


Against the odds

An investigation comparing
the lives of children on either
side of Britain's housing divide



Shelter



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To protect the identity of the children and families featured
in this publication, names have been changed and models
have been used in photographs.

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Foreword

More than one million children in Britain today live in bad housing. These children have to cope in dilapidated and run-down conditions, or be squashed with their families into overcrowded homes with no space to play or do their homework. Others have no permanent home at all and are forced to move several times a year from one temporary home to another. Surely children should be able to expect better living in twenty-first century Britain, the fourth richest country in the world?

Photo: Eddie McDonald



Shelter has conducted an unprecedented investigation into what life is like for children living in bad housing. How do their lives compare with those of other children? What is the impact of their living conditions on their life chances and future prospects? Are the odds stacked against them because of their housing situation?

New statistics reveal the huge housing divide between children living in bad housing and their contemporaries living in decent homes. Children's own descriptions of life in bad housing provide a vivid portrayal of the difficulties of living in unfit or overcrowded conditions, or temporary accommodation. The impact on these children of their housing circumstances is harsh. They do less

well at school, suffer from poorer health, get into more trouble, and live in worse neighbourhoods. The implications of these problems stretch well beyond childhood, affecting their chances of leading a successful, healthy life in adulthood. Is this fair?

A decent home is critical for a child to get a positive start in life, and a child's start in life has a huge impact on their future. The findings of this investigation highlight the urgent need to end bad housing for children in Britain to ensure all children get the fair start in life they need.

Addressing child poverty and improving children's life chances are central to government policy at the moment. The Government has made a crucial commitment to end child poverty by 2020. The Every Child Matters programme holds the potential to improve the lot of disadvantaged children.

But housing must be integrated into this agenda if the life chances of children in bad housing are to improve. And if there are to be enough homes available for those in need, the Government must commit to building an additional 20,000 social rented homes every year. The Comprehensive Spending Review offers a critical opportunity to make this commitment. The Government needs to act urgently before it is too late for another generation of children in bad housing.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Adam Sampson'.

Adam Sampson
Chief Executive, Shelter

Introduction

This report presents the findings of a major investigation into what it means to be a child living in bad housing.¹ Carried out between April and August 2006,² the investigation looked at the impact of bad housing on children, comparing the lives and life chances of children on either side of Britain's housing divide.

The findings reveal the huge disparity between the lives of children who live in bad housing and those of children who do not. New statistics demonstrate the extent of the disadvantage to children of living in homes that are overcrowded or dilapidated, or of not having a permanent home at all. Children living in these conditions describe in their own words the impact their housing problems are having on their lives. New figures about the number of children living in bad housing reveal the scale of the problem – one in seven children in Britain today is living in bad housing.

The findings presented in the report highlight the urgent need for the Government to end bad housing for children in Britain to ensure all children get a fair start in life. The recommendations at the end of this report set out a clear path for achieving this.

The body of evidence

The investigation findings presented in this report are based on three main sources of evidence.³

■ **New facts and figures** Shelter worked with the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) to obtain new figures comparing the lives of children living in bad housing with other children. The results are based on information about more than 12,500 children⁴ from the Government-funded Family and Children Study (FACS) 2004 database, widely regarded as one of the most up-to-date and authoritative sources of information available on families and children in Britain. This research has provided an unparalleled picture of how children in Britain are affected by living in bad housing.

■ **Children's voices** The investigation also took evidence directly from children and teenagers. Researchers interviewed 20 children, ranging in age from seven to 15 years, from 11 families living in bad housing in London and Bristol.⁵ Children described their own experiences of, and views on, the housing crisis. Many of the children reported struggling to study, sleep and play in their own homes because

of overcrowded or unfit conditions, or living in temporary accommodation.

■ **Other studies and research** To get the most complete picture possible, the investigation also looked at the wider body of evidence, including previous research reports and academic studies. This evidence includes the findings of an online survey of teachers that Shelter conducted on its website in June 2006, in which 133 teachers gave their views on how the lives of children living in bad housing compare with those of other children.

1 For a definition of 'bad housing' as used in this report, see What is bad housing? on page 8.

2 This period includes Shelter's investigation and the processing of Family and Children Study (FACS) data for Shelter by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen). The FACS data was gathered between September 2004 and January 2005.

3 More detail about the methodology used in the investigation is provided in the appendix on page 45.

4 FACS defines dependent children as all children aged 16 or under, plus those aged 17 and 18 who are in full-time education.

5 Unless indicated otherwise, interviews referred to in the report refer to Shelter's investigative interviews, not the quantitative interviews behind the FACS data.

The need for this investigation

The Government is committed to ending child poverty in Britain and to improving outcomes for children with its Every Child Matters programme.⁶ This is a critical time for children's policy in Britain. It is vital that the importance of decent, stable housing is recognised and that housing issues are at the forefront of the Government's children's agenda.

Shelter's *Chance of a lifetime* report, written by Lisa Harker, child development expert and advisor on child poverty to the Department for Work and Pensions, provided proof that bad housing has a severe impact on all aspects of children's life chances, both during childhood and beyond into adulthood.

The link between children's housing and their life chances was irrefutable, but up-to-date, robust information was needed to show what living in bad housing means for children in reality and how their lives compare with those of their contemporaries living in better housing.

To find out, this investigation asked:

- how do the lives and opportunities of children and families in bad housing compare with those of other children?
- how many children are suffering health, education and other problems because of bad housing?
- what do children at the heart of the housing crisis have to say about their housing and experiences?

Cause and effect

The new findings from FACS data presented in this report show that children living in bad housing are significantly more likely to experience difficulties relating to health, education and lifestyle than children not living in bad housing. Statistical testing has shown that even where the differences between figures appear slight, they illustrate significant gaps between the lives and life chances of children in bad housing and those of other children.

The findings demonstrate a clear relationship between housing and the quality of children's lives. From the figures alone it is not possible to say definitively whether bad housing causes or compounds the issues discussed in this report; for this reason information from other sources provides a vital insight into the reasons for the relationship. FACS data tell us that children living in bad housing are more likely to be in poor health, and interviews with children and evidence from numerous studies tell us why this is.

Looking at all the evidence together, it is clear that housing issues are in some cases the cause of the difficulties experienced by children and families revealed in this investigation, and in other cases housing is a factor that exacerbates existing problems, making difficult lives even more challenging.

⁶ More information on the Government's Every Child Matters programme is available at www.everychildmatters.gov.uk

⁷ Harker L., *Chance of a lifetime*, Shelter, 2006.

Life chances

This report focuses on children's life chances, comparing those of children who live in bad housing with those of children who do not. Life chances is a broad term used to describe a range of factors critical to a person's current and future well-being.

Shelter believes that the following areas are crucial to giving everyone a fair start in life:

- health and emotional well-being
- safety and security
- educational experience and attainment
- childhood and adult aspirations
- income and occupation of parents and carers.

This report presents detailed findings on a number of these areas, including education and school, physical health, emotional well-being, family life and friendships.



What is bad housing?

Bad housing covers a wide range of issues, including homelessness, overcrowding, insecurity, housing that is in poor physical condition, and living in deprived neighbourhoods. The analysis in this report focuses on the three key elements of bad housing defined below.

- **Homelessness** This refers to families living in temporary accommodation, which includes those who have been found homeless by a local authority and those who have homelessness applications pending.
- **Overcrowding** Shelter uses the 'bedroom standard' measure of overcrowding. For example, overcrowded conditions would include situations where children aged 10 or over of different genders have to share a bedroom; where parents have to share a bedroom with a child or children; where there are more than two children in a bedroom; and where rooms such as kitchens and living rooms are used as bedrooms.
- **Unfitness** The Government describes a decent home as one that is wind and weather tight, warm, and has modern facilities. Unfit or poor conditions are where housing is in need of substantial repairs; is structurally unsafe; is damp, cold, or infested; or is lacking in modern facilities such as an effective central heating system.

In the Family and Children Study (FACS) data used in this report, bad housing has been identified by parents in response to questions about the condition and size of their home, and whether or not they are living in temporary accommodation.

There is some overlap between the different types of bad housing. In this report, cases are referred to as **acutely bad housing** where a child was experiencing two or more of the housing problems on the left simultaneously, or where one housing problem was particularly bad, for example accommodation was very overcrowded or a family had not had a permanent home for more than 12 months.



Photo: Nick David



How many children live in bad housing?

Shelter's new figures reveal the scale of the housing problem affecting Britain's children today.



Photo: Nick David



Photo: Nick David

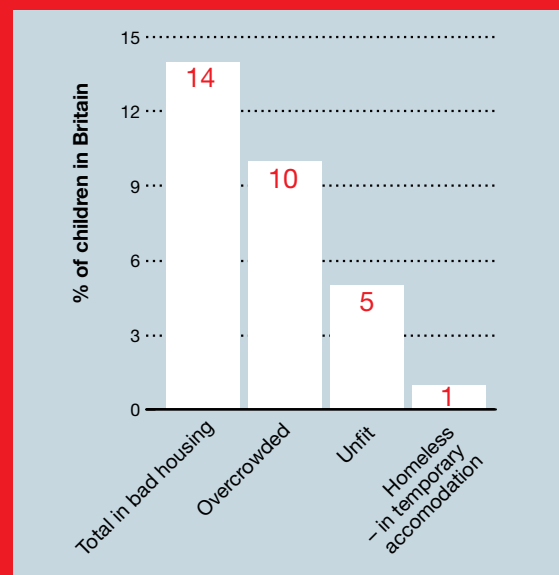
Shelter's new estimates

- 1.6 million children in Britain today live in bad housing.⁸
- 1.4 million of these children live in England.
- That is the equivalent of 14 per cent – or one in seven – of children in Britain.

Calculating the new estimates

Shelter used information from across Britain to calculate the new estimates. Information about children living in bad housing is complex, with data being collected in different ways in different countries in Britain. The Family and Children Study (FACS) gathers information about the housing conditions of families from

Figure 1: *Children living in different types of bad housing in Britain*



Base: all children in Britain aged 0 to 15 years.

across Britain.⁹ To produce the most accurate estimates, Shelter has also drawn on the most widely used official figures and surveys of housing in England.¹⁰

Before now, little has been known about the overlap between different types of bad housing, which has made it difficult to estimate accurately the total number of children living in bad housing. FACS data shows that there is a small overlap (11 per cent) between the three types of bad housing addressed in this report. This information has enabled a more accurate estimate to be calculated.

⁸ For a definition of 'bad housing' as used in this report, see What is bad housing? on the opposite page.

⁹ Excluding Northern Ireland.

¹⁰ Details of the official figures used are provided in the appendix on page 46.



School and learning

The findings in this chapter reveal the negative impact that living in bad housing¹¹ can have on children's education and school life, as well as on their aspirations and plans for the future. Children living in bad housing are less likely to enjoy and succeed at school than other children, and they are also more likely to plan on leaving school at 16.

School life and education play an important role in determining a child's future. Good educational attainment – successful learning and gaining qualifications – improves life chances. It reduces the likelihood of living in poverty, working in low-paid or insecure employment, living in bad housing, living in an area with many problems, and having few choices in life. A positive school experience can also contribute more generally to improved life skills, self-confidence, behaviour and aspirations.

In light of this, it is unsurprising how much importance children in Britain today attach to their education. Nearly all secondary school children aged between 11 and 15 years (97 per cent) feel that doing well at school is important to them. Children in bad housing are even more likely to feel that doing well at school is 'very important'. But the harsh reality is that they are significantly less likely to fulfil this aspiration than children not living in bad housing.

Attaining qualifications

More than 40,000 young people (aged 16 to 18) living in bad housing in England have no GCSEs.¹²

GCSE results are the most widely used indicators of educational attainment for children up to 16 years old.

This investigation has found that children living in bad housing are nearly twice as likely as other children not to get any GCSEs – one in four children living in bad housing gains no GCSEs compared with around one in 10 children not living in bad housing. Failure to attain any GCSEs will have a significant impact on these children's future prospects.

The disparity between children in bad housing and other children is similar where some GCSEs are attained. Children living in bad housing who get at least one GCSE are twice as likely not to attain an A to C grade as other children (16 per cent compared with eight per

Key findings

- Children living in bad housing are nearly twice as likely as other children to leave school without any GCSEs.
- Children living in acutely bad housing are twice as likely not to attend school as other children.
- Ten per cent of children living in acutely bad housing and six per cent of those in bad housing reported skipping school repeatedly over a year period, compared with only two per cent of other children.
- Children and teenagers aged 11 to 15 living in bad housing are twice as likely to have been excluded from school as other children.
- Only one-fifth of children living in bad housing intend to study full time beyond the age of 16, compared with around a quarter of children not living in bad housing.
- Children who live in bad housing are five times as likely to lack a quiet place to do their homework as other children.

¹¹ For a definition of 'bad housing' as used in this report, see What is bad housing? on page 8.

¹² Details about how this estimate was calculated are provided in the appendix on page 46.

cent). Only half of children living in bad housing (53 per cent) attain five or more A to C grades, compared with 71 per cent of other children.

There are a number of reasons for this lower level of attainment. Children living in bad housing face a number of issues that affect their results including:

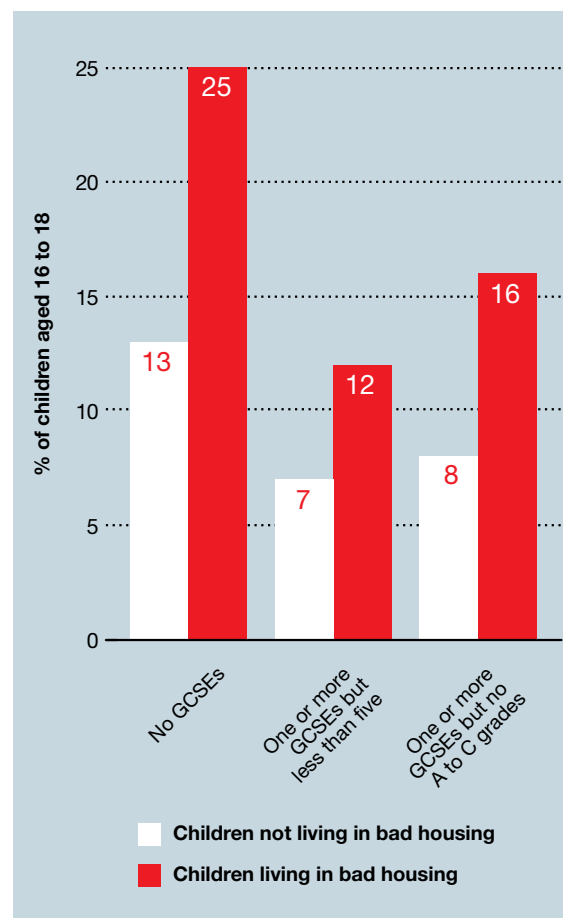
- time off school due to illness (see page 21)
- higher rates of school exclusion and truancy
- lower aspirations in terms of further education and future employment
- problems with studying at home.

These issues are discussed later in this chapter (except health, as indicated).

One of the respondents to Shelter's survey of teachers attributed a recent improvement in the school's results in part to improvements to social housing in the area:

'Our school has had improved results recently. The Glasgow Housing Association has spent considerable sums of money in improving [its housing] stock. This may be a partial factor in our [school's] improvement.'

Figure 2: GCSE attainment of children living in bad housing in England compared with other children



Base: all children in England aged 16 to 18 years and living in the household.

Attending school

Children living in acutely bad housing are twice as likely not to attend school as other children (two per cent compared with one per cent). Although the percentages are small, they show a very significant difference. Not attending school puts children at higher risk of social exclusion. Children who do not attend school at all (with the exception of the small number of children educated at home) are at an exceptionally high risk of social exclusion.

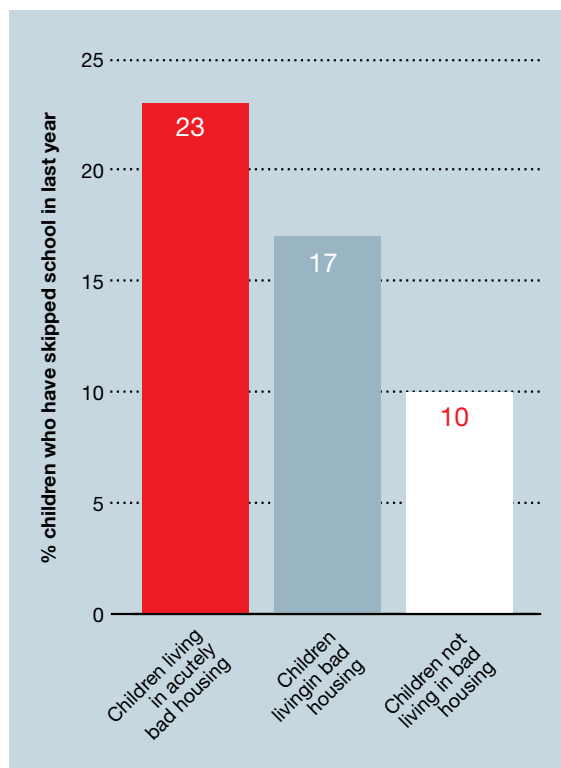
These new findings are backed up by other evidence. In a Shelter survey of families living in temporary accommodation, one in 10 parents (11 per cent) said that they did not have a school place for at least one of their children.¹³ Parents reported various reasons for children not being able to secure a school place. Some had found that having moved to a new area (for example moving between temporary accommodation) the schools in that area did not have capacity to take on new pupils during the term. In other cases it was difficult to secure a place at a new school if the child in question had been excluded from their previous school because of bad behaviour or truancy.

¹³ Mitchell F, Neuburger J, Radebe D and Rayne A, *Living in limbo*, Shelter, 2004.

Truancy

In a single year more than 75,000 children (aged 11 to 15) living in bad housing in Britain skip school on one or more occasion.¹⁴

Figure 3: Truancy rates among children living in bad housing and other children



Base: all children in Britain aged 11 to 15 years.

There is a clear link between living in bad housing and children skipping school. Missing school time because of truancy has a significant impact on a child's chances of achievement at school, with a further impact on their prospects in later life. Nearly one in five children living in bad housing (17 per cent), including one in four in acutely bad housing (23 per cent), admitted to skipping or 'bunking off' school during the past year. This is almost double the rate for truancy among other children, of whom only one in 10 reported skipping school.

Even more strikingly, children who live in bad or acutely bad housing are much more likely to skip or 'bunk off' school repeatedly over the period of a year. Ten per cent of those in acutely bad housing and six per cent of those in bad housing reported repeated unauthorised absence from school, compared with only two per cent of other children.

This higher incidence of truancy from school could be related to factors associated with living in bad housing that are explored later in this report, for example the stress of changing schools and long journeys to school experienced by homeless children, and problems completing homework and lower academic achievement experienced by children living in bad housing.

Behaving at school

In a single year over 57,000 children living in bad housing in Britain are excluded from school.¹⁵

Exclusion from school is usually due to problems with pupil behaviour at school. The link between growing up in bad housing and behavioural problems in children was highlighted in Shelter's recent *Chance of a lifetime* report.¹⁶ This investigation reveals that that children and teenagers aged 11 to 15 who live in bad housing are twice as likely as other children to have been excluded from school – that is, be told not to attend school for a fixed period or permanently – over the period of a year (five per cent compared with two per cent of other children).

The *Chance of a lifetime* report identified a similar higher prevalence of problem behaviour among children living in bad housing. Evidence in that report also demonstrated that behavioural difficulties in childhood can manifest themselves in offending behaviour in later life. Findings relating to children's

¹⁴ Details about how this estimate was calculated are provided in the appendix on page 46.

¹⁵ Details about how this estimate was calculated are provided in the appendix on page 46.

¹⁶ Harker L, *Chance of a lifetime*, Shelter, 2006.

behaviour out of school discussed later in this report (on page 33) confirm the relationship between problem behaviour and living in bad housing.

Possible triggers for problem behaviour could include some of the factors related to bad housing that are explored later in this report, for example stress induced by poor living conditions, and problems sleeping. Of 133 teachers who responded to Shelter's survey, more than three-quarters stated that in their experience the stress caused by bad housing contributes to behavioural problems in children.¹⁷

The case of a young homeless girl reported by a teacher who responded to Shelter's survey illustrates the impact of a child's housing circumstances on their behaviour at school:

'I know of one girl, now in Year 12, who has in the past experienced periods of sleeping rough, but when doing so [she] has still come into school. Recently she has been given a room in a hostel but is very unhappy there. She depends on the stability and community she receives at school. However, the last few years she has isolated herself in terms of making friends, as many have found her behaviour and aggression intimidating. Her behaviour has been a direct result of her very difficult home life.'

Clinical psychologist Dr Tanya Byron highlights the impact of bad housing on children's behaviour in her commentary in *I am so crowded: this is my story*, a collection of diaries written by children living in overcrowded housing, published by Shelter:¹⁸

'Stress [from living in overcrowded housing] can manifest itself in disruptive behaviour at school or, conversely, in a child becoming withdrawn. Even toddlers are capable of aggression if they are insecure. Combining stress or depression with adolescence is a potent mix...'

Problems related to school life

The children interviewed as part of this investigation, all of whom live in bad housing, described some of the problems they were experiencing in relation to their schooling. These included:

- finding a suitable space at home to do their homework
- getting to and from school, and
- moving to new schools

all of which were affecting their enjoyment and attainment at school.

Studying at home

Nearly 66,000 children (aged 11 or above) living in bad housing in Britain do not have a quiet space to do their homework.²⁰

Homework is an important element of children's schoolwork. Having access to a suitable place to do homework is crucial to success at school, but many of the children interviewed reported having problems with this.

'Here we have a living room, but at the last place [I lived in] it was really difficult. I had to do my work on top of the fridge...' Kelly, aged 15.

Children in bad housing are five times more likely to lack a quiet place to do their homework than other children (11 per cent compared with two per cent). The problem is even more prevalent amongst those living in acutely bad housing (18 per cent). It is, therefore, unsurprising that children living in bad housing are less likely to complete all of their homework (72 per cent of children in bad housing complete their homework, compared with 85 per cent of other children).

¹⁷ Three per cent said that this was not their experience and 19 per cent said they did not know.

¹⁸ Shelter, *I am so crowded: this is my story*, 2006.

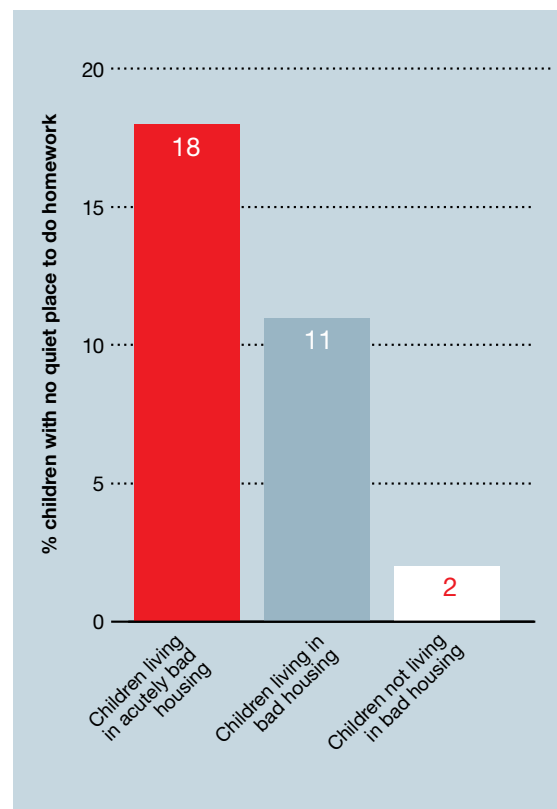
¹⁹ Harker L, *Chance of a lifetime*, Shelter, 2006.

²⁰ Details about how this estimate was calculated are provided in the appendix on page 46.

‘Here we have a living room, but at the last place [I lived in] it was really difficult. I had to do my work on top of the fridge [which was kept in the bedroom of the family’s shared house]...’

Kelly, aged 15.

Figure 4: Children with no quiet place to do their homework



Base: all school children in Britain aged 11 years and above who are given homework.

This finding was confirmed by teachers in Shelter’s survey: 90 per cent of respondents stated that in their experience children in bad housing had more difficulty completing homework than other children.

Several of the children interviewed, especially the older ones facing exams, felt very frustrated by the absence of a suitable place to study at home. The younger children interviewed seemed to be happy to study on a bed or on the floor, but older children felt they needed a desk or flat surface, and an area free from distraction.

‘I need space to learn – I need to improve my learning level... Sometimes I have exams [to study for] and if there’s noise I can’t think.’ Asad, aged 15, lives in severely overcrowded temporary accommodation.

Some of the older children were acutely aware of the impact that bad housing could have on their attainment.

‘There’s no space for writing – no table or flat surface. I think next year [be]cause of SATs²¹ and stuff they are going to give us lots of homework. I don’t have problems with work at school but when I come to do my homework, it is difficult for me.’ Darran, aged 13.

One of the teachers who responded to Shelter’s survey expressed similar concerns about the impact of housing issues on pupil’s attainment in SATs:

²¹ Standard Assessment Tests, which all children sit at the ages of seven, 11 and 14 years.

'Over 60 per cent of our pupils are in unsafe and overcrowded housing. Homework is impossible and such children are much more stressed. Please ask the Government to take note when they expect the same outcomes [in SATs]... irrespective of such challenges for some children.'

Getting to school

When a homeless family is placed in temporary accommodation by a local authority, the accommodation is often a long way from the children's current school. Parents and children are often faced with the difficult decision of whether children should undertake long journeys to and from school, or face the upheaval of changing schools. There is also no guarantee that a school place will be available in the area the family is moved to. A homeless family can be moved numerous times, which makes this even more difficult.

'It wasn't good [when we had to move] because we're living quite a distance from school now and in the other house we just had to walk. Now sometimes we get to school late, [and] have to take two buses. It's worth the journey but it's a bit difficult.' Saamir, aged 8.

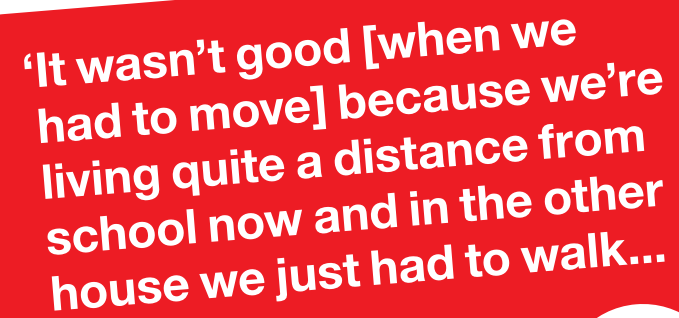
Children from five of the families interviewed reported long and tiring journeys to and from school that affected their education, health and friendships.

'I have to wake early in the morning to go to school – it makes me tired. It gets me down that it takes so long to get back from school later on...' Darran, aged 13.

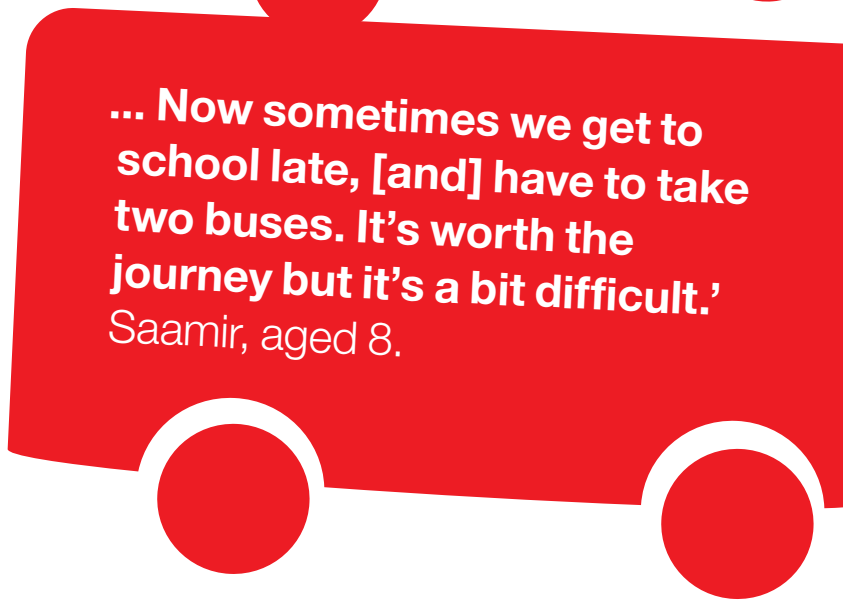
'It's really frustrating [be]cause by the time I get to school I'm really tired... In the afternoon I get back at half past five and I have to go to school at twenty to seven so I'm really tired, but I can't do much about it... The other schools can't accept me [be]cause next year I'm sitting my GCSEs.' Kelly, aged 15.

A teacher who responded to Shelter's survey highlighted the problem of homeless children being rehoused far from their school and the disadvantages this causes them:

'I know children who are rehoused at great distance from school, and this causes extreme social issues as well as learning disadvantages.'



'It wasn't good [when we had to move] because we're living quite a distance from school now and in the other house we just had to walk...'



... Now sometimes we get to school late, [and] have to take two buses. It's worth the journey but it's a bit difficult.'
Saamir, aged 8.

Moving house and changing schools

Homeless children can end up having to change schools several times in a school year because of moving into and between temporary accommodation. Changing schools is a stressful experience and was highlighted as a significant source of anxiety by children in interviews. Jasra, a bright and bubbly 10-year-old described how moving schools had affected her:

‘The thing I don’t like is we have to move all the time. At school people think I’m quiet and shy, but that’s [be]cause I don’t know anyone. It’s really hard to settle in with other people, to change and all that. At [my old] school I had some great friends.’

Eleven-year-old Sameera has moved house and changed school three times in two years, and has another move pending. When asked to describe how she felt about her home she said she felt sad, explaining that it was *‘because of moving. We keep moving – new people and every time a new school.’*

Another interviewee, nine-year-old Adam, reported a similar sense of anxiety about changing schools and being the new boy:

‘Changing school makes me feel angry because I think everyone’s going to bully me, but that didn’t happen... I just didn’t know anybody, so I was feeling kind of weird. I normally have to stand in front of the class.’

Children in interviews also expressed frustration at the time and energy taken up with moving house. The disruption of moving was highlighted in Shelter’s *Living in limbo* report. In that report, parents reported that children missed an average of 55 school days (equivalent to quarter of the school year) due to the disruption of moves to and between temporary accommodation.²²

‘The thing I don’t like is we have to move all the time... At [my old] school I had some great friends.’ Jasra, aged 10.

²² Mitchell F, Neuburger J, Radebe D and Rayne A, *Living in limbo*, Shelter, 2004.

Plans for the future

Post-16 learning plays a crucial role in improving life chances in terms of achieving a good income, secure employment and associated outcomes. The Government's *14-19 Education and Skills White Paper 2005* commits the Government to improving the post-16 educational participation rate in Britain over the next 10 years from the current rate of 75 per cent to 90 per cent.²³

Only one-fifth of children living in bad housing (19 per cent) intend to study full-time beyond the age of 16, which is significantly fewer than the 26 per cent of children not living in bad housing who plan to do so. Similarly, a higher proportion of children living in bad housing intend to get a full-time job on leaving school at 16 instead of continuing their education (25 per cent of children in bad housing and 27 per cent of those in acutely bad housing, compared with 17 per cent of other children).

Children who do not continue education beyond the age of 16 are more vulnerable to experiencing low-paid, insecure employment and unemployment in adulthood, as well as increasing the risk of adult exclusion. Shelter's *Chance of a lifetime* report revealed that adults with low basic skills are five times more likely to be unemployed than other adults.²⁴

²³ The report is available at www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/14-19educationandskills/pdfs/summary.pdf

²⁴ Harker L, *Chance of a lifetime*, Shelter, 2006.







Healthy living

Children's surroundings have a significant influence on their physical health, both in childhood and beyond into adulthood. The findings in this section illustrate the huge impact that living in bad housing²⁵ has on children's physical health. Bad housing is linked to debilitating, and even fatal illnesses and injuries in children.

Poor health

Nearly 310,000 children are suffering a long-term illness or disability in bad housing in Britain.²⁶

The link between living in bad housing – be it overcrowded or in poor physical condition – and health problems in children is unequivocal. The findings of this investigation demonstrate the severely negative impact that bad housing has on children's health. Children living in bad housing are almost twice as likely to suffer from poor health as other children (five per cent of children living in bad housing suffer ill health compared with three per cent of other children). The difference is even greater with children in acutely bad housing, of whom seven per cent suffer ill health. Children living in bad housing are also more likely to suffer a long-term illness or disability than other children (18 per cent of children in bad housing compared with 14 per cent of others).

'Children in bad housing are very prone to colds, flu and viruses and often develop asthma and other respiratory difficulties.'

One of the respondents to Shelter's teachers' survey, of whom seven out of 10 attributed higher rates of sickness in children directly to bad housing.²⁷

Academic literature shows clear links between bad housing and respiratory problems.²⁸ The new findings from this investigation confirm previous evidence, demonstrating that children living in bad housing are significantly more likely to suffer respiratory problems such as chest problems, breathing difficulties, asthma and bronchitis than other children (eight per cent of children in bad housing, including 10 per cent of those living in acutely bad housing, compared with six per cent of other children). Indeed, children living in unfit and overcrowded accommodation are almost a third more likely to experience these problems than other children.

In some instances poor living conditions exacerbate existing health problems, but in others they actually cause them. Two of the

Key findings

- Children living in bad housing are almost twice as likely to suffer from poor health as other children.
- Children living in unfit and overcrowded accommodation are almost a third more likely to suffer respiratory problems such as chest problems, breathing difficulties, asthma and bronchitis than other children.
- One in four children living in unfit housing attends Accident and Emergency in a year compared with one in five of other children.
- All but two of the 20 children living in bad housing interviewed for the investigation described having problems sleeping.

²⁵ For a definition of 'bad housing' as used in this report, see What is bad housing? on page 8.

²⁶ Details about how this estimate was calculated are provided in the appendix on page 46.

²⁷ Seventy per cent stated that bad housing causes higher rates of sickness in children, 24 per cent did not know, and only six per cent did not think there was a link.

²⁸ Harker L, *Chance of a lifetime*, Shelter, 2006.

children interviewed described respiratory problems caused by the condition of their housing. Until recently, 15-year-old Kelly and her mother were living in unfit, overcrowded housing where they shared facilities with another household and their landlady:

'The carpet was stained and in bad condition. I didn't like walking on it in bare feet... I was disgusted. The walls and floors were disgusting.'

The situation was so bad that Kelly's mother arranged for them to move in with relatives instead. Having recently moved to better accommodation, albeit still overcrowded, Kelly is very aware of the impact her former squalid living conditions were having on her health, as well as other aspects of her life:

'Here it's OK, but in the other place I felt sick because I had asthma and the room wasn't clean. Mum cleaned so I wouldn't be able to smell the dust, but it still affected me. I have asthma and sinus [problems].'

Fourteen-year-old Naseem also lives in severely overcrowded accommodation and is suffering ill health as a result:

'I feel sick sometimes... With five people in a [bed]room I feel ill. I can't breathe sometimes and that makes me feel ill. I have to miss school because I have a headache or feel sick.'

Shelter's *Chance of a lifetime* report highlighted the increased risk of infection from living in housing that is overcrowded or has problems such as damp and mould. For example, studies have suggested a link between living in damp and mouldy conditions and diarrhoea, headaches and fever in children, and overcrowding increases infection rates between children.²⁹

In this investigation children interviewed referred to problems with their housing that could increase the risk of illness and infection. These included:

- rats accessing and urinating in food storage areas
- dirty carpets in shared accommodation (as described by Kelly, left)
- 'dirty' walls as a result of damp
- beds shared by two or three other children
- bedrooms with up to four other people sleeping in them.

'I get sick often, I get a lot of flu... I get sick so much, then I miss my school work, but I don't stay at home that much... Maybe I catch it from other people or maybe I get it from this home... [The landlord] never repairs anything... Everything breaks.' Jasra, aged 10.

Accident and Emergency

The impact of bad housing on children's health is further highlighted by the higher numbers of children living in bad housing who attend hospital compared with children not in bad housing. Children living in acutely bad housing are more likely to attend Accident and Emergency in a year than other children (24 per cent in acutely bad housing and 21 per cent in bad housing, compared with 20 per cent of other children).

The likelihood is even greater for children living in unfit housing, of whom one in four (25 per cent) attends Accident and Emergency at least once in a year, compared with one in five of other children. This higher proportion could be related to the increased likelihood of accidents around the home because of hazards associated with unfit conditions, for example uneven floors, faulty electrics, or the use of cooking equipment in areas also used for playing or sleeping.

²⁹ Harker L, *Chance of a lifetime*, Shelter, 2006.



Sleeping

The investigation also revealed the impact of children's housing circumstances on their sleep patterns. Lack of sleep affects children emotionally and physically, impacting on many aspects of their life including their ability to learn at school. Evidence highlighted in the *Chance of lifetime* report also attributed slow growth to frequent sleep disturbance. The growth hormone is released during deep sleep and its secretion falls if sleep is disrupted.

All but two of the 20 children interviewed described having problems sleeping. They identified various causes for these problems including:

- overcrowding, for example sharing a bed or having several people sleeping in one bedroom
- heat related to overcrowding
- cold in homes with no central heating
- noise from neighbours, traffic (including frequent police sirens) and people, and
- noise of, and anxiety regarding, pests in the house.

The excerpts from interviews below highlight the extent of the sleeping problems experienced by children living in bad housing. All the children attributed the problems to factors that are related to the poor standard of their housing.

'Sleep? That's kind of difficult. In the room we are in, it's me and my sister and my mum. The room and the kitchen are sort of stuck together – there are no separate doors and stuff... My brother wakes up early and has to come in when we are asleep and there's lots of noise and stuff.' Sameera, aged 11, lives in severely overcrowded housing with three bedrooms shared between her mother and seven siblings.

'I find it very difficult to sleep – I feel tired in lessons. When I am tired it makes me feel weak. I feel tired in winter. When it is cold it's hard to sleep... In other people's houses they have central heating for when it gets cold...' Darran, aged 13, lives in a one-bedroom flat with his pregnant mother. They have been living in this 'temporary' accommodation with no central heating for nine years.

'[I find sleeping] difficult – you can hear the noise of rats. Sometimes they open the door and start making a loud noise.' Mark, aged nine, lives in temporary accommodation that is infested with rats.



Fifteen-year-old Damon directly attributed his sleeping problems to the neighbourhood he was living in. He described how he did not have sleeping problems in the past when he was living in better housing:

'It's difficult to sleep – the noise outside, you can hear it right now. People talking, drunk people outside... sirens. Other places [I have lived] have been better for sleep – easy environment, just quiet at sunset, no traffic, peaceful noise.'



Emotional well-being

Children's surroundings play a huge part in their overall sense of well-being. The findings in this chapter demonstrate the effect of bad housing³¹ on a child's emotional well-being and mental health. Older children expressed particularly negative feelings about their home.

Key findings

- More than three-quarters of respondents to Shelter's survey of teachers reported that in their experience children living in bad housing are more unhappy or depressed than other children.
- Children living in bad housing feel a mixture of emotions about their homes, positive as well as negative, highlighting the importance of the home and family unit in terms of children's emotional well-being. Negative emotions included anger, sadness and frustration about aspects of their home.
- Older children and those with more severe housing problems made fewer positive comments about their home than younger children and those with less severe problems.
- Mothers living in bad housing are almost three times as likely as other mothers to be clinically depressed.

Feelings about the home

'Every day I think of moving... Every time I walk through the house I am not really happy.' Darran, aged 13.

The children interviewed had mixed feelings about their homes. Many reported negative feelings about their home but, despite the housing problems that they were all facing, most of them also expressed positive feelings. This highlights the importance of the home and family unit in terms of children's emotional well-being. The section on family relationships on page 29 explores this further.

The children with the most severe housing problems, especially older children, tended to have fewer, if any, positive comments to make about their home. Fifteen-year-old Damon, who shares a bedroom with his mother and all other facilities with two other households, summed up his view on his home:

³¹ For a definition of 'bad housing' as used in this report, see What is bad housing? on page 8.

'It's not really a home, it's just a room. A home has other rooms... I just so want our own house with no one to share with... Because all my friends have houses it makes me sad that I don't.'

The children interviewed expressed a range of negative emotions about their housing situations, including anger, sadness and frustration about aspects of their home:

'I feel angry... Everything is broken, nothing works.' Chris, aged nine.

'It makes me annoyed that my bedroom looks like that in my own house... It's embarrassing...' Sameera, aged 11.

In the interviews, researchers asked younger children what kind of person they thought their house would be. The answers given by Zaki, aged eight, and his sister, Israa, aged seven, reveal a lot about their feelings in relation to their home. They live with nine other family members in housing that is both overcrowded and unfit.

'It's a raggedy person in lots of rags.' Zaki

'It's a very sad person.' Israa

'Yes, I don't think he would have a job... We don't feel happy.' Zaki

'We feel sad and unhappy.' Israa

In Shelter's survey of teachers, 78 per cent of respondents reported that, in their experience, children living in bad housing are more unhappy or depressed than other children. One teacher elaborated:

'Poor housing impinges negatively on children's [self-]esteem and sense of well-being. These human experiences affect every part of children's lives, not only their education. Some children, especially males, often adopt a great sense of denial of their housing situation and become angry if they hear from other sources that their housing is poor. A sense of shame emerges.'

Children interviewed had also picked up on their parents' negative feelings about their housing:

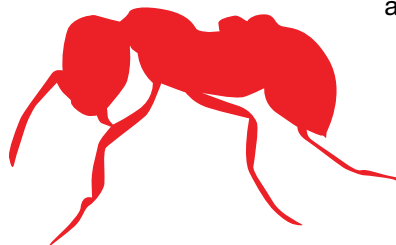
'My mum feels bad about the flat... Her sisters have bigger... better houses. She wants a better house for the baby – room for the baby and a cot. She wants a nice environment for the baby. She would like space for her shoes and clothes and to have guests over.' Darran, aged 13.

'Mum feels unhappy as we keep on moving and moving, and every time we have to get my baby-sister and put her in my aunt's house.' Sameera, aged 11.

Eight of the children interviewed (from three families) were experiencing infestations in their homes. The children mentioned the infestations repeatedly in interviews suggesting that this problem was causing them considerable distress. In interviews with children who were living in rat-infested accommodation, the vermin were associated with a general dislike of and unhappiness with the home, problems sleeping, and problems with the preparation of food. Children also reported negative feelings about having friends round to play because of vermin.

One child mentioned an ant infestation five times in his interview. The infestation was clearly having a significant impact on him:

'I hate the ants. When we first moved in the ants were everywhere, they crawled all over me and it frightened me... They still crawl all over me.'



Children's mental health

Given the problems with children's health, education and emotional well-being associated with living in bad housing that have been highlighted by this investigation, it is unsurprising that previous research shows clear links between bad housing and mental health problems.

The *Chance of a lifetime* report revealed that homeless children living in temporary accommodation are three to four times more likely to have mental health problems than other children.³² In a survey of homeless families, 42 per cent of parents reported that their children were often unhappy or depressed.³³ Mental health problems such as anxiety and depression have also been linked to overcrowded and unfit accommodation. In a survey of overcrowded families, 94 per cent of parents agreed that overcrowding causes anxiety, depression and stress.³⁴

³² Harker L, *Chance of a lifetime*, Shelter, 2006.

³³ Mitchell F, Neuburger J, Radebe D and Rayne A, *Living in limbo*, Shelter, 2004.

³⁴ Reynolds L, *Full house*, Shelter, 2005.

Mothers' mental health

More than 60,000 mothers in Britain are suffering clinical depression while living in bad housing.³⁵

One in 13 mothers living in bad housing, and one in 10 in acutely bad housing, suffers from clinical depression. This makes them almost three times as likely as other mothers to be clinically depressed. Parents living in bad housing often report that their housing problems are a source of anxiety and depression and stress:

'I am very stressed and depressed and had my baby three months early because of the stress.' A respondent to a survey for the *Full house* report.³⁶

Mental health problems in mothers inevitably put an additional strain on children living in bad housing.

³⁵ Details about how this estimate was calculated are provided in the appendix on page 46.

³⁶ Reynolds L, *Full house*, Shelter, 2005.



Family, friendships and fun

This chapter shows how the absence of decent, stable accommodation and a safe area in which to play can undermine a child's chance of a varied, stimulating lifestyle and fulfilling relationships. Children interviewed as part of this investigation had a lot to say about how their housing situation affects their relationships with family and friends, and their social lives. The investigation findings highlight the importance of family and peer relationships for children, and the negative impact that bad housing³⁷ can have upon these relationships.

Family relationships

When children interviewed were asked what they liked about their home, the most common response was spending time with their family. Three children referred specifically to the kitchen and cooking when describing what they liked about their home.

'We like being with the family... and the kitchen, as long as you don't open the drawer with the rats in. If you touch that drawer you have to wash your hands.'

Israa, aged seven.

'The thing I like about my home is that we are all together. The thing I don't like is that we have to move all the time.' Jasra, aged 10.

Sadly, evidence from this investigation shows that bad housing can seriously compromise

family relationships. Children living in bad housing are three times as likely as other children to feel unhappy about their family (three per cent compared with one per cent). Children confirmed the impact of housing circumstances on their family relationships in interviews:

'If I had my own room, I'd have my own space. Sometimes if I'm in a bad mood there will be shouting and screaming. I don't like shouting and screaming at mum but she's in the same space. It's hurtful to my mum to curse her and everything, but you just can't control yourself [be]cause you're so frustrated because of sharing the space... In this house I shout and it's really hurting my mum. It causes tension.' Kelly, aged 15.

Key findings

- Living in bad housing can seriously compromise family relationships. Children living in bad housing are three times as likely to feel unhappy about their family as other children.
- Privacy is a daily concern for many children in bad housing, particularly affecting teenagers sharing a bedroom with their mother, and children sharing a room with more than one other person.
- Children living in bad housing are more likely to run away from home than other children (nine per cent compared with six per cent).
- Moving to new areas because of homelessness, lack of space and privacy, and poor housing conditions were all identified by children living in bad housing as factors that negatively affect their friendships.
- Children in bad housing are nearly twice as likely to suffer from persistent bullying as other children.
- Parents of children living in bad housing are more likely to be contacted by the police regarding their children's (alleged) behaviour than parents of other children.

³⁷ For a definition of bad housing as used in this report, see What is bad housing? on page 8.

Shelter's *Full house* report highlighted the impact of overcrowding on family relationships.³⁸ One parent interviewed for that report summarised the impact in strong terms:

'Being overcrowded means no happy life for the family.'

In her commentary in *I am so crowded: this is my story*, clinical psychologist Dr Tanya Byron discusses how family relationships are affected by living in overcrowded conditions:³⁹

'A lack of space and privacy puts immense pressure on family relationships, lowering the point at which resentment or frustration boils over into a shouting match.'

Photo: Nick David



Privacy

'That's what I have been planning for my whole life – to have my own bedroom.' Darran, aged 13, shares a bedroom with his pregnant mother.

For many of the children interviewed privacy was a daily concern. Fifteen-year-old Damon and his mother have one room for sleeping, eating, studying and relaxing; they share all other facilities with two other households. Damon was one of three teenagers interviewed who had to share a bedroom with their mother. All three were significantly affected by their lack of privacy, as expressed by 13-year-old Darran who shares a bedroom with his pregnant mother:

'I am surrounded. I would like to sleep in my own room and have privacy... I want to be alone and I want to be comfortable...'

Fifteen-year-old Kelly shared these sentiments:

'I don't really like to share a room with my mum [be]cause she just invades my space.'

Privacy was also a big issue for children sharing a room with more than one other person. One child, who had to share a bedroom with two other children, explained that her older sister's body was changing and that she *'shouldn't have to sleep with her brothers and sisters anymore'*.

Shelter's *Full house* report highlighted parents' concerns about children, especially older children, sharing with siblings of the opposite sex.⁴⁰ One in 10 parents living in overcrowded accommodation who responded to the survey was forced to pair teenagers of the opposite sex in the same bedroom, a figure that rose to one in five (19 per cent) among severely overcrowded families. Children sharing a bedroom with their parents was very common – reported by nearly three-quarters of respondents (74 per cent). A quarter of families had children sleeping in rooms that were not intended as bedrooms, usually living rooms (27 per cent of all respondents, rising to 52 per cent among severely overcrowded families).

38 Reynolds L, *Full house*, Shelter, 2005.

39 Shelter, *I am so crowded: this is my story*, 2006.

40 Reynolds L, *Full house*, Shelter, 2005.

Running away

In light of the stresses and strains caused by living in bad housing, it is perhaps unsurprising that children living in bad housing are more likely to run away from home at least once during their lifetime than other children (nine per cent compared with six per cent among 11- to 15-year-olds). One in 10 children living in acutely bad housing has run away from home, as has one in seven children living in unfit housing conditions.

Friendships and free time

'I like [having friends round] because we can do homework together and play, but it's bad [be]cause when we get close to the hotel, [I know that] all the rooms will be busy and I don't know where to sit [my friends]. Also it's too far for people from my old area to come to.' Asad, aged 15.

Findings from this investigation reveal how living in bad housing can affect children's friendships and their enjoyment of their free time. Building and maintaining friendships is a crucial element of a child's social development, which in turn plays a fundamental role in determining a their life chances. A negative experience of friendships and relationships in childhood can have an impact on the rest of a person's life, affecting social skills and self-esteem.

Nearly two-thirds of teachers responding to Shelter's survey reported that in their experience children living in bad housing find it more difficult to make friends with their classmates.⁴¹

New evidence from this investigation confirms this: children aged 11 to 15 who live in bad housing are more likely not to have had any friends visiting them at home over the period of a week than other children (20 per cent compared with 16 per cent). In acutely bad housing children are even more likely to have had no friends visit their home (25 per cent).

This was reflected in the interviews:

'We like having friends back... but we don't have them very often because there's no room... and because of the rats.'

Sisters Rahma and Jasra, aged 12 and 10.

In interviews children identified a lack of space and privacy, poor housing conditions, and moving to new areas because of homelessness as factors that negatively affect their friendships. Overcrowded and unfit housing conditions make it hard for children to play with friends in their home and were cited as a cause of anxiety and shame.

'I don't like my friends to come to my house or see the ants... and we don't have much room to play.' Chris, aged nine.

'We like having friends back... but we don't have them very often because there's no room... and because of the rats.' Sisters Rahma and Jasra, aged 12 and 10.

⁴¹ Sixty-one per cent said they did, 20 per cent did not know, and 18 per cent said they did not find it more difficult.

Fourteen-year-old Fahd lives in a house that is both overcrowded and in need of major repair work. He was all too aware of his friends' reactions on coming to his home:

'[I feel] very bad [about having friends over]. The house is too small. First of all he'll look at my brothers and sister and say it's a small house, and then he'll start laughing and he won't like it [be]cause the house is small and we've got a lot of people living here.'

For homeless children living in temporary accommodation, frequent moves and living far from school make it harder to meet with friends after school and establish lasting friendships. Fifteen-year-old Asad and his seven siblings have moved three times in two years and have another move pending:

'It harder to make friends because every time I move again I miss them and I can't make new friends.'

Damon, also aged 15, expressed the same frustration about the effect of moving house on his friendships. He and his mother have moved four times in two years:

'Moving makes me angry. If I move I know I'm just going to move again and again, and have to try and make new friends in the area. My old friends – I never see them again.'

Bullying

Children living in bad housing not only have a harder time making and keeping friends, findings suggest they are also more vulnerable to bullying. The impact of bullying on a child can be devastating.

Children aged 11 to 15 who live in bad housing are more likely to be the victims of bullying than children not living in bad housing (40 per cent of those living in bad housing and 43 per cent of those in acutely bad housing, compared with 33 per cent of other children). Particularly strong is the relationship between living in bad housing and experiencing persistent bullying – that is, bullying on three or more occasions over a year. Children in bad housing are almost twice as likely to suffer from persistent bullying as other children (13 per cent compared with seven per cent of other children).

Shelter's survey of teachers confirmed this link between living in bad housing and experiencing bullying. More than half of the respondents reported that in their experience children living in bad housing are bullied more than other children.⁴²

These findings resonate with Shelter's 2004 *Listen up* report about the lives of homeless children.⁴³ In that report, two homeless children described being bullied, one in school and one out of school: both attributed the problem to their housing situation. One, a 14-year-old boy, explained that *'more places to play and hang out with friends, a place where we can go without being threatened by older kids'* would make things better for his family.



Photo: Nick David

⁴² Fifty-two per cent said they were; 28 per cent said they did not know; and 19 per cent said they were not.

⁴³ Mustafa Z, *Listen up: the voices of homeless children*, Shelter, 2004.

Getting into trouble with the police

Parents of children aged eight to 16 living in bad housing are more likely to be contacted by the police regarding their children's (alleged) behaviour than parents of other children in the same age group. Although the vast majority of parents had not been contacted, the percentage of parents of children living in bad housing who had been contacted was twice that of parents of other children (four per cent compared with two per cent). Furthermore, parents of children living in acutely bad housing are three times more likely to be contacted by the police than the parents of other children.

The greatest difference noted was for parents of homeless children living in temporary accommodation, who were four times more likely to have the police contact them compared with parents of non-homeless children (eight per cent compared with two per cent).

In the *Chance of a lifetime* report, Lisa Harker reports that bad housing and homelessness during childhood can contribute to the emergence of problem behaviour. Nearly half of male remand young offenders and 42 per cent of female sentenced young offenders have experienced homelessness.⁴⁴



Parents of children aged eight to 16 living in bad housing are more likely to be contacted by the police regarding their children's (alleged) behaviour than parents of other children.

⁴⁴ Harker L, *Chance of a lifetime*, Shelter, 2006.



Neighbourhoods and community

Bad housing⁴⁵ is often located in problem areas. The findings in this chapter highlight children's concerns about the area they live in. Many children living in bad housing are also facing problems associated with living in an unsafe or unsuitable neighbourhood.

Perceptions of neighbourhoods

More than 62,000 children (aged 11 to 15) in Britain are suffering bad housing in areas they do not enjoy living in.⁴⁶

Children living in bad housing are more likely to live in unsuitable or unsafe neighbourhoods. Findings from this investigation confirm this: children living in bad housing are twice as likely to disagree that their neighbourhood is an area that they enjoy living in (14 per cent compared with seven per cent). Children living in acutely bad housing are even more likely to disagree – three times more likely (22 per cent) than children not living in bad housing. Children living in bad housing are also more likely to feel afraid of walking alone in their area after dark, and less likely to feel that most people in their area are friendly.

Neighbourhood problems

'The area is dangerous... [There is] fighting and people who take drugs and drink on the stairs [of my block].' Darran, aged 13.

Children interviewed expressed concern about the area they were living in and areas they have previously lived. The issue most commonly mentioned was noise from neighbours, traffic and people in the street – several children stated that they would like to live in a 'quiet' or 'peaceful' area. More serious problems such as crime and antisocial behaviour were identified by four of the children interviewed.

Sisters Jasra and Rahma, aged 10 and 12, described the problems in the areas in which they live now and previously in vivid detail:

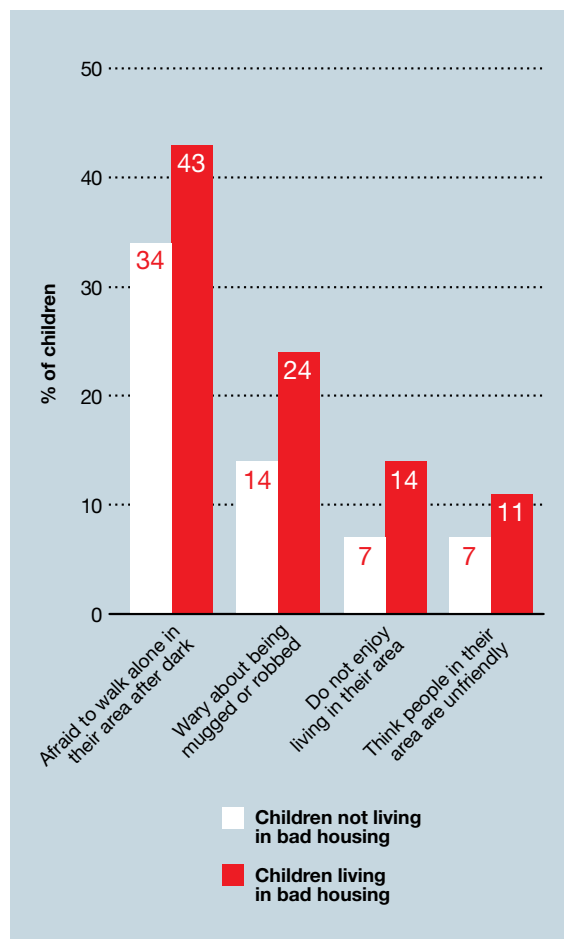
Key findings

- Children living in bad housing are much more likely to feel that they do not to enjoy living in their neighbourhood.
- Most of the children interviewed by Shelter did not have any outside space to play in at their home (14 out of 20).
- Children living in bad housing are more likely than other children to feel afraid of walking alone in their area after dark, and less likely to feel that most people in their area are friendly.

⁴⁵ For a definition of 'bad housing' as used in this report, see What is bad housing on page 8.

⁴⁶ Details about how this estimate was calculated are provided in the appendix on page 46.

Figure 5: Children's feelings about the area they live in



Base: all children in Britain aged 11 to 15 years.

*'It's bad... There are lots of drunk people around here at night... Some people ask you for money. In Matalan there was this boy and another boy and he said "f***k off", throwing glass bottles and all that – it made me feel so scared. Why do they do that? Little boys and big boys as well... Someone was going to hit my brother who is three.'* Jasra, aged 10.

'In the area we used to live in there was a lot of murders going on.' Rahma, aged 12.

One of the respondents to Shelter's teachers' survey highlighted the related problem of families being placed in housing with unsuitable neighbours:

'Inappropriate housing where children are rubbing shoulders with adults with issues has been my main experience [of bad housing]. Councils seem to put bodies in boxes rather than looking at individuals and thinking should that child be on that hallway with that twenty-something recovering addict.'

Outside space

'There's nowhere to go except in the streets.' Zaki, aged eight, lives in very overcrowded accommodation, so outside space for play is particularly important to him.

Children need space in which to play both indoors and outside. For children living in housing that is overcrowded or unfit, having space to play outside becomes even more crucial. However, 14 out of the 20 children interviewed – all of whom live in bad housing – did not have any outside space at their home. The importance that outside space held for these children was illustrated by the responses most of those interviewed gave when asked what would improve their home – a garden.

'I would like to have a garden, then we could play and mum could put the washing up. And mum could have flowers... Sometimes you can grow vegetables and sometimes flowers.' Saamir and Majdi, brothers, aged eight and nine.

Children who had access to high-quality open space near their homes tended to appreciate this facility, but commented that a private garden would be even better.

Several children referred to playing in unsuitable, and even dangerous, places in the absence of a decent public space or garden. Children from one family living in overcrowded and unfit temporary accommodation described the patch of disused land that they play on:

'Near the hotel where we live there is a field we can play football in. No one comes in there but there is too much rubbish... Crisps, chocolate, drinks, rubbish... I would like to play somewhere clean – a park or a garden would be good.' Sameera, aged 11.

Two brothers, Saamir and Majdi, aged eight and nine, described playing in the communal corridor of their block of flats. The interviewer noted that on the day of the interview the corridor was full of flies and the mother reported that the building was infested with mice. Their descriptions of their 'play area' reflect the woefully low expectations among children living in bad housing:

'I like having our hall corridor.'

'It's good [having friends over], it's very good and sometimes we play football along the corridor.'

'I would like to play in the garden but we don't have one. We have to play downstairs.'





Conclusions and recommendations

Shelter's groundbreaking investigation comparing the lives of children on either side of Britain's housing divide has drawn on a broad range of evidence to explore different aspects of children's lives. The comparison has revealed the huge disadvantage to children of living in bad housing.⁴⁷

Robust statistical analysis in this investigation has highlighted the link between living in bad housing and lower life chances in children. Children in bad housing have less chance of getting a good education and succeeding at school; less chance of staying healthy and happy; and less chance of living a fulfilling life. Children's own descriptions of their lives have explained how housing affects children and why. Evidence from academic literature confirms these findings.

This report has found that lower educational attainment, a greater chance of ill health, and a greater chance of social exclusion, including exclusion from school, bullying and getting into trouble with the police, are just some of the realities of life in bad housing.

The investigation findings demonstrate that growing up in overcrowded or unfit housing, or in temporary accommodation, puts children at a significant disadvantage in life. It is crucial that the Government recognises the impact that bad housing has on children's life chances, and the urgent need to put an end to bad housing to ensure that all of Britain's children have a fair start in life. The recommendations at the end of this chapter outline the steps that need to be taken to achieve this as a matter of priority to achieve.

Children living in bad housing are:

- nearly twice as likely as other children not to get any GCSEs
- twice as likely as other children to have been excluded from school
- almost twice as likely as other children to suffer from poor health
- three times as likely as other children to feel unhappy about their family
- twice as likely to say they do not enjoy living in their area
- almost twice as likely as other children to suffer persistent bullying
- more likely to run away from home at least once during their lifetime than other children.

⁴⁷ For a definition of 'bad housing' as used in this report, see What is bad housing on page 8.

Conclusions

Children need a permanent home to live in with their family – not a temporary home and not a home shared with other households.

'We have to share everything kitchen [and] bathroom. I just so want our own house... No one else to share with.' Damon, aged 15, and his mother have one room between them for eating, relaxing, studying and sleeping. They share facilities with two other households.

Children need a decent space at home in which to study and get organised for school. Doing homework on the top of a fridge or studying for exams with no desk in a room full of people or that is freezing cold does not give children a fair chance of success.

'I need space so that I can learn, to improve my learning level and get an A* grade. I wake up early and I can't think, I can't learn. I don't know where to learn.'

Asad, aged 15, lives in temporary accommodation with only three bedrooms shared among his family of nine.

Having friends over to play and playing independently or with siblings are vital to ensure a fun and stimulating childhood, and healthy development both physical and emotional. Constant moving to new housing, long journeys to school, living in problem neighbourhoods, lack of space to play, and cold, damp or infested conditions deny children living in bad housing this basic right.

'That's what I have been planning for my whole life – to have my own bedroom. Normal size with a TV and a bed and a place for my clothes... Not a really big room but enough room for my TV and bed. I would play PS2 and do my homework and relax. I think it would be tidy.' Darran, aged 13, lives in temporary accommodation in which he shares a bedroom with his mother. They have been living there for nine years waiting for a permanent home.

Children need a decent place to sleep – without a good night's sleep children's health and education suffers. They need a warm and well-maintained bedroom, with a bed of their own and a reasonable amount of privacy and space.

'[There's] one double bed and two singles... five or four people are sleeping there... When I can't get a bed for myself, I have to come down here [to the living area]... [be]cause there's not enough room... I like having more room around or I'll fall off and I'll bang my head.' Fahd, aged 14, lives with his large family in severely overcrowded housing that is also in need of major repair work.

Children need well-maintained homes with enough space and decent facilities. They need an environment free of pests, damp and mould, and with decent heating, washing and cooking facilities.

'It's freezing in winter, you have to wear hats and scarves... Even though you wear too much clothes you still feel cold. It's bad when you sleep.' Mark, aged nine, lives in temporary accommodation.

Shelter's recommendations⁴⁸

- It is vital that more social rented accommodation is built to provide the homes required to give children a fair start in life. The Government must use the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review to invest in an additional 20,000 social rented homes each year, over and above those already planned. This is a minimum requirement to meet urgent, newly arising need, and to ensure the Government meets its target to halve the numbers of people in temporary accommodation by 2010.
- The Government must introduce a modernised statutory definition of overcrowding, based on the 'bedroom standard', which reflects today's understanding of children's need for space and privacy. This is the only way to establish a true picture of the overcrowding problem and will help make assessments of housing need more accurate.
- The Government must set a target to end overcrowding for all households in the rented sector by 2020, and to halve overcrowding in the rented sector and eliminate all of the most severe cases by 2013. This should be supported by a strategy for achieving these targets, including the provision of more affordable, family-sized social rented homes.
- Good progress has been made with the decent homes standard in the social rented sector. However, continued resources and commitment are needed to ensure that the decent homes target is met in the social rented sector and to provide assistance to vulnerable households experiencing poor housing conditions in the private sector.
- The Government must provide secure and increased funding for housing advice and tenancy sustainment services. These play a vital role in preventing families with children from becoming homeless and enabling them to access their housing rights.
- The Government's Every Child Matters Outcomes Framework should be revised to reflect the direct impact that housing has on all aspects of children's life chances, and the Government should consider modifying Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets to reflect this.

⁴⁸ Recommendations apply to England and Wales.

- Key agencies including Primary Care Trusts, local education authorities, Sure Start children's centres and Connexions branches should have an officer with designated responsibility to provide support for homeless children. These roles should have a particular emphasis on prevention work around health and education.
- To improve life outcomes for homeless children, the Government should encourage closer working relationships between key children's services and housing services. This would facilitate better information sharing, and prevent gaps in service provision arising.
- As this report has shown, living in bad housing reduces children's life chances and is strongly associated with social disadvantage in a wide range of forms. This link needs to be reflected fully by Government in the development of strategies for tackling social exclusion. In particular, housing should be a key area of work for the Social Exclusion Unit, and should be examined as part of the recently announced 10-year strategic review of the long-term drivers of social exclusion.



Photo: Claudia Janke

The last word

The final words of the report go to four of the older children interviewed for the investigation. They each had a message for the Government and decision-makers based on their own experience of Britain's housing crisis.

‘Make people move as quickly as possible. Make people happier. It’s time to move already! We need more space and newer houses. I hope to move when the baby is born – it is dangerous for the baby [in this house]. When I find out I am moving I will be very excited and can’t wait to see my new house. Here it is not comfy, no privacy, boring and a bad area. I want to be close to school and somewhere good for the baby.’ Darran, aged 13, whose mother is pregnant.

‘Right, listen up! Are you listening? If you’re listening – please help! There are families everywhere that need your help – we need bigger houses to survive... We need bigger houses and brighter houses...’ Fahd, aged 14.

‘[We need] more places for people to go and live in [be]cause moving houses, I really hate it, and if you don’t have your own house, you really have to move... If the decision-making people would make homes to go and live in, it would be more permanent and you won’t have to keep on moving schools and getting new friends. And if people can have their own rooms and their own privacy... their mothers wouldn’t get hurt because of them shouting...’ Kelly, aged 15.

‘Governors, this house is making me sick! There’s the rats there and I feel them at night and I am screaming. I want governors to help me and my family. I wish that the Government could move us into a better home...’ Rahma, aged 12.



Appendix: Methodology

This investigation is based on evidence from a number of sources – the Family and Children Study (FACS), interviews with children, an online survey of teachers, and previous studies. These are explained below.

Analysis of Family and Children Study data

What is the Family and Children Study?⁴⁹

The Family and Children Study (FACS) 2004 is the sixth in a series of annual panel surveys designed to investigate the lives of families and children in Britain. The study was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and carried out by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen). FACS provides unique data for investigating the association between housing and the living standards of children because it is one of the few datasets that contains information on a number of different measures of bad housing. Analysis in this report is based on:⁵⁰

- face-to-face interviews with 6,940 families, representing 12,727 children
- 3,477 self-completion questionnaires completed by children aged 11 to 15 whose parent or carer had taken part in an interview.

The data used in this investigation were gathered between September 2004 and January 2005.

Identifying children living in bad housing and acutely bad housing

Information about the following was used to identify which children in the FACS database are living in bad housing:⁵¹

- to identify children living in unfit conditions: whether the parent reported that the house was in poor or very poor condition
- to identify children living in overcrowded conditions, as defined by the 'bedroom standard': the number and ages of children and the number of bedrooms in the house
- to identify children who are homeless, or have very recently ceased to be homeless: whether the family was living in temporary accommodation or had lived in temporary accommodation during the previous 12 months.

Children living in unfit, overcrowded or temporary accommodation are defined as living in bad housing. Most figures presented in this report compare all children living in bad housing with all children not living in bad housing.

FACS data were also analysed to see if children living in acutely bad housing experience problems to a greater extent than those in bad housing.⁵²

49 More information about FACS and the analysis undertaken for this report is available on the DWP website: www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/facs

50 Barnes M, Lyon N and Conolly A, *The living standards of children in bad housing: evidence from the 2004 Family and Children Study (FACS)*, NatCen, 2006.

51 For a definition of the different types of bad housing mentioned below, see What is bad housing? on page 8.

52 For a definition of 'acutely bad housing', see What is bad housing? on page 8.

New estimates of the number of children in bad housing

A combination of FACS data for Britain and other official housing figures for England was used to calculate new estimates for the number of children living in bad housing in Britain and England (see page 9). The following figures were identified as the most reliable sources of data available for three types of bad housing in England:

- 905,000 children live in overcrowded conditions in England: data from the Survey of English Housing (SEH 2000–03)
- 486,000 children live in unfit conditions: Shelter estimate using data from the English Housing Condition Survey (EHCS 2001, published in 2003)
- 128,000 children live in temporary accommodation: data for March 2006 from the Department for Communities and Local Government (previously Office of the Deputy Prime Minister).

In comparison to these figures, FACS data show a higher proportion of children living in bad housing. This is most likely to be because FACS oversamples lower-income families.⁵³ For this reason, when calculating the new estimates, Shelter has adjusted down FACS estimates to match the official figures of bad housing. The new estimates also take account of the overlap between the different types of bad housing (identified by FACS data as 11 per cent).

Estimates of numbers of children experiencing specific problems

This report gives estimates of the number of children in Britain experiencing specific problems while living in bad housing, for example with their school or health. As mentioned above, FACS estimates have been adjusted down to compensate for the higher proportion of children living in bad housing in the data compared with official figures.

Interviews with children

A programme of in-depth interviews with children living in bad housing was undertaken by Shelter to complement the FACS data analysis. Interviews were conducted with 20 children from 11 families living in London (15 children) and Bristol (five children). The table below shows the age and gender of children and the housing problems they were experiencing.

Children were accessed through projects working with families in bad housing and through families who had taken part in self-completion surveys for Shelter in the past and stated that they were happy to be contacted for further research. Interviews were conducted by researchers from Shelter, with the support of a research consultant. Most were carried out in the interviewee's home.

Interviews were semi-structured. Children were asked to describe their homes and reflect on how their home influenced other aspects of their lives.

⁵³ The first two waves of FACS (1999 and 2000) were studies of families with low incomes. In 2001 the FACS sample was expanded to include families of all incomes. It is likely, however, that FACS continues to oversample lower-income families.

Table 1: Age, gender and housing status of children interviewed in the investigation

	Number of children
Gender	
Male	14
Female	6
Age	
7 - 8	6
9 - 10	5
11 - 12	2
13 - 14	5
15	2
Housing problems*	
Temporary accommodation	17
Overcrowded	14
Unfit	10

*Most children were experiencing more than one housing problem.

Teachers' survey

This report also includes data from a survey of teachers conducted on Shelter's website in June 2006. Although the results from the 133 respondents are not representative of teachers overall, the survey demonstrates clearly that teachers are all too aware of the disadvantages experienced by children living in bad housing.

Previous research findings

To back up the new findings revealed by this investigation, a desk review of literature about children living in bad housing was undertaken. Literature reviewed included academic studies and previous Shelter reports.

Bad housing wrecks lives

We are the fourth richest country in the world, and yet millions of people in Britain wake up every day in housing that is run-down, overcrowded, or dangerous. Many others have lost their home altogether. Bad housing robs us of security, health, and a fair chance in life.

Shelter believes everyone should have a home.

We help 170,000 people a year fight for their rights, get back on their feet, and find and keep a home. We also tackle the root causes of bad housing by campaigning for new laws, policies, and solutions.

Our website gets more than 100,000 visits a month; visit www.shelter.org.uk to join our campaign, find housing advice, or make a donation.

We need your help to continue our work. Please support us.

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