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Research Report

Housing in small towns: Current challenges in research and practice

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Positionspapier aus der ARL 162

HOUSING IN SMALL TOWNS

Current challenges in research and practice

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The statements and findings set forth in this position paper represent the opinions and positions of the authors and not those of their respective institutions.

Executive Summary

Housing in small towns is a blind spot in social and political debates. To date, both public and academic attention has focused heavily on large cities and metropolitan areas, even though approximately 30 percent of Germany's population lives in small towns. They thus play a key role in the provision of equitable living conditions and sustainable spatial development. Nevertheless, due to limited data availability and a lack of empirical research, there are significant knowledge gaps concerning housing market structures and trends, and a lack of understanding of the housing needs and housing practices of different social groups.

Generalized notions that small towns have sufficient affordable housing or could serve as buffers for large cities are insufficient. Small towns are highly heterogeneous: they differ considerably in terms of location, functional integration, economic development, housing stock and social structures. Their corresponding housing policies are equally diverse. Based on current research and social trends, this position paper identifies four key problem areas:

1. Small-town housing supply focuses on a limited number of housing forms and is struggling to meet increasingly diverse needs.
2. Small-town housing markets, which are dominated by homeownership, are at odds with the growing demand for rental housing.
3. Inner development as a guiding principle is being challenged by the continued designation of building land on the outskirts of towns.
4. Efforts to respond to the urgent need for action are constrained by a lack of human and financial resources at the local level, as well as by a general lack of awareness of the need for an active municipal housing market policy.

Solid empirical knowledge is required for effective policy and practice advice. Future research should therefore focus on the following:

- > Systematic and comparative analyses of small-town housing markets, particularly regarding supply and ownership structures, rental markets and patterns of segregation, and the housing needs and practices of different age and social groups;
- > Empirical studies of typical local constellations in small towns to better understand local housing market dynamics and thus to develop differentiated and specific policy approaches for housing and urban development;
- > Providing a practical knowledge base for municipal action, for example regarding instruments for revitalizing housing stock and inner development, municipal land and building policies, and governance and funding structures under conditions of scarce resources.

As many smaller municipalities have limited human and financial resources, developing practical and applicable tools for urban development and planning is particularly important. Comparative analyses and pilot projects can help to identify effective approaches and allow them to be adapted to different small-town contexts.

HOUSING IN SMALL TOWNS

Current challenges in research and practice

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Abstract

Around one third of the population in Germany lives in small towns, making this type of settlement key in spatial development. Sufficient and adequate housing supply in small towns is essential for providing equitable living conditions and promoting sustainable spatial development. The diverse structures and processes related to housing in small towns manifest both as excess supply on the housing market and as housing shortages and displacement. However, the field is often viewed in an overly simplistic manner in research, politics and planning, leading to considerable gaps in knowledge and a lack of spatial management options. This position paper identifies current housing-related challenges and problems that are specific to small towns, and hence derives research needs and recommendations for practice. Small-town housing is characterized by owner-occupied housing markets and a narrow focus on a limited range of housing types. These issues are exacerbated by ongoing designations of building land on the outskirts of settlements and by the limited personnel and financial resources of local administrations, which restricts municipal scope for influence. We conclude that differentiated, data-based analyses are required to develop tailored strategies for small towns, taking the specific local constellations of their housing market, economic and socio-demographic developments into account. Research gaps include systematic and comparative analyses of housing markets, housing needs, preferences and practices. Furthermore, empirical data on specific development and policy options for small towns are needed to create a practical knowledge base for municipal action.

Keywords

Small town – Housing market – Housing needs and practices – Inner development – Land management – Municipal housing policy – Spatial development

1 Housing in small towns – a topic of growing societal relevance

The potential of housing in small towns to create equitable living conditions and promote sustainable spatial development has been underestimated. This neglect has arisen despite increased attention from policymakers, the media, academia and planning professionals being directed towards the quantity and quality of housing for some time now. There has been intense discussion about a “return of the housing issue” (e.g., Egner/Grohs/Robischon 2021; Schöning 2020; Baldenius/Kohl/Schularick 2020), primarily concerning a shortage of affordable housing for low- and middle-income groups, the failure of new housing construction to keep pace with

demand, the large gap between rents for new and existing leases, displacement processes and growing socio-spatial inequalities. However, these debates focus almost exclusively on cities and metropolitan areas with, for example, the Association of German Cities (*Deutscher Städtetag* – DST) referring to a real estate, construction and housing crisis in cities (DST 2024).

In this debate, small towns are primarily seen as places that relieve market pressure in metropolitan areas by offering affordable housing. Sometimes, they are not considered as independent municipal entities, but rather as suburban areas of large cities (see Cotella/Demaziere/Dembowski 2024). This corresponds with the self-image of many small towns, which present themselves as livable communities with manageable spatial and social scales (Hannemann 2004: 312). However, for peripheral rural areas undergoing long-term population decline and significant aging, the function of small towns as anchors of public services is emphasized (e.g., Danielzyk/Priebs 2020). In the best-case scenario, residents here have walking access to local amenities, educational and cultural institutions, and medical care. At the same time, small towns in these regions are characterized by high vacancy rates. Revitalizing and rehabilitating this vacant housing can reduce land take by minimizing new construction (Knippschild/Rößler/Bräunel 2025). In contrast, small towns with strong tourism struggle with the continuous loss of permanent housing to temporarily used holiday apartments (Frank 2026). The contrast between housing shortages in large cities and unused housing in small towns is reflected in notions drawn up by policymakers to encourage people suffering from a lack of affordable housing to move from large cities to smaller towns (Geywitz 2024).

However, these notions are overly generalized and lack empirical support. They fail to consider that:

- > Small towns are diverse in their spatial, architectural and social structures, as well as in the constellations of stakeholders;
- > Individual and collective housing preferences and needs of potential demand groups are only partially aligned with the available supply;
- > Small-town land and real estate markets, housing stock, and spatial and social structures vary according to specific local conditions.

We discuss these issues in this position paper¹. We argue that qualitative and quantitative housing issues must also be addressed in small towns. In Germany, 30 percent of the total population lives in small towns, though this proportion varies among the states, ranging from 13 to 54 percent depending on local government structures and territorial reforms that occurred since the late 1960s (BBSR 2025). Of the approximately 43 million housing units in Germany, over 12 million are located in small towns, and nearly 8 million of these are in buildings with only one or two units. These figures are based on the latest 2022 census (Destatis 2024) but reveal nothing about the processes and dynamics of small-town real estate markets, social practices, or housing preferences.

This position paper primarily targets researchers and, secondly, decision-makers in municipal and regional practice. The objective is twofold: to concisely articulate theses concerning current challenges in the field of housing in small towns – referred to as problem dimensions – and to identify open research questions.

¹ The ARL working group “Housing in Small Towns: Real Estate Markets, Segregation Patterns and Housing Practices,” which was launched in 2025 and is scheduled to run for three years, brings together the two previously loosely connected subject areas of housing and small-town development. Members of the working group are experts from academia and practice in Germany, Belgium, France, Austria and Switzerland. This position paper is the result of initial intensive discussions and preliminary data analyses and builds on the working group members’ prior knowledge from other project contexts. The focus is on Germany. The international composition of the working group will also play an important role in future discussions.

- > First, we argue that housing provision in small towns faces social developments, planning challenges and construction difficulties comparable to those in cities. These include demographic change, such as an increasingly elderly population; socio-structural processes of individualization and differentiation; the financialization of housing markets; social and socio-spatial inequalities; and rising real estate prices, construction costs and financing costs, which can lead to an affordability crisis.
- > Second, it is apparent that many of these challenges and their effects manifest in ways specific to small towns. The same is true of potential approaches to addressing these issues. Such specifics should be analyzed and understood in greater detail. Examples include the significant surplus of single-family homes, the resulting lack of affordable rental housing, the one-sided structure of housing stock and a lacking openness to promote innovative housing options.
- > Our third argument is particularly important for this position paper. Housing markets and housing problems in small towns are as diverse as their geographical locations, housing stocks, economic situations and social structures. For example, a small town in a scenic location that attracts many seasonal visitors may experience pronounced displacement of residents due to rising housing prices, while a small town in a peripheral location may exhibit the much-discussed “donut effect” with vacancies in the town center but new development areas on the outskirts. The topic of small-town housing is therefore characterized by considerable heterogeneity.

The housing market is currently under strain in many large cities, which is why there are high hopes linked to vacant housing stock and building land reserves in smaller towns. However, this highlights familiar gaps in knowledge, research and policy guidance regarding housing markets and segregation patterns in small towns (Schenkel/Großmann 2021). The reasons why housing in small towns is a relevant topic in academic research are explained in the following section.

There is no uniform definition or delimitation of small towns. In general, they can be distinguished from other types of settlements and cities using the following criteria:

- > Statistical delimitation: an administrative municipal area with a defined population size;
- > Urban morphology: compact settlement structure and higher building and population density than in villages;
- > Urban functions: concentration of jobs, services and urban functions (e.g., hospitals, high schools) including central-place functions.

A population of approximately 5,000 to 20,000 combined with central-place functions is often used as a guideline in Germany (BBSR n. d.; 2025), Switzerland and France. However, these boundaries remain flexible (see Russo/ Serrano Giné/Pérez Albert et al. 2017). In Austria and Belgium, historical town charters and functional criteria, such as the presence of services, also play an important role in defining small towns. Beyond a quantitative definition, sociologists understand a small town as a specific mode of local socialization (Beetz 2017). Urban planners consider it as a central place with functional significance for its region (Danielzyk/Priebs 2020). In literary studies, it is discussed as an established topos (Nell/Weiland 2020).

2 Structures and practices of housing in small towns: a largely unexplored field of research

Traditionally, the focus of urban research in conceptual, empirical and discursive terms has been primarily on large cities and metropolises. Even in rural studies, small towns have not been systematically considered. Consequently, small towns suffer from a structural perception gap (Steinführer/Sondermann/Porsche 2021: 18; ARL 2019). Both classical and more recent urban studies concepts were developed in the context of large cities and are consequently most applicable in such contexts. Examples include the concepts of residential segregation, gentrification and the financialization of housing (Musterd 2020; Eckardt 2018; Aalbers 2019). The extent to which these approaches provide adequate explanations of housing market structures and processes in areas outside large cities remains largely unexplored. Specifically, there has been little consideration of whether these approaches can be effectively transferred to smaller urban settlements, or whether approaches specific to small towns are necessary to address housing-related challenges. The conceptual dominance of research focused on large cities and metropolitan areas is also reflected in the lack of empirical studies on small towns. Knowledge regarding housing market structures, segregation patterns and housing practices in small towns remains limited (Steinführer/Großmann/Schenkel 2018). Medium-sized towns (which are beyond the scope of this discussion) are similarly under-researched. The lack of small-scale, continuous data in Germany (Milbert/Fina 2021) – unlike in other countries, like Austria, for example – significantly contributes to the shortage of comprehensive, nuanced, comparative analyses of housing in small towns. Consequently, political and planning action in this field tends to be based on intuition or ad hoc research rather than comprehensive, systematic evidence.

This theoretical and empirical imbalance leads to housing provision and housing challenges being primarily addressed and problematized from the perspective of large cities, not only in academic debate but also in social, media and political discourse. However, studies show that the extent of residential segregation is higher in medium-sized settlements than in large cities (Helbig/Jähnen 2018), and that the phenomenon of precarious housing outside metropolitan areas is underestimated (Schnell/Musil/Heinze 2025).

This lack of insight into housing in small towns is particularly problematic in light of current societal and socio-economic developments, which include an aging and increasingly heterogeneous population with new housing demands and individualized and diverse lifestyles (Wagner/Valdés Cifuentes 2014), changing family structures (Peukert 2019) and a “care crisis” (Dowling 2022). These developments, in conjunction with an increase in mobile lifestyles and more flexible and digital work environments, are leading to a shift in housing demands (Hannemann 2022). The existing housing stock only partially meets these needs, creating new challenges for stakeholders in the housing market.

3 Specific challenges facing small towns in the field of housing

Background

Housing in small towns differs from that in cities in many ways: the spatial and built structures are different, as are the governance and planning culture, while financial resources and administrative capacity are often limited (Dehne 2021).

The most common type of housing in small towns is the single-family home, which is usually privately owned and owner-occupied. Many of these buildings and corresponding settlement structures were constructed in the decades following 1950. The marketability of these properties depends on their location, modernization status (particularly with regard to energy efficiency), the attractiveness of the small town and its position in the transport network. The prevalence of housing other than owner-occupied single-family homes, such as rented property, cooperative housing or community-led housing projects, varies significantly by region. Alternatives to single-

family homes and owner-occupied housing are often found on a larger scale in the form of multi-unit rental apartment buildings, primarily in eastern Germany but also in small industrial towns in other regions.

In our discussions to date, we have paid particular attention to the unique characteristics of small-town housing, including its forms, practices and markets, as well as the conditions related to planning and settlement structures. Based on these themes, we have identified four problem dimensions specific to small towns:

1. The focus of housing supply on few housing types vs. diversifying demand
2. Owner-occupied housing market structures vs. demand for rental housing
3. Inner development as a guiding principle vs. the designation of building land on the outskirts
4. The limited capacity of municipal authorities to act vs. the need for action

These four problem dimensions are briefly explained below and then refined into key theses.

Problem dimension (1): The focus of housing supply on few housing types vs. diversifying demand

Problem description

Society is characterized by a wide variety of social situations and lifestyles, leading to the diversification of housing needs and demands. In small towns, such needs encounter a relatively standardized housing supply based on narrow definitions of target groups. This limited supply of housing types makes it difficult for small town residents to envision attractive housing options beyond owner-occupied single-family homes. We expect frequent mismatches between housing supply and demand. Often, housing preferences and actual conditions diverge. Dwelling units may be too expensive, too large, too small, lack barrier-free access, or otherwise fail to accommodate changing life circumstances. Those seeking to change their housing situations often face various hurdles.

Demographic aging is one of the biggest drivers of changing housing needs, leading to a care crisis in society: there are not enough quality housing options that enable a self-determined life at all ages. The need for senior-friendly housing is particularly high due to the large and aging baby-boomer generation. At the same time, deficits in care-appropriate housing and the provision of local care infrastructure are becoming increasingly apparent (Binet/Houston-Read/Gavin, 2023).

Key points

1. Small towns need a diverse range of housing options – varied in type and price, adaptable to different life situations and easily accessible. However, small towns generally do not yet offer this.
2. An affordable and high-quality housing supply is necessary to increase residential mobility within small towns. This would ensure that households have access to housing that meets their needs and reduces per capita living space.
3. The proactive development of neighborhoods as “caring communities” where people support one another can be a key approach for future-proofing life in small towns. At the same time, it is important to address the risk of “community capitalism” (van Dyk/Haubner 2021), i.e., the outsourcing of public service obligations to volunteers.

Problem dimension (2): Owner-occupied housing market structures vs. demand for rental housing

Problem Description

In small towns, owner-occupied, single-family homes are a well-established and valued type of housing. They are generally considered the standard form of housing. In contrast, the rental market plays a relatively minor role in many small towns, particularly in western Germany. However, the rental segment provides a more flexible housing supply and is particularly important in societies where households are increasingly mobile, where household structures are becoming more flexible (in terms of frequency of relocations and changes in household type), and where rising land prices are impacting the real estate market. The underdevelopment of the rental housing market contributes to a lack of affordable, attractive housing options. Consequently, numerous population groups (including low-income earners, seasonal workers, refugees, single parents, trainees and older people living alone) face difficulties in finding suitable housing. Lastly, this segment is important for younger households because their housing needs (particularly in an increasingly diverse society) are becoming more difficult to meet due to rising prices, while their life plans are shaped by uncertainty and fluidity, both professionally and privately. In many small towns, there is thus only a limited supply of affordable housing, a fundamental component of services of general interest.

On the other hand, people who own their homes often do not change their living conditions over the course of their lives, even if their household size shrinks. Mobility is low in many places, partly because households do not want to move (e.g., after the children have left home). Lock-in effects also play a decisive role here as many households that want to move cannot find suitable housing locally, including starter households, young families and older people living alone.

Key points

1. Due to the existing building stock, the dominance of single-family homes is not expected to change significantly in the future. However, focusing solely on this type of building poses significant drawbacks. More flexible lifestyles, declining affordability and the need to decrease land take are clear reasons to supplement and enrich the current stock with alternative housing options through renovation and new construction.
2. Against the backdrop of demographic change, a functional rental market offers flexibility to respond adequately to aging, individualization and social differentiation. It also represents an economic development factor by providing regional companies with a competitive advantage in labor markets thanks to the availability of flexible housing options.
3. A broader range of housing options that vary in price, location, size, quality and style, and that are available nearby, could increase people's willingness and capacity to adapt their housing situations to their needs. In this way, small rural towns could become increasingly important destinations for older households (Steinführer/Großmann 2021).

Problem dimension (3): Inner development as a guiding principle vs. the designation of building land on the outskirts

Problem description

Many small-town development concepts and policy frameworks now include an inner development strategy as a guiding principle. However, implementation has generally proven complex and protracted. Fragmented ownership structures, diverse stakeholder interests (e.g., tourism, retail and workplaces) and the desire to preserve privacy and adequate separation between properties hinder the efficient and planned realization of inner development as a guiding principle.

In many small towns, central residential neighborhoods have been neglected in recent decades in favor of designating new construction zones on the outskirts of municipal areas. On the one hand, this is due to the presumed high demand for single-family homes in outer areas. On the other hand, municipalities anticipate tax revenue from population growth, despite the fact that such revenue is often offset by infrastructure and development costs, sometimes even resulting in a net loss (see Bizer/Erlei/Gutsche 2017).

Key points

1. If new residential and transportation areas continue to be developed on the outskirts of towns despite existing opportunities for inner development, a “donut effect” will emerge or intensify. Town centers will lose vitality while sprawling structures with high infrastructure demands emerge on the outskirts. Such a process involves expensive development processes, land take, landscape fragmentation, poorer accessibility, increasing mobility constraints and greater dependence on cars.
2. Housing is a crucial component for developing town centers, especially in light of declining retail space and vacant commercial properties. Alongside the demand for single-family homes, demand for attractive dwellings in town centers is growing (see Projektverbund Stadt der Zukunft auf Probe 2024). These locations could be ideal for various target groups and housing needs, particularly for senior-friendly housing and smaller households.

Problem dimension (4): The limited capacity of municipal authorities to act vs. the need for action

Problem description

Many small towns recognize the need for urban development to develop and modernize infrastructure, urban design and housing supply. However, when it comes to implementation, decision-makers often encounter limitations that force them to focus on their core business: the municipality’s mandatory tasks. Small towns often have limited administrative personnel and face shortages of qualified professionals. Additionally, municipal finances are often highly constrained, and local government relies to some extent on voluntary political engagement, which – despite evident commitment and often close ties to citizens – leads to a lack of specialized expertise. There is thus a discrepancy between knowledge (e.g., regarding socio-spatial inequality, ecological challenges and land-use conflicts) and actual planning and political action.

Little structural funding is available for small-town development, and funding criteria are based on population size rather than the functional significance of small towns. Furthermore, there is often insufficient personnel available to identify suitable programs, submit funding applications and draft comprehensive reports, which makes it difficult to access or utilize these resources effectively.

Existing planning tools are insufficient and few experimental approaches exist. At the same time, local policymakers often lack awareness of housing issues. Housing is usually addressed as part of integrated urban development concepts and guiding principles rather than with dedicated housing development concepts or strategies. A lack of data makes specific housing-demand forecasts impossible. Standardized concepts from private planning offices, developed with insufficient financial resources, have little planning value for small towns. There is also a lack of locally specific analyses with analytical depth.

Additionally, in some cases the critical mass of people needed to explore new approaches to housing is unavailable. Particularly in structurally weak regions, potential investors are unwilling to take the risk of engaging in the development and implementation of housing concepts that are not yet well-established in the market, such as those with a communal or intergenerational focus.

Key points

1. The ability of municipalities to act in all areas of urban development, including housing and inner development, depends on having sufficient financial resources.
2. Many municipalities already have pilot projects in housing and urban development in place, which include both the adaptation of existing buildings and new constructions. These projects could provide innovative examples to inspire other housing-market participants in the municipality and other small towns. However, a willingness to innovate and take risks is not enough. Small-town administrations and town councils also need specific funding, networking opportunities and training in order to further develop their residential areas and housing stock.

4 The diversity of small towns: a heuristic approach to the broad spectrum of local constellations

Small towns are not a uniform type of settlement. They differ significantly in their built form, settlement structure, social characteristics and economic strength, and have highly differentiated housing and real estate markets. Accordingly, the needs of households seeking dwellings, the diversity of housing supply, price structures and market dynamics vary from place to place. It is therefore insufficient to classify small towns solely based on location types and factors related to growth or decline (Atkinson 2019). Rather, both research and practice related to real estate markets, segregation patterns and housing practices must also consider aspects such as the disproportionate importance of the tourism industry in certain regions, exogenous factors like large-scale commercial developments, differences in housing stock and stakeholder structures.

The working group has therefore – based on conceptual considerations and exclusively on a qualitative basis – developed an initial heuristic differentiation of small towns in order to address specific housing-related challenges in further work. This is not a systematic or comprehensive typology; rather, it is intended to illustrate the broad spectrum of problems and actions in small towns. The five constellations serve to illustrate the diversity of manifestations and do not claim to be exhaustive:

1. Peripheral and structurally weak small towns with vacant properties

These towns are characterized by long-term population decline, above-average aging of the population, loss of infrastructure and strained municipal finances. These issues are accompanied by a decline in property values and an increase in vacancies, which are often not on the market (Schenkel/Großmann 2021: 241). Vacancies and the decline of town centres are common problems. At the same time, these small towns serve as hubs for their rural surroundings, providing a minimum level of public services and amenities. The rural housing market is heavily dominated by owner-occupied housing, and rental housing is only available to a limited extent, if at all. In small-town centers, rental housing therefore caters for the small town itself and the surrounding villages (BBSR 2019). Nevertheless, questions arise regarding the usability and affordability of available rental housing, despite the excess supply. For example, in Thuringia, a shortage of affordable housing has been documented in certain market segments, partly because rent increases in the low-cost segment can be particularly burdensome (Schönig 2020).

2. **Small towns in metropolitan areas with excess demand**

A second type is small towns located near major cities in economically prosperous regions (Brombach/Jessen 2005). These towns are characterized by strong housing demand, as well as competition between residential and commercial uses and between local and incoming households. Positive and negative price fluctuations in the metropolitan core rapidly spread to suburban small towns (the ripple effect), often independently of local market conditions (Cotella/Demazière/ Dembski 2024). Local households are displaced by affluent buyers from the metropolitan area to varying degrees. Due to high land prices, there is a tendency toward densification, including an increased share of multi-story residential construction. Vacancy rates are low, and strong demand leads to the rapid mobilization of housing stock. The rental market in these small towns is shaped by the dynamics and structures of the nearby metropolitan areas. While some small towns regard external demand as a growth opportunity, others do not wish to succumb to growth pressures and attempt to meet housing needs from the existing stock rather than designating new development areas (Pietschnig 2023).

3. **Small towns in stable regions beyond metropolitan influence**

Many small towns are characterized neither by extreme population decline or growth, nor do they display a tendency toward marginalization. These towns are located at some distance from major cities and their economies are dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises. They are often home to “hidden champions” (Vonnahme/Graffenberger/ Görmar 2018) and serve as anchors of urbanity and public services in their regions. In western Germany, the housing stock is characterized by owner-occupied single- and two-family homes, reflecting a rural pattern. In eastern Germany, multi-story rental housing, predominantly owned by municipalities and cooperatives, plays a significant role in the regional housing market (Baumgärtner/Jessen/Willnauer 2018).

4. **Rural small towns with high rates of tourism**

This type of town is characterized by housing market dynamics that are otherwise usually found in major cities. Processes of commodification and financialization of housing are particularly evident here, resulting in sharp increases in land and property prices, as well as reduced housing accessibility and affordability. A defining feature of such small tourism hotspots is the continuous loss of permanent housing for locals and seasonal workers in favor of temporary housing for vacationers and second-home owners. Even if there is a stock of rental housing owned by municipal or nonprofit housing associations, it is far from sufficient to meet the demand for affordable, long-term housing. Research has not yet thoroughly addressed the far-reaching consequences of such scarcity for the economies and societies of tourism-oriented small towns at the local and regional levels. Public attention has primarily focused on the displacement of the local population, which is often discussed in terms of gentrification or super-gentrification. In this regard, coastal and alpine vacation destinations have received particular attention (Frank 2026; Rainer 2024).

5. **Small towns affected by external growth drivers**

The establishment or expansion of large and medium-sized companies, as well as changes in accessibility (e.g., highway access or a high-speed train stop), can lead to a sharp increase in housing market demand (Siebert/Vanclay 2024; Kaufmann/Wittwer 2019). At the same time, such exogenous economic factors can be seen as an opportunity to modernize existing housing market structures in small towns, mitigate lock-in effects in the owner-occupied segment, and integrate new forms of housing into the rental market. Skilled and highly qualified workers are placing new demands on the housing market with rental apartments, multi-family homes and temporary housing options for commuters or temporary workers becoming increasingly important in addition to single-family homes. A growing willingness to invest in these segments, coupled with limited response times, is leading to higher rents and land prices (Debrunner/Kolosek/Schindelegger 2025). This is

mainly because the available housing supply does not always meet the expectations of newcomers moving to the area for work, particularly regarding temporary housing arrangements in rental units.

5 Research agenda: The diversity of small towns – improving visibility, gaining in-depth insights and developing nuanced visions of the future

A more detailed and systematic analysis of the housing challenges, action options and future visions of small towns is required and has the potential to provide much needed insights. Such an analysis should consider the great diversity of local constellations and their respective challenges. There are currently few research findings on the socio-spatial dynamics, preferences and housing practices of small towns, or on their supply and stakeholder structures. Consequently, significant knowledge gaps and research needs exist in numerous areas, particularly regarding systematic, empirical findings on:

- > The housing needs and preferences of different generations and groups (including current residents and potential newcomers);
- > Decisions concerning place of residence (immigration, emigration, relocation within the municipality, or staying in place) and their consequences for small-town housing markets;
- > Overarching patterns and structures of small-town rental housing (including the structure, motivations and roles of different property owners);
- > Evolving local housing needs (supply vs. demand) and safeguarding public services;
- > The significance of care work for place of residential location decisions;
- > Patterns and dynamics of residential segregation and displacement processes;
- > The extent and forms of precarious housing;
- > The balance between inner and outer development in urban development and planning.

There is also a need for research regarding conceptual approaches and potential incentive structures in the housing market, such as:

- > The target-group-oriented and collaborative development of approaches to adapt the housing stock;
- > The identification of structural barriers to the implementation of alternative housing options (regarding municipal financial constraints, subsidy structures and market logics, building and townscape conservation, legal restrictions, building standards, human resources and expertise, etc.);
- > The empirical comparison of specific urban development policies and planning aimed at promoting inner development.

These research gaps serve as examples and should not be addressed uniformly for small towns as a settlement type. The issues identified should rather be examined for specific small towns facing structurally similar local constellations (as described above), both individually and comparatively. Only a more nuanced perspective can adequately address the empirically observable phenomena

in smaller towns and their unique challenges and opportunities. Part of such an approach could be a quantitative, systematic analysis of the different local constellations qualitatively identified in the first step (see Section 4).

6 Small-town housing in urban development and planning practice: initial reflections on practice strategies and transdisciplinary research needs

As demonstrated, significant knowledge gaps exist due to limited data availability and a lack of empirical research. Nevertheless, small-town practices already incorporate strategies for addressing various social developments and challenges within diverse local constellations (Sections 3 and 4). In this section, we conclude by compiling selected practical approaches at various spatial development levels. The extent to which these are effective and transferable, and any additional approaches that might be needed to complement them, remain a topic for future research.

Integrated approaches, political objectives and local municipal action

Our account of problem dimensions (see Section 3) shows that individual measures, such as promoting new construction without considering the existing housing stock or managing vacancies without defining housing policy goals, are ineffective. Instead, strategic frameworks that combine planning, land policy and housing market instruments are required. In practice, this means:

- > Clear definitions of political objectives (e.g., securing affordable rental housing, revitalizing inner-city housing stock and prioritizing inner over outer development);
- > The development of integrated urban development concepts (*Integrierte Stadtentwicklungskonzepte*) and housing development concepts (*Wohnentwicklungskonzepte*) as a strategic framework for urban land-use planning and program-based housing development.

Practical implementation must also be prioritized by local politics and requires sufficient human resources within the planning administration. There is clearly a need for research and well-grounded action in this area, specifically to systematically examine the political and administrative practices of housing in small towns and identify ways to implement an active housing policy despite limited resources.

Municipal land policy is widely established in practice, but the active management of building stock, particularly regarding vacant or underutilized residential buildings, is often underdeveloped. In small towns in particular, municipal control over land and selected building stock could be a decisive way to respond to different market situations (see Section 4). There is therefore a need for research and knowledge transfer of good practices, for example concerning:

- > The possibilities of municipal and regional monitoring of land use and housing stock, including vacancies;
- > Market participation through public housing corporations;
- > The strategic use of municipal land and its development based on defined social goals.

Local instruments and strategies

Depending on the specific problem (see Sections 3 and 4), appropriate strategies are required. For (research into) urban development practices, this means posing questions such as:

- > Which planning and legal instruments contribute effectively and in the long term towards securing and creating affordable, high-quality rental housing?
- > How can the rental housing needs of specific target groups (e.g., starter households, people living in shared housing and elderly people living alone) be assessed, and how can corresponding housing options be promoted?
- > How can small local authorities systematically record and classify their housing stock and vacancies while using minimal resources?
- > Which communication tools effectively contribute to enhancing housing stock and inner development (e.g., engaging with property owners and municipal advisory services)?
- > Which financial instruments are suitable for addressing bottlenecks, managing oversupply and facilitating the repurposing of existing stock (e.g., urban development funding and land acquisition)?

Level of action	Selected examples of tasks and measures
Federal	> Establishment of an appropriate legal framework (see DST 2024: 7) > Implementation of urban development programs for the enhancement, conversion and renovation of housing stock in small towns
State	> Low-threshold funding programs for small towns (e.g., the <i>Zukunftsräume Niedersachsen</i> program) > Model programs for inner development and vacancy management > Strategic direction of housing subsidies > Building-land funds
Regional	> Pooling of expertise > Support in drawing up housing development strategies, housing surveys and monitoring (e.g., Region Hannover, Regionalverband <i>Frankfurt RheinMain</i>, <i>Planungsverband Zillertal</i>) > Project development and funding acquisition > Action plans and planning strategies (e.g., <i>Initiative Baukultur</i>; see SGD Nord n. d.)
Municipal	> Integrated approaches (inner development, affordable housing, no net land take) (see Ehrhardt/Eichhorn/Behnisch et al. 2022) > Active land and housing policy (establishment of land and housing stock management, engagement with property owners) > Development of municipal housing stock > Cooperative small-town development (BBSR 2018: 11)
Associations and civil society	> Knowledge transfer and consulting (e.g., <i>Kleinstadtakademie</i>, <i>EspaceSuisse</i>) > Support for communal and innovative forms of housing (e.g., FGW, n. d.; Zemp/Juppien/Winterberger 2018; Wüstenrot Stiftung 2020) > Support in the conversion and renovation of buildings for residential purposes (e.g., WFG Ostbelgien n. d.)

Table 1: Selected examples of tasks and measures related to small-town housing stock and housing markets within the multi-level system of spatial development. Source: the authors

Possible measures within the multi-level system of spatial development

Many of the measures mentioned require sufficient financial and human resources, which are often limited in small towns. This makes it even more important to consider the multi-level system of spatial development, its various actors and their contributions to housing development in small towns (see Table 1).

Table 1 provides an initial overview of potential tasks and measures at different levels of spatial development. These need to be further explored within the ARL working group “Housing in Small Towns: Real Estate Markets, Segregation Patterns and Housing Practices”, in accordance with specific local constellations (see Section 4). Further differentiation and refinement of these approaches and instruments could involve quantitative analyses, and their effectiveness could be assessed through case studies. By conducting specific case studies and pilot projects, additional suitable approaches for the various constellations may be identified, along with innovative and transferable solutions for urban development and municipal housing policy in practice.

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No.

162 Housing in Small Towns – Current challenges in research and practice.

This position paper is drawn from work by the members of the working group ‘Housing in small towns: real estate markets, segregation patterns and housing practices’ (*Wohnen in Kleinstädten: Immobilienmärkte, Segregationsmuster und Wohnpraktiken*). Hanover, 2026.
<https://doi.org/10.60683/df21-wn11>

161 Wohnen in Kleinstädten – Aktuelle Herausforderungen in Forschung und Praxis.

Dieses Positionspapier wurde von den Mitgliedern des Arbeitskreises „Wohnen in Kleinstädten“ erarbeitet. Hannover, 2026.
<https://doi.org/10.60683/z4qv-je63>

160 Resiliente Raumstrukturen – Raumordnung und Raumentwicklung stärken Landes- und Bündnisverteidigung sowie Bevölkerungsschutz.

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159 Planning, designing and implementing green infrastructure – A contribution to Alpine spatial planning.

This position paper was prepared by members of the cross-border working group ‘Green Infrastructure in the Northern Limestone Alps’ (*Grüne Infrastruktur in den Nördlichen Kalkalpen*) of the ARL Bavaria Forum. Hanover, 2025.
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158 Grüne Infrastruktur planen, entwickeln und umsetzen – Ein Beitrag zur Alpen Raumordnung.

Dieses Positionspapier wurde von den Mitgliedern der grenzübergreifenden Arbeitsgruppe „Grüne Infrastruktur in den Nördlichen Kalkalpen“ des ARL-Forums Bayern der ARL erarbeitet. Hannover, 2025.
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157 Reaktivierung von Schienenstrecken in den Bundesländern – Zwischen Euphorie und Hindernissen.

Dieses Positionspapier enthält Ergebnisse und Empfehlungen des Arbeitskreises „Reaktivierung von Schienenstrecken als Instrument einer integrierten Raumentwicklung“ der ARL. Hannover, 2025.
<https://doi.org/10.60683/9rhx-0b78>

156 Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on facilitating Cross-Border Solutions – BRIDGEforEU.

This position paper was prepared by members of the ad-hoc Working Group ‘Cross-Border Solutions’ at the ARL. Hanover, 2025.
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