




# What Are Social Workers Currently Doing to Positively Impact How People Access Public Housing Services in Spain?

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## Abstract

Residents of Andalusia (Spain) experienced major public housing challenges during the financial crisis. In this study, social work practices in the public housing field in Andalusia and the primary roles they are playing to help negotiate these challenges and influence housing policy are analyzed. Twenty-eight in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted among 15 social workers, four provincial managers, and eight lawyers from the Housing and Rehabilitation Public Agency of Andalusia to triangulate and explore perceptions about the roles and contributions of social workers in public housing. Content analysis was used to analyze the results. Findings indicated that this sample of professionals coordinated multiple levels of public housing issues and directed attention and resources to the needs of public housing users, especially those associated with the social needs of tenants, such as reducing conflicts associated with late payments. The findings also revealed a lack of clear guidelines for satisfactory work performance, particularly in the areas of prevention and evaluation. Evaluation and systematization of the effectiveness of social work professional practices is recommended. In addition, there is a necessity of correcting the identified shortfalls in the execution of tasks and interventions with tenants of social housing.

## Keywords

professional roles, public housing policy, social housing, social work practice

## Introduction

Social Work is a “practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people [. . .] to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing” (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). Although the housing topic area of the current article is certainly not new to Social Work, there is a surprising dearth of research literature that discusses professional work in this field in Spain. A review of the first study carried out in Spain about the areas of social work intervention, for example, revealed that although housing was an area of intervention for social workers, it represented a small area of intervention with a minimum incidence of 0.82% of the study sample (Vázquez, 1971, p. 303). Over time, the incidence of including housing issues in social work research studies was reduced more and more until it practically disappeared in the 1990s (Banda et al., 1999, p. 122); it was not mentioned again until after the first decade of the 21st century (Gómez & Torices, 2012).

In Europe and, of course, in Spain, public housing policies during the first half of the 20th century focused on land ownership law (Carrero de Roa, 2009, p. 145) and on its

administrative management. The social orientation of these policies was limited to facilitating access to housing for people with low-income levels. The application of these laws corresponded to the bureaucratic administration, distorting housing as a social right. This did not allow for the development of social work in this area.

Despite the fact that in the 1950s there were already international studies that recommended the planning and management of public housing from a social perspective (Bauer, 1951; Cohen, 1951; Demerath & Baker, 1951), the reality is that the policies of both European and Spanish housing have generally prioritized planning and management from a purely administrative perspective; therefore, the recognition of the social worker as an important player in housing issues during the 20th century was practically null or residual.

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Starting in the 1960s, coinciding with the development of the Welfare State, increased recognition of the difficulties associated with accessing adequate housing helped propel housing issues into the public eye as a significant social problem. Still, policies and procedures were lacking in helping housing recipients achieve full social integration. Specifically, the conception of housing as a watertight product whose public intervention ended when the house was built and awarded was faulty (Kuri et al., 2003).

During this time, the social work profession gained a certain prominence in Europe, thanks to programs for the eradication of sub-housing and slums (Barranco-Expósito et al., 2010, p. 102), such as slum clearance programs in the main cities of England and Wales between 1955 and 1985 (Yelling, 2000).

As a consequence of the economic crisis and the social alarm caused by increased evictions, a growing number of jobs have been created in Spain to ensure that safe and good housing practices occur (Arredondo & Palma, 2013; Claros, 2008; Díaz, 2008; Hernández, 2013; Malagón, 2008). This reality has led to reflection and analysis about the functions that a social worker should perform in the field of housing in this country.

Given the current situation, the purpose of this study is to analyze what are the perceived professional roles of social workers with regard to public housing in Spain as seen through the lens of social workers and other professionals themselves. Through conducting this analysis, we hoped to explore what social workers are currently doing to positively impact how people access public housing services in Andalusia (Spain) and to determine their main functions.

Specifically, the focus of this study is to develop a comprehensive understanding of social workers practices from both insider and outsider professional perspectives of those who are associated with the Spanish Public Housing System.

To explore these perceptions, multiple documents and publications were compiled in an attempt to discover how the functions of social work are both identified and described. The few documents and publications that referred to the field of housing usually referred to specific precarious issues or derived problems, such as homelessness. In fact, the social work practices that showed the greatest positive outcomes in the scientific world tended to deal mostly with homelessness. These outcomes focused on the causes and consequences of, and possible solutions to, homelessness, revealing that the issue of housing was typically addressed circumstantially (Mayock et al., 2011; Muñoz, 2008; Pérez, 2008; Zufferey, 2008). Other studies dealing with the subject, albeit somewhat indirectly, were those related to socio-residential and/or spatial exclusion (Alonso, 2010; Cortés et al., 2008; Duque, 2008; Juan-Toset, 2010; Nebbitt et al., 2014), family needs (Barranco-Expósito et al., 2010; Spitzer et al., 2004; Teater, 2010), and gender (Fernández-Rasines & Gámez-Ramos, 2013; Juan-Toset, 2011; Young, 2010).

According to the Spanish Social Work code of conduct, which is approved by the General Council of Social Work (Consejo General del Trabajo Social [CGTS], 2012) who

respect the principles and values of the International bodies of this profession, the typical functions performed in the Social Work profession include information, research, prevention, support, direct attention, promotion of social integration, mediation, planning, management and leadership, evaluation, supervision, teaching, and coordination. This list of functions could easily be applied in any area where intervention could be accommodated through social work. Each function also includes many sub-functions depending on the specific field of labor. For example, a social worker who intervenes in treating drug dependence should conduct diagnosis and treatment through therapeutic communities, rehabilitation, and social reintegration (Vázquez-Aguado, 2004, p. 141), which differs from direct interventions carried out by a social worker engaged in the educational field.

To explore the purpose of this study, 28 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted among 15 social workers, four provincial managers, and eight lawyers from the Housing and Rehabilitation Public Agency of Andalusia (AVRA) to triangulate and explore perceptions about the roles and contributions of social workers in public housing. Although multiple functions of social workers were reflected in the analysis, due to space considerations, we only focused on those found during the interviews which showed the highest frequency and density, namely: coordination, direct attention, and promotion of social integration.

Spain is divided by Autonomous Communities (AC), which by definition is a territorial administrative entity that, within the state constitutional legal order, is endowed with certain legislative autonomy, with its own representatives, and with certain executive and administrative powers.

Intervention and management in public social housing is specific to each AC, because the competencies, responsibilities, and accountability regarding housing in Spain are transferred to the regions. All Spanish regions, however, have an entity similar to AVRA, in which social workers share the same working space with similar professionals like in AVRA. Administrative and functional structures are also similar within all AC, and therefore, the results of this study can be considered transferable to all regions.

Before examining the data, the three main functions of social workers analyzed in this article must be defined in accordance with international standards established by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), more specifically, with the Spanish Code of Ethics (CGTS, 2012). Our purpose for defining these functions at the outset is to provide the reader with a conceptual framework to the issues discussed in this article.

*Coordination* can best be understood as the “integration of joint efforts through labor division” (Vázquez-Aguado & Álvarez-Pérez, 2012, p. 125). Coordination takes on a special meaning within the field of Social Work, as it may constitute a full-time job in and of itself. According to Vázquez-Aguado (2004, p. 171), the ultimate goal of coordination is to provide the most appropriate service to the user as a result of the joint efforts of various professionals, whether they come from the

same or different organizations. This last point refers to the interdisciplinarity found in the discourse that occurs among service professionals.

The social worker, through *direct attention* and *intervention*, solves the varying needs and situations of the user, be they social, family, economic, individual, community, or group needs (Chaparro & Urra, 2014, p. 42). The goal is to help people cope with their own situations and problems and to promote integration into a healthy social life (Vázquez-Aguado, 2004, p. 170). Clearly, any action of this kind can be carried out in the user's home, so home visits constitute a part of a social worker providing direct attention and intervention. In fact, according to one recent study on the functions of social work in Spain, direct attention was viewed the most relevant for professionals (Ballester et al., 2013, p. 131).

Another critical function of social workers is the *promotion of social integration*. This function includes actions associated with the goal of maintenance, improvement, or even restoring the capabilities of the person or group, without ever losing sight of the individuals themselves as active agents in this process (Vázquez-Aguado & Álvarez-Pérez, 2012, p. 420).

Finally, it is pertinent to define what is meant by Social Services, as we refer to them throughout this work. Social Services include public responsibility social policies which are embodied in regulations, programs, or resources that aim to ensure citizens' rights to social welfare; these policies, regulations, programs, and resources are often managed by regional/local administrations or by third-sector entities (Vázquez-Aguado & Álvarez-Pérez, 2012, pp. 464–465).

## Method

### Sample Selection

The focus of this research study is on the intervention and management of public housing developments in Andalusia, Spain.

Professionals working within the intervention management area in the public body that manages public housing in Andalusia have been taken into account. As noted above, this Institution is called the Andalusian Housing and Rehabilitation Agency (AVRA).

AVRA offices are distributed territorially in all the eight provinces of the Andalusian region and in the disadvantaged areas of each province. The teams are made up of managers, social workers, lawyers, and architects. Architects have been excluded from the sample because they do not work in the area of managing interventions with the tenant population.

As Social Work functions at AVRA were not regulated by any law at the time of the study, and given that managers, social workers, and lawyers work together as an interdisciplinary team managing the intervention of social housing, the perceptions of the entire work team on the professional functions of social work is essential to understand the division of work that was carried out in each of the AVRA delegations.

With a total of 28 participants, the distribution of the sample used in this study is as follows:

- 16 social workers, two for each provincial delegation;
- eight lawyers, one for each provincial delegation;
- four managers, one in each province, except in four provinces where the figure of the manager coincided with a social worker or lawyer.

### Data and Coding Processing

The data coding and processing documentation was prepared, and a hermeneutic unit was created housing all the documents from which an analysis of citations, codes, and networks was carried out in accordance with the methodological procedure of Grounded Theory designed by Glaser and Strauss in 1969.

This method suggests that the theoretical development emerges from the data (Bottom-Up Approach); from the identification of the basic processes or minimum units of meaning, which throughout our study we call codes. Through the application of this theory, the researcher can discover relevant aspects that with simple direct observation or unsystematic analysis can be ignored or go unnoticed otherwise (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In short, Grounded Theory helps the researcher discover and explain, through an inductive method, the interpretation of meanings of each of the concepts that are conjugated in the works analyzed, with the ultimate goal of creating a theory that explains the phenomenon of study.

To carry out this analysis based on Grounded Theory, the Constant Comparative Method (CCM) was used. This method consists of collecting, coding, and analyzing data in a systematic way, contrasting incidents, categories, hypotheses, and properties that arise during the analysis process. Ultimately, it consists of the constant comparison of similarities and differences of incidents identified in the data to discover conceptual patterns that can be repeated.

This CCM was carried out in this study with the support of the CAQDAS software (Computer-Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software) Atlas.Ti 6.2, whose programming is in turn based on Grounded Theory. This software allows for computer-assisted analysis to facilitate the task and assists the researcher, in terms of time, to develop complex processes and to make the review of analysis processes more flexible (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

A total of 176 codes were generated from the coding process, distributed in nine families or groups of codes among which are home adjudication, Conflicts, Coordination, professional functions, protocols, TAP (Tenant Assistance Program, PRAI in the original Spanish version), needs of the system, and proposals for improvement.

At a quantitative level, Atlas.ti shows a relationship between the codes that emerged, according to the number of repetitions in the analysis (rooting) and the number of direct relationships of each of the codes (density), as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Groundedness and Density of Codes Related With the Three Main Social Work's Functions Found in Interviews.

Family codes	Codes	Groundedness	% over total	Density
Coordination	Coordination (generalist)	27	9.5	22
	Stakeholders coordination	6	2.1	5
	AVRA Coordination	19	6.7	7
	Coordination with private institutions	34	12.0	6
	Coordination with public institutions	12	4.2	3
	Coordination of Public Housing Applicants Registry	9	3.2	7
	Social services coordination	30	10.6	8
Total		107	48.3	58
Promotion of social integration	Employment orientation	26	9.1	5
	Promotion of social participation	18	6.1	7
	Integration of the tenant into the community	20	7.4	6
	Protocols (general)	9	3.2	5
Total		73	25.8	23
Direct attention	Attention to the social needs of tenants	20	7.0	15
	Conflict reduction	27	9.5	16
	Housing late payment reduction	26	9.3	16
Total		73	25.8	47

Source. Prepared by authors.

Note. AVRA = Housing and Rehabilitation Public Agency of Andalusia.

### Instrument

For this study, a tailored interview schedule was designed for each of three actors: (a) managers, (b) social workers, and (c) lawyers, in accordance with their responsibilities and professional functions. From a cross-sectional perspective, three themes were addressed: (a) the way in which the regulations provided for the administrative processes; (b) the way in which, in practice, the professionals executed the processes; and (c) in an ideal way, what improvements would be introduced or what situation or activity would be appropriate in the different management tasks.

A total of 28 in-depth interviews were conducted in the first semester of 2016 with an average duration of 60 min per each. Thus, all three types of key informants were consulted to meet information saturation criterion requirements.

Social Worker or "SW" initials were used to ensure the anonymity of participants followed by the interview number assigned to each person (e.g., SW1). This same process was used for managers and lawyers who provided triangulated insight into the perceived functions of social workers.

For explanatory reasons only, we proceeded to classify the functions of social workers in accordance with those outlined in the Spanish Code of Ethics. The process of creating this classification was divided into two phases: (a) conducting a literature review of the definitions of the functions of Social Work identified in the Spanish Code of Ethics and (b) conducting a systematic analysis of these same functions found in the interviews (Table 2). As discussed previously, the most important functions were coordination, direct attention-intervention, and promotion of social integration. Our analysis of these three primary functions in the interviews revealed associated sub-functions discussed below.

### Results

#### General Data About Social Work's Functions in Public Housing

Upon completion of content analysis thematic coding, the data showed that there was no overall consensus among the three types of actors interviewed regarding the perceived specific functions social workers perform, even though a specific question was asked to assess potential consensus. Ultimately, each of the three types of actors interviewed (i.e., social workers, managers, and lawyers) articulated more specific tasks rather than general functions of social workers. The only functions that did appear explicitly were coordination and direct attention through conflict management. The three functions of the Ethics Code did not appear in the interviews: prevention, evaluation, and teaching.

#### Main Social Work Functions in Housing

**Coordination.** There are five main ideas related to coordination: (a) *Social workers as a key element.* Other housing professionals highly value social workers for their coordination role and as a consequence, they are considered to be an important key element or bridge between users and institutions; (b) *Coordination as an instrument.* Social workers recognize coordination as the most common professional instrument, or tool they can use to both establish professional collaboration with colleagues and offer help to tenants, as expressed by SW3; (c) *Coordination as professional supervision.* The interviews revealed the essential role of social workers to consult with colleagues to ascertain whether or not various deployed interventions were still appropriate;

**Table 2.** Social Work Functions.

General functions extracted from the Spanish Code of Ethics <sup>a</sup>	Specific to the scope of the Public Housing in Andalusia extracted from interviews <sup>b</sup>
Research	Socio-family research Definition of the family's social profile for suitable adjudication
Coordination	<b>Coordination with public and private entities</b> Interdisciplinarity
Information	Information and guidance Reception of tenants
Direct attention	Referral to other services Attention to disability <b>Attention to the social needs of the tenant</b> Home visits <b>Conflict reduction</b> Reduction of delinquencies <b>Late payment reduction</b>
Promotion of social integration	<b>Integration of the tenant in the community</b> <b>Promotion of social participation</b> <b>Employment orientation</b>
Mediation	Mediation
Assistance	Resource mobilization Basic assistance Writing the social report
Management and direction Planification Supervision	Management and direction Administrative management

Source. Prepared by authors.

<sup>a</sup>Three functions of the deontological code do not appear in the interviews, and they are prevention, evaluation, and teaching. <sup>b</sup> Highlighted functions are the ones analyzed in this article.

(d) *Coordination as professional protection.* One respondent (SW5) expressed how coordination was used strategically as a tool between social workers to provide support for each other when confronted with delicate/difficult issues that arise in professional practice; (e) *Interdisciplinarity.* An important element associated with coordination was interdisciplinarity. In the AVRA, social workers frequently mentioned the “team,” which included architects, surveyors, and lawyers. Specifically, they articulated that the projects they were working on of necessity took into account the views of each group or team member. According to the content analysis, there was interdisciplinarity of collaborating as a team within a specific Agency, but when working with other agencies, complications often arose.

*Coordination with social services.* Social Services serve as a referent in the administration of social work at the labor level in Spain. Because the users of public housing present unique challenges, coordination of social services with public services is essential. Together, they provide a significant number of material and other resources that can be accessed by the general population.

For example, Social Services plays a key role in processing applications for public housing because they are responsible for carrying out social reports showing the reality about the housing needs of applicants. In addition, social workers are able to provide supplements to pay rents to beneficiaries in situations where users are particularly vulnerable.

From the beginning, AVRA professionals emphasized the good relationship they have with social workers of Social Services, though it has not always been like this. For example, several respondents reported that housing issues were not considered a sphere of responsibility previously in Social Services. This lingering perception has slowed the process of cooperation between relevant stakeholders.

Coordinated work between AVRA and Social Services was articulated by respondents as crucial to solving housing challenges in four main ways: (a) to find out critical information about tenants; (b) to get information about potential users, which are usually families in situations of exclusion; (c) to provide an inter-institutional, more holistic service; and (d) to show tenants that there is a joint and coordinated effort by public institutions to serve and help them.

*Coordination with other institutions.* Beyond Social Services, there are a number of public and private entities that are related to AVRA. When talking about coordination with these entities, two aspects were identified by respondents during the interviews: (a) the importance of developing networked, coordinated relationships with these entities and (b) the value and influence of social work in such coordination.

Coordinated relationships with these entities, or institutions, were articulated by respondents as having two dimensions: (a) relationships with the institutions themselves and (b) relationships with the professionals who belong to these institutions. Regarding the first dimension, respondents

indicated that there were a large number of institutions which showed coordinated and concrete relationships with AVRA. The content analysis revealed respondent examples of these relationships with both public bodies, such as municipalities, mental health, public works, and primary care, and private organizations, such as electricity and construction companies, including generic references to many nonprofit organizations, with specific reference to Caritas, Roman Catholic social service organizations, given the precarious situation in which many families live.

Regarding the second dimension, working with institutions involves working with professionals. Correspondingly, respondents identified the importance of combining efforts to carry out joint actions with professionals of various institutions. For example, multiple reports were signed by both social workers and lawyers indicating combined efforts in meeting user needs. In addition to combining efforts on housing challenges with lawyers, respondents also reported coordination with technical managers, including builders and architects. For example,

Each (professional) contributes with his/her work. In the case of Social Work [. . .] we do the needs assessment, which is then passed to the architect. With this information, the architect ma[kes] a distribution of the space available so that each family has adequate housing to [meet] their needs in the same building where they had always lived. (SW2)

With respect to the value and influence of social work in such coordination, we found the critical role social workers

play in these coordination processes to be very insightful. Similarly, respondents expressed that social workers' contributions have considerable influence on decision-making with respect to each housing case considered.

However, respondents also indicated that all was not perfect when considering these coordination processes. Of note was the lack of comprehensive interventions for certain users in need. For example, one social worker respondent warned against the lack of a "team and a comprehensive participatory arrangement as may be in other districts" (SW4), which could help coordinate the type of assistance to be carried out in specific housing districts.

**Direct attention.** According to the content analysis of the housing professionals in this study, the most important aspects of direct attention include (a) attention to the social needs of tenants, (b) conflict reduction, and (c) housing late payment reduction.

**Attention to the social needs of tenants.** As stated in Table 3, this area constitutes one of the direct interventions most frequently cited by respondents as an important function of social workers. This function implies finding a solution to particular social needs. Identified social needs included (a) basic and/or economic needs, (b) adaptation to housing developments, (c) integration of older people, (d) rehabilitation of spaces/homes, (e) guaranteeing the right to housing, (f) training/qualification for employment, (g) enhancement of family networks, (h) social participation, (i) social inclusion, and (j) education.

**Table 3.** Direct Attention to the Needs of Tenants.<sup>a</sup>

Needs identified	Direct care mechanisms identified
Adaptation to neighborhood communities	Not referred to by interviewees.
Integration of older people	Dignifying their living conditions without evicting them from their homes.
Rehabilitation of spaces/homes	Needs assessment report prepared by the social worker who seeks to adapt housing to the tenant and with which the architect works housing distribution.
Guaranteeing the right to housing	Not referred to by interviewees.
Economic	Individualized study of income and expenses to apply appropriate action (programs for tenant assistance [PRAI], social wages, etc.)
Training/qualification for employment	Residual intervention in the field of drug addiction. Community involvement for education in the basic social skills of specific individuals.
Enhancement of family networks	Facilitating, as much as possible, that allocated homes are close to family networks.
Social participation	Fostering projects proposed by institutions/associations in the area that revert to the tenants themselves.
Social inclusion	Not referred to by interviewees.
Enhancing settlement	Facilitating that granted homes are located near the birthplace of tenants (near schools, families, social centers, associations, etc.)
Employment	Building Insertion Project (requires the company to employ 20% of local staff for housing construction).
Basic	Coordinating specific measures with different organisms.
Educative (Truancy/school failure)	Not referred to by interviewees.

Source. Prepared by authors.

Note. AVRA = Housing and Rehabilitation Public Agency of Andalusia.

<sup>a</sup>The interventions described are not generalizable to the Public Housing Stock in Andalusia. These are experiences identified through the discourse of AVRA social workers in the eight Andalusian provinces.

**Table 4.** Professional Solutions to Conflicts of Social Coexistence.

Conflict <sup>a</sup>	Solution	Description
A B C	<i>Mediation of influential/key people</i>	Mediation is guaranteed by taking into account the leaders of the neighborhood
A B C	<i>Community as a resource</i>	Provided that the group has a minimum of social skills and is involved in community life, it will be identified as an important source of reference for mediation and individuals
A B	<i>Agreed neighboring statutes</i>	Building a participatory process so that community rules can be adapted to the needs of each place
A B	<i>Working relationship skills</i>	Beneficiaries of Public Housing Allocation often show significant convivial gaps for having inhabited single-family homes, so social workers also address this deficit
A	<i>Awareness and education</i>	The direct task of the social worker conveys providing relevant knowledge to avoid prejudice and discrimination against minorities
B	<i>Habitat Education Program</i>	The social worker is responsible to educate public park tenants on standards of living, cleanliness, respect, etc., that enable harmony in neighboring communities

Source. Prepared from interviews with professionals.

Note. AVRA = Housing and Rehabilitation Public Agency of Andalusia.

<sup>a</sup>A: Some families exercise their power over other families or the community of neighbors; B: Lack of respect for the basic rules of coexistence; C: Lack of communication between tenants and AVRA.

The ultimate goal of addressing the social needs of tenants is to increase the well-being of people. However, because these social needs are diverse, they can only be met by knowing the community, neighborhood relationships, and so on, well before acting intentionally to meet them. This is why there can be multiple challenges experienced in attempts to respond adequately to tenant social needs if protocols are closely followed, as evidenced by some respondents (SW2; SW4). This notion helps to explain why effective social work requires not only the mobilization of resources but also the flexibility and adaptation of professional roles adapted to each case or project intervention. This notion adds credence to why it is advisable to use local resources (and even influential members of the community) to achieve positive housing impacts and outcomes.

**Conflict reduction.** A common and widely cited function of social workers involves negotiating housing-related conflicts effectively. Specifically, the effectiveness of the work done in housing developments depends on the level of the existing conflict and the ability of social workers to manage it successfully.

The most common conflicts arise as a result of coexistence between people and can be of three types: (a) power positions of some families over others; (b) lack of respect for the basic rules of behavior, which often involves disregard for others; and (c) miscommunication between the public housing Agency and public housing tenants when social housing becomes available because existing tenants wish to avoid incoming tenants who might disturb the welfare of the community.

Table 4 provides a summary of the answers proposed by social workers to the conflicts identified above.

Each proposed solution can be considered an instance of direct conflict resolution intervention. Although the solutions may seem sufficient, in the opinion of social worker respondents in this study, additional policies need to be implemented to establish better control and protocols for how to manage these housing-related problems successfully.

**Housing late payment reduction.** Housing late payments were a central and pervading theme identified by respondents throughout the 28 interviews. All the measures devised by AVRA have an economic component and are primarily aimed at helping tenants to pay rents. Social workers typically confront this problem when they engage in direct interventions. The main functions associated with social workers' housing late payment interventions include providing (a) *Information* about resources and public aid available; (b) *Research* to promote understanding of each particular situation because not all tenants can pay; (c) *Negotiation* associated with the possibilities for interventions and assistance identified after studying each particular case; (d) *Education* about tenants' habits that compromise their ability to pay their debts; and (e) *Follow-up* about the actions taken, as professionals say they cannot be effective if they lack the control to work with the beneficiaries of these social services.

The vast majority of these functions are applicable to cases in which tenants are unable to pay rent, but in some cases, the problems encountered are beyond the limits of direct intervention. In such cases, stronger interventions are required, such as legal interventions.

**Promotion of social integration.** According to social service professionals, the promotion of social integration involves three actions: (a) integration of the tenant into the community,

(b) promotion of social participation, and (c) employment orientation.

*Integration of the tenant into the community.* In this study, the integration of the tenant was primarily discussed by respondents at the community level. From the AVRA, this process was understood as being a two-way process of working with the tenant and the housing development Agency to change social patterns and prejudices about the tenant's ability to adapt into the community and also to promote among community members the usefulness of new tenants integrating into their community.

With regard to working with tenants, the ultimate goal articulated by respondents was to enable tenant adaptation to housing in a particular community and not vice versa. But, according to respondents, this adaptation also implies a commitment on the part of the tenant to contribute to their community. As a result, a contract between the family and AVRA is sometimes signed to ensure the proper maintenance of the housing residence. Prevention of eviction of homeowners with low purchasing power also falls under properly integrating tenants into their new communities.

*Promoting social participation.* The word "participation" does not explicitly appear in any of the responses of professionals interviewed in this study, but does not mean, however, that the idea was not present in many of their comments.

Three reported cases from this study related to promoting social participation. The first case involved *coordination between AVRA and other entities* working in housing developments, especially associations. Partnership and empowerment projects identified by respondents in neighboring communities showed a clear attempt to promote social participation, although the socio-educational characteristics of tenants often represent a handicap that limits such participation.

In the second case, *interventions in neighborhood communities* were aimed at promoting mutual collaboration among residents for the common good. Typically, such interventions are agreed upon among tenants to ensure that they are actually carried out. In the same vein, the Agency requires a compensation for the services tenants receive (such as cleaning of the common areas in a block of neighbors) as a service by tenants that promotes social participation.

Finally, the interviews revealed an attempt to *recover the long-term unemployed* through social skills. Besides trying to steer them toward employment (as discussed below), professional respondents in this study reported that the unemployed had often lost work habits, relationships, self-esteem, and so on, so an effort must be made to reintegrate them into society by increasing social skills with the objective of promoting healthy social participation among their neighbors.

*Employment orientation.* Mentioned previously, managing housing late payments is essential for the Agency; therefore, promoting employment is one of identified solutions to this

problem. It is well known that an important factor that promotes social inclusion is employment (Lafuente & Faura, 2012), so the AVRA has identified four steps to carry out this function: (a) socio-professional education for the long-term unemployed, (b) promotion of a non-shadow economy,<sup>1</sup> (c) provision of employment programs, and (d) monitoring processes.

These four steps are presented in a deliberate order and do not necessarily suggest that this step-by-step process plays out successfully in all real-world situations. However, the steps have been structured in this way because the most important and basic foundation to employment is education, followed by avoiding a shadow economy and finally, engaging in concrete actions related to employment, including responsible and accountable monitoring of employment processes.

During completion of the content analysis, a significant function of social workers was revealed regarding unemployed people over 50 years old—a function that suggested the important role social workers play in the area of providing professional training and social education for this population. Respondents also identified the importance of social workers roles in the socialization of clients to avoid the money from the sale of drugs, for which the community was often used as a tool. In addition, respondents identified the importance of social work projects targeted to promote employment development in some areas, including the creation of binding contracts that proved useful for tenants. Equally useful were the commissions created for the evaluation and monitoring of these binding contracts, which were also made up of social workers who ensured that the conditions of these contracts were met.

## Discussion

Based on the data from this study, we found that most of the actions of social workers are related to meeting the objective of providing direct attention to tenants, expressed concretely through the meeting of the social needs of users (basic needs, adaptations, and integration to housing developments) and the reduction of conflicts and housing late payments. Coordinated actions between institutions are also designed to meet this objective. This finding showed that the nature of the intervention is associated with assistance and having enough control to make important housing-related decisions.

With respect to the orientation of professional practice, it is noteworthy that during the interviews we found references neither to prevention nor assessment as functions of social work, although they are represented in the code of ethics. This finding represents an important key to interpreting the intervention model used by social workers in the future.

The findings indicate that there was certainly a willingness among social service professionals to seek the integration of the tenants into the communities where they reside, encouraging their social participation and orientating them toward



employment. It is critical to note that autonomy among social workers must not be jeopardized or lost in housing-related situations because this would necessarily result in providing reactive or emergency interventions. Specifically, some interventions require the social worker to have a high degree of decision-making control and power as, for example, in the mediation of conflicts and late payments.

One strategic proposal for improvement could be to invest in more preventive functions social workers can play in housing situations, including involving tenants as actors of intervention in these preventive functions. Moreover, the promotion of the proactive nature of social workers toward interdisciplinary and research-based interventions could represent a cross-cutting strategy which could demonstrate a positive effect on more than one function they engage in. Knowledge of the problems associated with public housing results from direct contact with users, but mostly, the study of cases allows social workers to make proposals for service improvement. Perhaps one of the recommended areas for this type of improvement could be interdisciplinary coordination with other institutions that play an important role in intervention with the tenants so that actions taken can be more holistic and comprehensive.

As mentioned at the beginning of the article, social work associated with housing is not new in Spain, but it has lost its relevance within recent years, both in the scientific field and in the field of intervention (Banda et al., 1999; Gómez & Torices, 2012). This has led to three overarching and undergirding consequences in relation to the professional roles of social workers articulated by respondents: (a) *Undefined functions*. Having no tradition of uninterrupted intervention in this field; there is no consolidation of tasks either. This leads to a lack of “official” recognition of professional roles; (b) *Execution of unrelated tasks*. Not knowing the professional limits of social work in this field leads other professionals to misinterpret what should be done and also to demand tasks that are not specific to social work; and (c) *Unrecognized professional skills*. As a result of the above two points, it would appear that social workers do not have the necessary skills to do their work, so there is a lack of its recognition from institutions and other colleagues, in some cases. We propose, therefore, that a systematic and comprehensive policy of professional practices and outcomes be developed that clearly articulates the need for social work and the functions of social workers in the public housing sector.

Linked to this idea, it seems that the basic guidelines for social work are clear, but the means to put them into practice are generated through experience. This reflects praxis, or learning by doing, a reality that exists in many areas of activity of the social work profession. This versatility in the application of general knowledge to specific situations in which there is no previous experience has a dual effect. On one hand, it can be an advantage to adapt to new environments. It is what might be considered bottom-up work or construction from praxis. On the other hand, a lack of real-world practices

among professionals when doing social work can severely limit their effectiveness.

Learning basic research and best practices regarding what other social workers in other countries and contexts are doing could also provide some guidance toward implementing new interventions. As noted by Viscarret while citing Escartín, “the method in Social Work must be both the means to transform [. . .] as well as to know” (Viscarret, 2014, p. 54). Basic research and best practices should be taught by Higher Education Institutions (HEI), as Social Work and Social Sciences degrees are housed in these institutions. This fact reflects what Bologna Process for Higher Education established for the future to come (European Higher Education Area, 2015). Social Work as a profession and academic discipline, that feeds on other Social Sciences but that produces its own knowledge that informs practice (Álvarez-Pérez & Ferreira, 2020), should deepen curricula contents on research. We have also to consider making a shift of our training paradigm based on student’s participation at all levels and not just in the academic field (Álvarez-Pérez et al., 2019) to promote knowledge co-production, as well. In addition, best practices training should be addressed tripling consisting of: (a) Professional Order, regulating the minimum quality content required as well as mandatory continuous training courses for professional practice; (b) Institutions where social workers are integrated, favoring internal as well as inter-institutional supervision; and (c) HEI, guaranteeing the pedagogical process as well as the scientific and validity of contents, creating synergies for the systematization and production of results that consolidate this area of knowledge in this domain.

Although it is true that flexibility is necessary and is typical in social work (de Robertis, 2003), it can also give rise to interference and lack of autonomy among professionals, especially in the multifaceted field of public housing. For this reason, it is necessary to use knowledge based on the models and methods of social work to inform best practices because such knowledge is the only thing that will develop and improve professional practice itself (Howe, 2009; Stepney & Ford, 2000). We understand by knowledge-based practice the *theoretical practice*, meaning a reflexive process between the professional adaptation of theoretical basis, empirical research, practical knowledge, and practical implementation through Social Work models and methods (Viscarret, 2014).

These reflections on practice lead us to think about the professional profile in Spain and the competencies to be developed. One of the issues already discussed (Vázquez-Aguado & Álvarez-Pérez, 2012) is the need for more specialized professionals, which might be pursued through specific graduate training in social work that goes beyond the very general training grade and that responds to the needs specific to the different sectors, which in this case would be public housing. Another reflection discussed is the necessity for a professional profile shift that goes from intervention-based

approach to another applying the intervention-research logic (Ferreira et al., 2018).

Regarding potential housing policy changes for potential macrolevel recommendations, results show two main proposals should be considered: (a) a need to include standardized intervention protocols in all intervention areas as each professional intervenes according to their involvement or professional criteria leading to important differences in the quality of service among territories and (b) a real and effective broad policy conception, integrating different sectors and domains that respond to today's social complexity and uncertainty (Van Ewijk, 2018). Results indicate serious concerns regarding coordination and interdisciplinarity efforts between different administrations. This does not happen inside AVRA. Efforts should be made to link services that come from different policies to offer a better and integrated service to citizens.

In conclusion, we recommend the continued enhancement of the basic professional skills expected from social workers as defined over 10 years ago through the European Space for Higher Education (Vázquez-Aguado, 2005, p. 246). However, based on our findings, we also recommend the enhancement of skills that are missing from the list. For instance, we recommend the following: more attention be given to the control and evaluation of the effectiveness of real-world professional practices based on experience, which are clearly fundamental to understanding how to be effective as social workers; systematize social work professional practice with regard to public housing; and, most importantly, correct the identified errors in the execution of tasks and interventions with tenants of social housing.

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### Note

1. According to Dell'Anno and Schneider (2003), shadow economy refers to: "those economic activities and the income derived from them that circumvent or otherwise avoid government regulation, taxation or observation."

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