Research Findings

What happens to children in persistently bad housing?

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Over one in eight children (13 per cent) persistently lived in overcrowded accommodation between 2001 and 2005 according to analysis of the Families and Children Study (FACS), which interviews the same families at annual intervals.

In addition, 6 per cent of children persistently lived in poorly-repaired accommodation and 4 per cent in inadequately-heated accommodation.

The longer children lived in bad housing, the more likely they were to suffer from health problems, get bullied and struggle to keep up with homework.

Large families, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) families and families in the rented sector disproportionately lived in persistent bad housing.

Policy-makers need to address the various ways bad housing appears to detrimentally affect outcomes for children and focus on reducing the substantial number of children who live in bad housing for long periods.

Interventions in housing provision for families are likely to lead to improvements in many other aspects of children’s lives.
One in four children lived in overcrowded, poorly-repaired or inadequately-heated accommodation.

We measured three types of bad housing in this study — overcrowded, poorly-repaired and inadequately-heated.

1. **Overcrowded accommodation**: housing deemed too small for a family according to the established ‘bedroom standard’ criterion, which takes into account the number of rooms and the size and composition of the family.

2. **Accommodation in poor state of repair**: housing suffering from three or more problems including rising damp in the floor or walls, general rot and decay, and draughts.

3. **Inadequately-heated accommodation**: housing which the family couldn’t keep warm enough in winter.

FACS measures bad housing by asking the mother about her accommodation, unlike some specialist housing surveys which employ an independent surveyor to assess the accommodation. Despite its different approach, FACS finds patterns of bad housing in line with other published research. The proportion of children living in bad housing has remained fairly consistent from 2001 to 2005 (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Rates of bad housing (2001-2005)**

![Graph showing rates of bad housing (2001-2005)]

**Base: Dependent children in Britain**

Note: ‘Poor state of repair’ is not plotted on this chart as it was measured slightly differently in FACS 2001.

In 2005, one in four children (25 per cent) were living in housing which qualified as ‘bad’ on at least one of the three counts we measured, while a minority (5 per cent) were living in housing which qualified as ‘bad’ on more than one count.

A substantial number of children persistently lived in bad housing between 2001 and 2005.

Our research analysed data from interviews with the same families over five consecutive years from 2001 to 2005, and categorised children according to the number of times they lived in bad housing during that time.

- **Persistent bad housing** means children were living in bad housing at three or more of the five interviews.
- **Short-term bad housing** means bad housing at one or two interviews.
- **No bad housing** means children avoided bad housing over the period.

Overcrowding was the housing problem children were most likely to experience on a persistent basis. Fewer children persistently experienced accommodation that was inadequately heated or in a poor state of repair.

- 13 per cent of children persistently lived in overcrowded accommodation.
- 6 per cent of children persistently lived in poorly-repaired accommodation.
- 4 per cent of children persistently lived in inadequately-heated accommodation.

**Figure 2. Duration of bad housing (2001-2005)**

![Graph showing duration of bad housing (2001-2005)]

**Base: Dependent children in Britain**

More children were affected by bad housing over the period than standard point-in-time estimates may suggest. For example, 24 per cent of children experienced overcrowding at least once over the five-year period (compared with 15 per cent of children in 2005).
Social-rented housing was more likely to be persistently overcrowded, while private-rented housing was more likely to be inadequately heated or poorly-repaired.

The duration of all three types of bad housing varied by tenure, even after taking account of a range of other circumstances, such as family composition, income and geographical area.

- 26 per cent of children in social-rented accommodation persistently lived with overcrowding.
- 19 per cent of children in private-rented accommodation persistently lived in poorly-repaired housing.
- 19 per cent of children in private-rented accommodation persistently lived in inadequately-heated housing.

There were other groups of children who were more likely to experience persistent bad housing.

**Persistent overcrowding**
- 53 per cent of children in families with four or more children;
- 32 per cent of children with an Asian mother.

**Persistent poor state of repair**
- 10 per cent of children living in one of the 20 per cent most deprived areas;
- 12 per cent of children in families below the income poverty line;
- 14 per cent of children in families that had a number of debts.

**Persistent inadequate heating**
- 10 per cent of children in families that had a Black mother;
- 9 per cent of children in lone-parent families;
- 11 per cent of children in families that had a number of debts.

Children who persistently lived in bad housing were more likely to face a range of other negative outcomes.

Even when taking into account other factors that could cause poor living standards for children, such as poverty and poor parental health, an increased duration of living in bad housing meant children were more likely to face a number of other negative outcomes (Figure 3).
Implications for policy

The evidence from FACS suggests that living in bad housing for long periods has an adverse impact on children’s lives. Given that there is also evidence of a substantial number of children who spend significant parts of their childhood living in bad housing, we believe that policy should focus on children who live in bad housing for long periods.

Policy-makers should also be aware that far more children experience bad housing at some stage during childhood than traditional point-in-time surveys suggest.

The issue of persistent overcrowding for families in social-rented housing highlights the lack of affordable and suitably-sized accommodation for families in the social-rented sector. But bad housing is not restricted to the social-rented sector: our research shows that a higher proportion of children in the private-rented sector persistently lived in inadequately-heated accommodation or accommodation in a poor state of repair.

Since housing policy is closely connected to the particular varieties of tenure, different policy levers work in different sectors. To enable housing policies to target interventions at the most appropriate groups, policy-makers need to consider the different types of families living in social- and private-rented accommodation. The recent rises in energy prices will also have significant repercussions for families on low income.

Persistently living in bad housing does not only negatively affect children in and of itself: it also links to a range of other negative outcomes which compromise children’s well-being. That is why it is crucial that policy-makers consider the wider impact of bad housing when designing child welfare policies. Our research implies that incorporating housing issues into the policy agenda on the well-being of children will result in efficiency savings in other policy areas, as interventions in housing provision and quality are likely to lead to improvements in many other aspects of children’s lives.

Methodology

- The findings from this study are based on analysis of the Families and Children Study (FACS).
- FACS began in 1999 with a survey of lone-parent families and low/middle-income couple families with children in Britain. Since 2001, FACS has surveyed families with children irrespective of income.
- The FACS surveys are carried out via a face-to-face interview with the mother (and the partner in couple families). The interview covers a range of topics, including health, education, income, labour market activity, childcare, housing and deprivation.
- FACS interviews the same families on an annual basis, providing information which allows us to observe how the circumstances, behaviour and attitudes of individual families and children change over time.
- Almost 7,000 families and 13,000 children take part in FACS each year. This report focused on the 6,431 children present in every FACS interview from 2001 to 2005.

Obtaining the full report for this study

The full report of these research findings, The Dynamics of Bad Housing: The impact of bad housing on the living standards of children by Matt Barnes, Sarah Butt and Wojtek Tomaszewski (2008) was published by NatCen in September 2008. Please visit the NatCen website for details of how to access the report: www.natcen.ac.uk

NatCen analyses FACS for a variety of organisations. For more information on this research or general enquiries about FACS, please contact Matt Barnes: m.barnes@natcen.ac.uk