

# Domicide

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## Glossary

**Domicide** The intentional destruction of dwellings and homes through human agency and resultant human suffering and victimisation.

## What is Domicide?

The term *domicide* was coined by Douglas Porteous and Sandra Smith in 2001 to refer to the “deliberate destruction of home by human agency in pursuit of specified goals, which causes suffering to the victims” (p. 12). The term therefore refers to processes which have a long social history, yet which have arguably not been studied in significant detail. The suffix of the word itself, ‘cide’, comes from the Latin, meaning to cut, or to cut down. The power of the word thus stems from its resonance with other words suggestive of murder or death (such as *suicide* and *homicide*), but is also used in relation to the deep, affective connection between householders and the dwelling they call home.

The term *domicide* was coined to generate greater interrogation and empirical analyses of processes that not only affect significant numbers of people but which have also tended not to see systematic consideration. Acts such as dam construction or urban redevelopment have frequently involved large-scale and compulsory destruction of, often poorer, people’s homes. In addition, many of the most extreme events in social history, such as war and ethnic cleansing, have led to the destruction of homes and the expulsion of large populations, both within and across national boundaries. So *domicide*, taken within these wide reference points, encompasses some of the most significant faultlines of human experience and misery, extending back across many centuries. The idea of *domicide* adds both emotional and sociolegal weight to acts which ‘cut down’ or deprive us of our private home or homeland and the deep emotional, physical, and physiological impacts that such deprivation implies.

While the home is often considered the core social space, protected by property relations, it is also overlain by significant variations in tenurial security, by the varying incomes and circumstances of the inhabiting household, and by broader social, political, and economic forces which may serve to undermine or finally destroy the

links between dweller and dwelling. Since home expresses significant aspects of affective development, identity formation, and physical and income security, the idea of *domicide* presents us with a critical concept through which we can explore the destruction and loss of a foundation point of our broader social lives. Understanding the depth and nature of such a relationship is critical to a subsequent comprehension of the immiseration generated by such destruction, and the urgency of projects by which such aggression might be halted. Continued and extensive warfare, megaprojects (such as dam, airport, and road construction), and the restructuring of urban fabrics globally continue to make the concept of *domicide* a live and somewhat neglected issue.

Porteous and Smith distinguished two forms of *domicide*, the extreme and the everyday. Their intention here was to distinguish between irregular and extensive acts of domestic destruction (extreme), such as that generated through war, from those woven into the daily patterns of capitalist, urban political economy and property relations (the everyday), including compulsory purchase and neighbourhood renewal. Under the former they include the examples of South Africa’s Bantustans where 15 million Blacks were concentrated within 13% of the nation’s land, and Israel’s forced displacement of around a million Palestinian households and the physical destruction of many of their homes and villages. The latter includes widespread dam building projects, which have been cited as generating the displacement of up to 80 million households globally.

*Domicide* brings into the housing researcher’s lexicon the theatres of war, human aggression, and the destructive elements of everyday life in most regions of the globe. It sets conventional, often Western, notions of the tacitly understood perpetuity and stability of domestic life against such threats. The statistics (see below) relating to acts of *domicide* highlight an extensive, regular, and intrinsic part of our geoculture. Capitalist land relations, the power and expansion of corporate commodity

extraction, as well as major income inequalities act as the fertile ground upon which domicile is permitted or carried out by political and industrial elites. The embedding of continued warfare and civic strife in many regions underscores that acts of domicile continue with depressing regularity, often used to take revenge in ethnic conflicts or deemed in the interests of the greater good in the contexts of many development projects.

## **The Scale of Domicide**

In the early 2000s Porteous and Smith's estimate was that more than 30 million people globally were affected by domicile but that the issue remained neglected due to the complexity and lack of coherence of research in this area. However, global statistics on refugees and forced migrants by the United Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) have used a variety of different sources (government, other agencies, site visits, camp registration) to generate estimates that are relevant to this project of basic enumeration. Yet the scale of such estimates is so overwhelming that a consideration of the nature, or even possibility, of concerted policy responses remains a major challenge.

Recent figures on the scale of domicile can be determined to some extent via an examination of the reports of the UNHCR. Their latest, covering 2008, concluded that there were 42 million people forcibly displaced, and that this figure included 15.2 million refugees (though it is not clear how many of these people's homes were destroyed and therefore what proportion can be considered to be linked to acts of domicile in the strict sense of its meaning). The UNHCR itself was also offering protection or assistance to 25 million such people. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has also estimated that there are an additional 25 million people who have been displaced due to natural disasters (see Relevant Websites). This brings in a related but conceptually distinct process, the unhousing of people through such catastrophes.

Porteous and Smith note that many of those affected by domicile remain internally displaced in the countries they come from. Figures for 2009 from the International Committee of the Red Cross estimate that there are 26 million internally displaced people globally – casualties of war feeling the terror of possible or actual attack on homelands and dwellings. The Red Cross cite the use of starvation, attacks on civilian sites, and the obstruction of relief as key tactics driving these human flows, often to informal or 'containment camps' run by agencies like the Red Cross itself. To take one key example they suggest that 40 000 internally displaced people were generated by the Israeli war in Lebanon in 2007. To

these enormous tolls the same report adds a further 25 million people displaced by natural disaster and a further 11.4 million international refugees.

The UN has noted dramatic increases over time in these figures, with ongoing violence in countries like Iraq, which has generated the greatest number of refugees (2.2 million), and Afghanistan (1.9 million) (UN estimates for 2007). Estimates taken as early as 2000 show that there are still 7 million Palestinian refugees in the world, many seeking a right to return to settlements that were systematically destroyed in the war of 1948 to form the independent state of Israel.

Data issues clearly remain a challenge; many refugees have not suffered domicile in the strict sense of the word intended by Porteous and Smith. Refugees are easier to monitor and catalogue, while those internally displaced are harder to categorise and are not considered legal refugees by the UN, and so do not qualify for aid. Yet not all refugees will be led to seek shelter as a result of the actual destruction of their home, and yet the possibility of their continued existence and sustenance within the dwelling has been made impossible, often because their sociopolitical life has been compromised.

Estimates relating to the domicile of homes to enable, often Western-funded, megaprojects have been gathered by some researchers. In relation to dam construction, for example, it has been estimated that some 40–80 million people have been displaced. In early 2007 the BBC reported that the Chinese Three Gorges Dam project alone would displace around 1.4 million people, yet, shortly after, the UK Guardian newspaper detailed plans for a further 4 million people who were to be moved from their homes to ensure the 'environmental safety' of the dam, one of the biggest resettlements in modern history. Ironically at least one key rationale for the dam is to reduce China's reliance on coal-fired power stations, themselves part of a broader conflagration of forces generating the climate change that has made settlements on the steeply sided areas adjacent to the dam more vulnerable to mudslides.

A key example of the destruction of homeland linked to domicile was witnessed in the plight of the marsh Arabs of southern Iraq. It was here that Saddam Hussein drained the marshes, creating one of the first groups to be recognised as environmental refugees. Estimates of the number of Arabs displaced by these acts vary significantly, from around 40 000 to 1 000 000. Domicide also relates to the relationship between informal settlements, tenure, and questions of national sovereignty and migration. This complex amalgam was raised in the destruction of the 'jungle' camp close to the Channel Tunnel where those already displaced from countries like Afghanistan and Iraq saw the French state dismantle their temporary homes, leading to a second round of homelessness and

dispossession from even the slenderest handhold on shelter that they had provided for themselves.

In countries like the United Kingdom the postwar period was marked by a move to rehabilitate and clear many sections of bomb-damaged and blighted urban areas, often of poor building standards, which were constructed by private developers in earlier decades. The slum clearance of this period moved many tens of thousands of households, particularly in the larger cities, such as London, Birmingham, and Glasgow. In the name of the common good many people were moved to areas of new public housing in order to improve their conditions and health. Yet such programmes, given the grieving for social systems of support documented in books like Willmott and Young's *Family and Kinship in East London*, highlighted an often misguided policy that generated many secondary problems. Yet whether we would seek to call such policies acts of domicile would no doubt generate significant debate given the genuine problems of these areas. Older examples of domicile abound and include the Scottish Highland clearances, the complex relationships between land, economy, and ethnicity that resulted in the potato famine in Ireland, and even the resiting of smaller English villages within country estates, often carried out to improve the views of the landed gentry.

Current policies in the United Kingdom for housing market renewal have raised these problems again. These have designated just under 50 000 demolitions in nine areas across the postindustrial landscape of northern England. The key question here revolves around the use of compulsory purchase, demolition, and the remaking of areas with more affluent characteristics seen to be more palatable by local political elites. In many cases evidence has arisen that people do not want to be forced to leave their homes.

## Conceptual Issues

Domicide can be seen as a subset of complex forces that generate the loss of home. Such loss may be generated by a range of sources. For Porteous and Smith their concern is with the misery and victimisation caused by the intentional, human destruction of home. Many studies of such phenomena have been carried out, such as those on dam building, indigenous peoples, the impact of war, and so on. It is not clear whether the concept requires, or would benefit from, some refinement to encompass other processes through which the home is lost, or whether destruction of the home and human intentionality should be considered its hallmarks. Porteous and Smith certainly see domicile as analytically distinct from unintentional and nonhuman generated sources of homelessness and displacement. Yet this raises further questions.

Let us examine two key examples of possible confusion. First, while genocide is not considered to be an act of domicile, because victims of such acts are killed and dwellings may not be destroyed, it may be the case that genocidal acts considered under the UN definition (which includes the statement "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part") might well force the abandonment of homes. Second, do we need to see the physical destruction of homes as the hallmark of domicile, or would the act of unhousing itself not be enough for us to deem that an act of domicile had occurred (i.e., that a sense of home has been cut down or lost)?

While Porteous and Smith did not include a discussion of gentrification per se there are a number of features of gentrification-related displacement that seem relevant to this debate. Could we not consider the eviction of tenants in order for a property to be sold to more affluent owners a process of domicile? While the house has not been destroyed it may well be that a home has been (precisely the affective dimension of the experience of dwellings that drove the creation of the neologism itself), and that grief, identity, and a place of refuge are swept away for those exiled through market dislocation, mediated by property relations. Certainly the talk of loss by victims of such displacement mirrors many of the accounts provided in direct efforts at describing the impact of domicile.

It would seem useful to distinguish between intentional and unintentional domicile and human/nonhuman forms, and that the actual act of destruction could be extended to include processes of unhousing that may or may not involve the physical disassemblage of a person's or household's dwelling. Yet even here things are blurred by the relationship between human agency itself and other forces. A clear example of this would be climate change, which has been responsible for the significant destruction of homelands and, more directly, property, such as that seen in Hurricane Katrina's impact on New Orleans, and the social geography of its impact on the city's black population. Similarly the broader impact of catastrophes, like the tsunami of 2007, highlights the interplay of social geography and national and social inequalities, which has mediated and amplified the effect of such disasters. Where such catastrophes have interacted with local variations in official responses the effect has been domicile by nature, compounded by the inadequacy or even overt racism of responses in cases like that of Katrina.

So the question arises as to how we can understand and explain the destruction of home, but perhaps also its more generalised and forced loss. If we require a sense of intentionality we should also recognise the broad range of rationalities driving such intentions. To include vicious acts against civilian populations by military personnel in

Darfur alongside households knocked down for a highway may suggest an overelasticity of the concept, even if we attach the tags of 'extreme' and 'everyday' to it.

## Conclusion

Housing studies in the West have often focused on socio-economic, problem-based questions, such as affordability, quality, and supply among many others. Yet, taken in a global context, such questions inevitably appear somewhat inconsequential when set alongside questions of internal displacement, household education and malnutrition, disease, homelessness, warfare, and political instability. The intersection of these factors with rapid urbanisation and social inequality of the global 'south' provides us with a salutary correction to the perhaps often insulated nature of housing studies in the global north. Refugees, informal settlements, domicile, and ecological catastrophe (variously mediated through human-political systems) highlight some of the largest housing problems globally. The figures associated with estimating the scale of such events have become a parade of epic and ungraspable statistics that belie individual human tragedy and persistent suffering amidst warfare, asymmetries of power, and property rights systems.

Stephen Graham has discussed in detail the purposive destruction of settlements and cities, using the term urbicide. This suggests the further possible scalar escalation of issues of human unhousing and the need to discuss and embrace such concepts in the face of overwhelming human need and policy and community responses to such problems. For all the raw, emotive power of the term domicile, and its connection with some of the most significant existential questions of human habitation, it is worrying that it has generated remarkably little direct literature.

In an age in which terrorism has been foregrounded and state crimes more clearly made visible by international media, the almost daily visualisation of the destruction of

homes has become widespread and unsettling. One of the key contributions of this neologism has been to highlight the mundane quality of the kind of violence, destruction, and political power that unsettles Western notions of the stability of home and its ontological centrality. Like homelessness and displacement, domicile raises a concern with the antisocial forces that deny the most critical human symbiotic relationship – that between the physical shell and sheltering function of a dwelling, and the lives and nurturance of diverse household units within.

**See also:** Demolition; Gentrification; Home and Homelessness; Residential segregation; Social Justice.

## Further Reading

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## Relevant Websites

- [www.fmreview.org](http://www.fmreview.org) – Forced Migration Review #20.
- [www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org) – United Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees.
- [www.refugees.org](http://www.refugees.org) – United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants.