macro-level and exploratory study are also recognized. Firstly, the length of suitable data available prevents an examination of longer-term trends beyond a reliance on limited preceding research. Of course, it is also difficult to predict future developments in homeownership access and the intensity with which delays or deferrals of property purchase will accrue future disadvantage in equity accumulation. Nonetheless, the contemporary empirical evidence pointing to exacerbation rather than reversal of inter or intra-generational inequality should not be understated. Secondly, as common to research examining wealth or income distribution, there are likely biases of underreporting among the wealthiest individuals whose financial holdings often can be more opaque. It would thus be expected that wealth concentration may be even more skewed than apparent in the WAS data further strengthening conclusions of housing equity inequalities. Finally, the scope of the research is not able to unpack the specific mechanisms by which housing investments differentiate equity accumulation. Despite the necessary limitations of the exploratory research, the focus herein is crucial in establishing a critical examination of contemporary housing wealth as well as current trends in equity inequality. The further hope is of stimulating future research in addressing these limitations and in deepening understanding in the specific role of housing in inequality dynamics.

While some past criticisms have arisen, there has remained an engrained optimism and purchase into the ideology of homeownership as a redistributive force of capital accumulation and an attainable goal for widespread sectors of society. Where growing problems of limited access to homeownership have been highlighted – especially among a young generation increasingly seen as restricted to ‘generation rent’ – scholars and the media have decried the lack of access by these groups to what is still implicitly presented as an ‘equalizing’ housing ladder. This assumption negates the fundamental transformative development of the housing market into a dimension of growing inequalities. While underlining difficulties of homeownership access for younger and lower-income households is an important piece of the puzzle, neglecting concentrations of housing equity at the higher end of the wealth spectrum, such as through a growing ‘landlord class,’ masks an essential holistic perspective of a housing system itself that may be becoming a vehicle for growing societal inequality rather than widespread financial security. At the macro-scale, recent research has both

highlighted growing inequalities across most advanced economies as well as the primary and growing role of housing capital within these dynamics of unequal wealth accumulation (see Piketty 2014; Rognlie 2014; Stiglitz 2015; Nolan et al. 2014; Allegré and Timbeau 2015). Rather than optimistically dismissing housing as a widespread and redistributive mechanism of wealth – perspectives historically entrenched in homeownership ideologies – it is essential to better understand the true nature of property within dynamics of established and increasing inequalities.

Beyond bringing these theoretical discussions to the fore, an examination of the British case provides an invaluable empirical look at housing equity inequalities within an established homeownership society facing advanced trends in increasing inequality and differentiated housing market opportunities. While issues surrounding housing access and inequality are more implicit within the British public debate, these investigations provide both empirical evidence as well as essential lessons for international contexts where similar trends may be emerging (Lennartz, Arundel and Ronald 2015; Nolan et al. 2014; Piketty 2015) yet have not received proper academic attention. It is hoped that further research in both similar homeowner societies, such as other liberal Anglo-Saxon contexts, as well as across differing housing systems and welfare regimes would enrich comparative understandings of housing inequalities.

The implicit promotion of financial security for all households through homeownership has likely forever been a false promise, as sectors of the population have always been shut out, but in periods of relatively widespread access, there was justifiable optimism in homeownership as a more equalizing sector of wealth accumulation. The contemporary trends pointing to limited access of homeownership seem to coincide especially in those housing markets where increases have been the largest and most heavily promoted and where ideas of asset-based welfare have been given strongest currency (Lennartz, Arundel, and Ronald 2015). The context of Great Britain as an advanced homeowner society presents a case where ideologies of a property-owning democracy (Ronald 2007) seem to be contradicted by the empirical reality of high-levels of housing wealth inequality and trends towards increasing disparities. This apparent continued concentration of housing equity among a select group of (secondary) property owners brings into question arguments for housing assets as a means for widespread welfare security. If homeownership has been proposed as the cornerstone of the new welfare state (Malpass 2008), what does it

imply for the continued stability of the social fabric when this foundation becomes progressively more lopsided with one sector increasingly lavishly buttressed while others lack support? The message here is not that the issues of unequal wealth accumulation are limited to housing equity, nor that solutions to inequality arise from tackling only problems within the housing system. Rather, housing dynamics are inextricably linked to essential underlying dilemmas of income inequalities, increasingly precarious labour markets, education indebtedness, or financialisation. Within these contexts, the notion of housing equity accumulation as a broadly equalizing economic force is something that defies the growing reality of how housing markets have recently developed across many advanced economies. In the face of increasing financialization of housing, growing landlordism among the wealthier, and few options outside of homeownership or an expensive and precarious private rental market, the practice of accessing shelter becomes a highly financialized decision wherein the circulation of capital may increasingly resemble a divergence into a class renters and a class of ‘rentiers’.

Word count: 7,650

Notes

1. Housing *equity* is used throughout the paper and, following standard definition, represents the housing wealth at a point in time as the assessed value of all properties net of all mortgage debts.
2. Housing in the UK accounted for approximately 37% of household wealth over 2010-12 (ONS 2014) and is only matched by private pension holdings (ONS 2014). Pension wealth arguably does not play the same role as its access is limited to a certain age group, within which there is little exemption, and it is generally not directly transferable across generations.
3. Roughly 17% of households across the UK were in public housing in 2014 (DCLG 2014). Whereas the sector is smaller and residualised in England, in some contexts such as Scotland public housing represents an important alternative for a larger proportion of urban households.
4. In terms of the UK case, the quality of private rental options is contingent on substantial regional variation in affordability and jurisdictional differences where, for example, weaker tenant rights are evident in England versus Scotland.
5. Based on author’s own analysis of the British case using ONS Wealth and Assets Survey 2006-2012 adding other forms of financial savings increased disparities between wealth deciles.
6. Comparing data from 2006-8 to 2010 in the UK, real wages for employees in their 20s fell by between 5 and 8% for both men and women and 8 to 10% for lowest-income employees. On the other hand, wages grew 2% for those in their late 50s (Labour Force Survey in Hills et al. 2012).
7. A recent evaluation of the outcome of tax and benefit systems in reducing the consequences of labour market inequalities, show no effective attenuating impact for the deteriorating position of young adults in their 20s between 2007-8 and 2011-12 in the UK (Hills et al. 2012).
8. This is evidenced by rising ratios of house prices to earnings, where the estimated time needed to save for an average deposit in the UK rose from less than 5 years in 1983 to over 25 at the pre-crisis peak (Resolution Foundation 2013).

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9. Post-GFC, the Bank of England oversaw a reduction of the interest rate to an all-time low of 0.5%, a program of quantitative easing and, finally, the provision of cheap loans to banks for lending towards home purchase through the Funding for Lending Scheme (Kemp 2015).
 10. The WAS data excludes Northern Ireland. While some of the discussion of policy, housing system and historical context refers to sources across the entirety of the UK, the difference in geographical entity is not considered to impact the findings significantly. Nonetheless, it is recognized that variation within the included jurisdictions exists, especially in terms of housing system policy and practices in Scotland versus England.
 11. A usable sample of 30587 households in wave one, 20165 in wave two, and 21446 in wave three.
 12. Based on the author's further analysis of the WAS data, total housing value distribution over all households showed very high levels of concentration with roughly 80% of housing value held by the top 40% and over 55% among top 20%. Just looking at those with a head of household over 50 still showed concentrations of over 77% and 54% respectively. Both the full age group and over 50 year olds show significant changes towards increasing inequality in total housing value between, at minimum, the last two waves.
 13. Looking at average housing values instead of equity helps to control for the natural life-cycle of the mortgage which is gradually paid off as cohorts age – albeit effects of 'trading-up' later in life are not possible to control for. Average values are shown to take into consideration different demographic bulges in population. Unfortunately, due to the waves being averaged over two-year periods, there is some overlap among the birth year ranges.
 14. Further analyses of equity by the author also pointed to significant increases in inequality among only those with heads of households 50 and older.
 15. In the UK, this included the transfer of public housing through the Right-to-Buy (RTB) scheme which particularly benefitted certain older cohorts (Forrest and Hirayama 2009; Jones and Murie 2006). RTB resulted in nearly 3 million homes being sold to tenants at mostly below-market rates with up to 38% having incomes below the national average (Jones 2003; Searle and Koppe 2014).
 16. 89% of English landlords are private individuals with 78% owning only one more property (Ronald, Kadi, and Lennartz 2015).

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Figure Captions:

Figure 1: Total housing equity in Great Britain by deciles

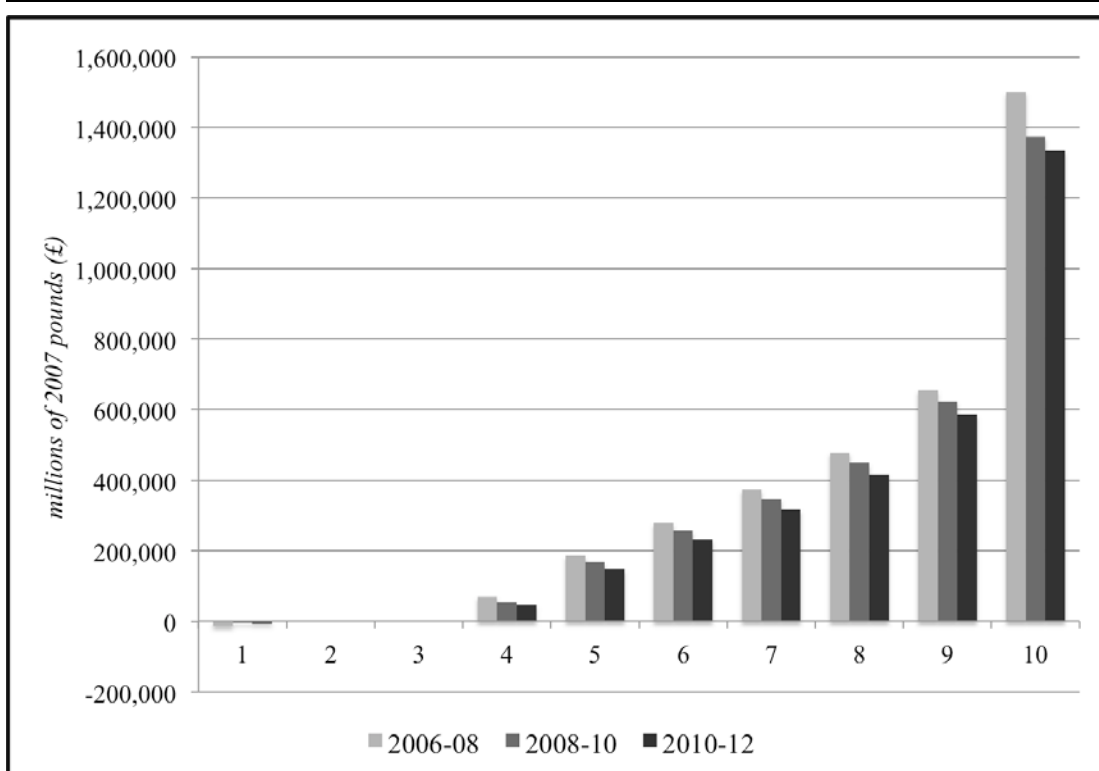
Figure 2: Average housing value and equity among homeowners by cohort – 2010/12

Figure 3: Total housing equity among 20-39 year olds by deciles

Figure 4: Average housing equity by household income deciles – 2010/12

Figure 5: Proportion of landlord households per housing equity deciles

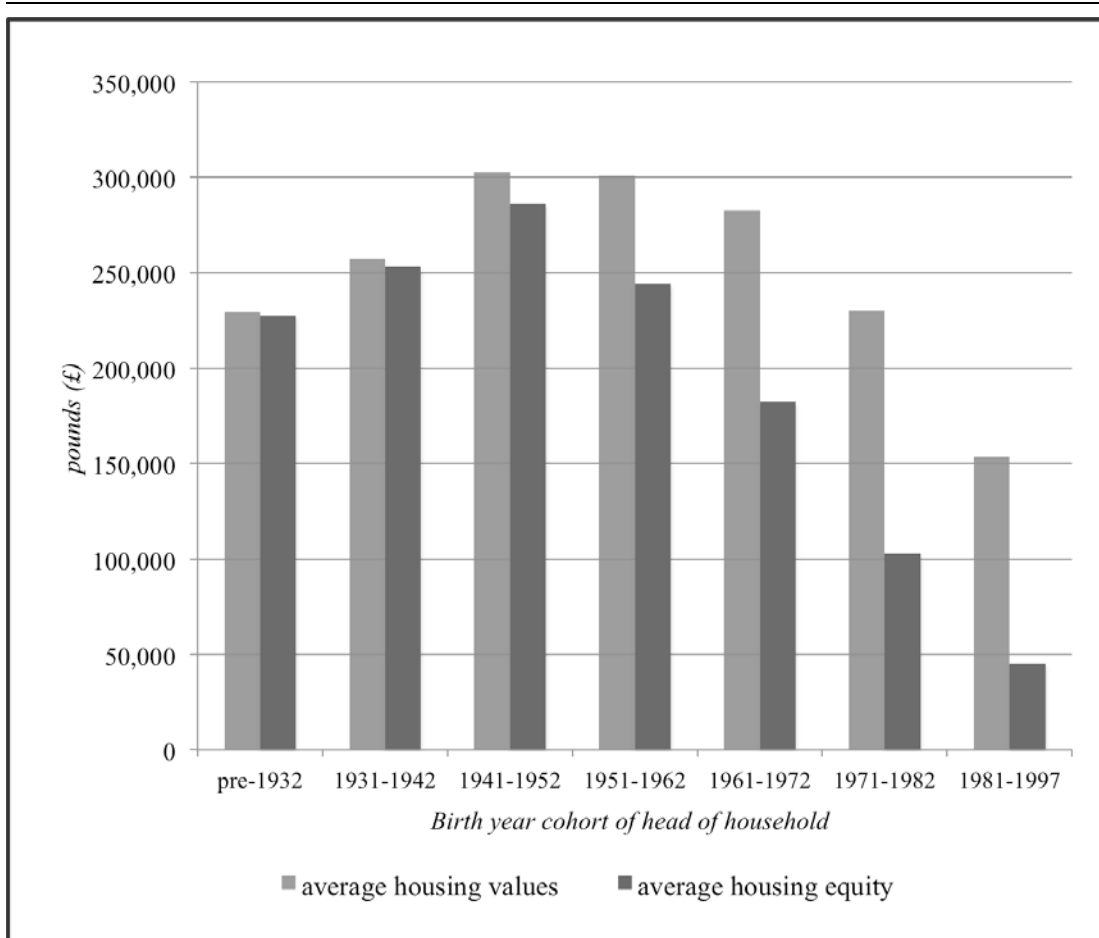
Figure 6: Proportion of landlord households and average rent income per pre-rent income deciles – 2010/12



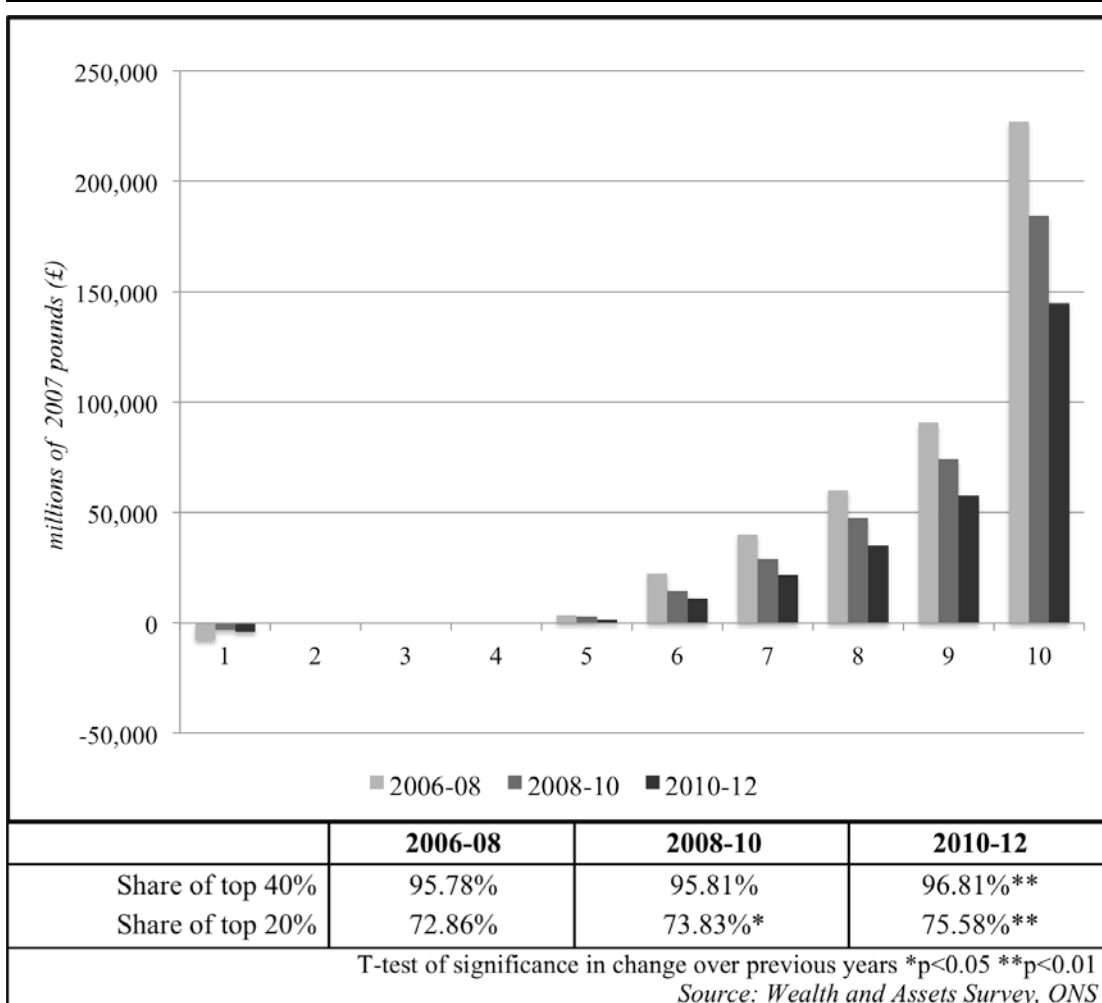
	2006-08	2008-10	2010-12
Share of top 40%	85.21%	85.49%	86.32%**
Share of top 20%	61.09%	61.07%	62.49%**
Ratio of average equity in top 10% vs. bottom 50%	30.75	31.65	35.27

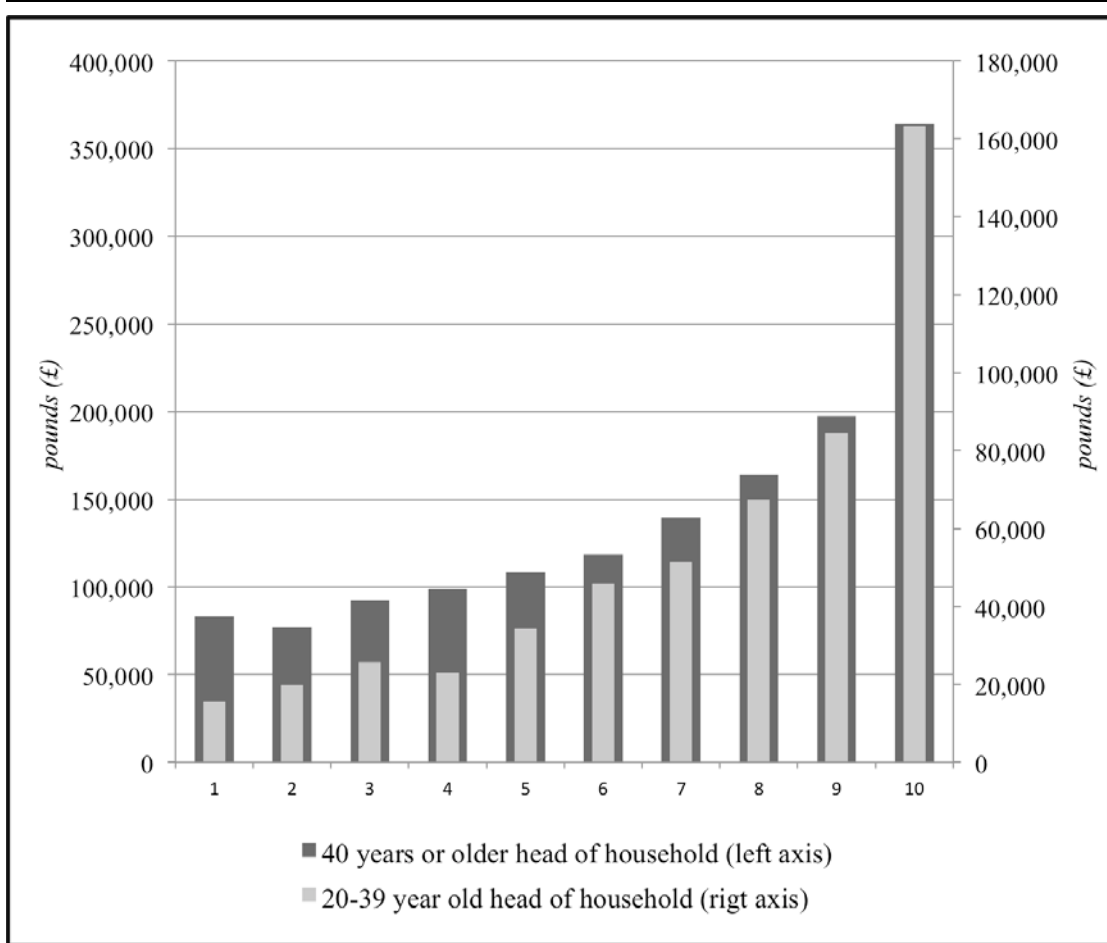
T-test of significance in change over previous years *p<0.05 **p<0.01

Source: *Wealth and Assets Survey, ONS*

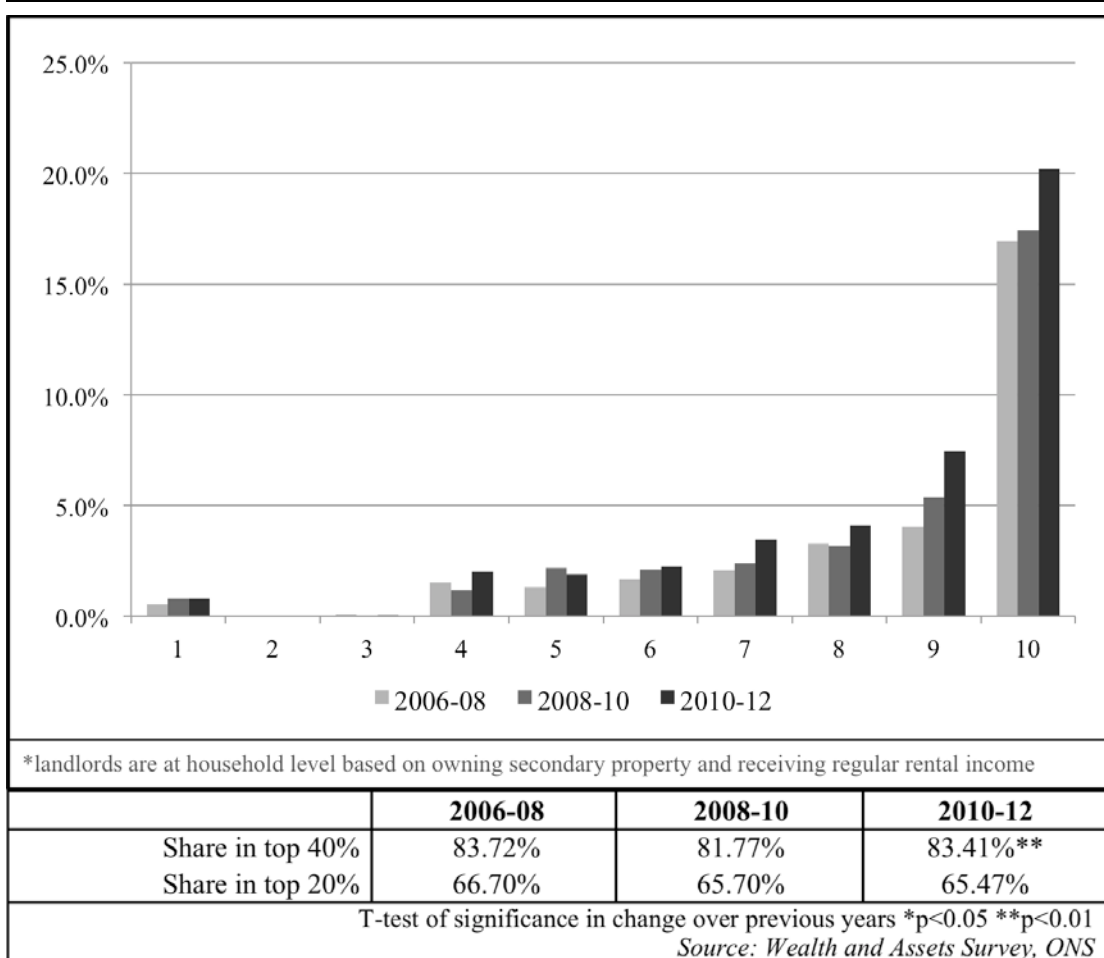


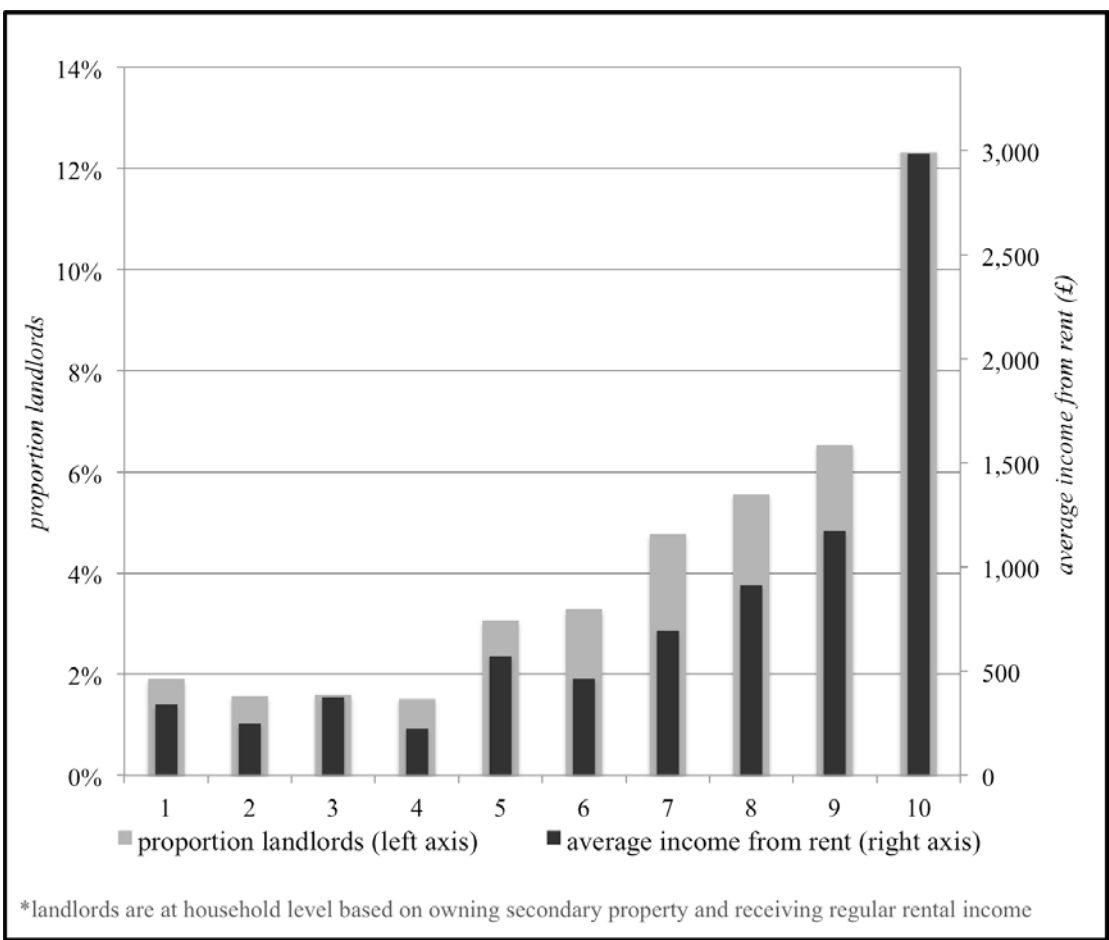
Source: *Wealth and Assets Survey, ONS*





Source: *Wealth and Assets Survey, ONS*





Source: *Wealth and Assets Survey, ONS*