

SHELTER

Briefing: The social housing overcrowding crisis

Years of underinvestment in social housing has resulted in chronic levels of overcrowding in the social rented sector. New research from Shelter has revealed the extent of this crisis: **1.5 million people are living in overcrowded social homes today – an increase of more than 40% in just five years.**

We will not end the housing emergency without building much more social housing. To end the scandal of chronic overcrowding in social housing, the government must:

- 1. Increase investment in social housing and build at least 90,000 social homes in England a year.**
- 2. Ensure that reforms introduced in the Planning Bill significantly increase the number of social homes delivered by the planning system.**

We are in the grip of a housing emergency fuelled by decades of underinvestment in social housebuilding. For years, successive governments have failed to build the social homes we need. On top of that, we are losing more social homes than we are building every year **In 2018/19, only 6,287 social homes were built across the whole of England. But we lost more than 23,000 social homes to sales and demolitions in the same period.**

The disappearance of social homes means there are now **over 1 million households on the social housing waiting list**. Families on the waiting list spend years bidding for bigger properties without success simply because there are not enough social homes. This chronic underinvestment is fuelling an overcrowding crisis in social housing and **we are now in a situation where far more families become overcrowded each year than are rehoused into suitably sized social homes**. Our research found:

- **1.5 million people are living in overcrowded social homes.**
- **This is an increase of 44% or 467,000 people in the last five years.**
- **730,000 children are living in overcrowded social homes: an increase of 192,000 in the last five years.**

Cramped, overcrowded, unsuitable

Successive lockdowns have made us all more aware of the space that we have in our homes. But the pandemic has not affected us equally. Shelter has heard from countless families in overcrowded social homes that have struggled to self-isolate in homes that are not big enough for themselves and their children. Overcrowded homes not only increase your risk of catching COVID-19, but self-isolating with no space to yourself puts a serious strain on mental health too.



The impact of overcrowding on our health is not new, and millions have been struggling with this for years. Overcrowding can harm children's education and development. It can take a serious toll on physical and mental health. And to make matters worse, overcrowded homes are more likely to fall into bad conditions.



Being in this hopeless situation has caused me so much distress and has made my depression and anxiety worse.

Living in cramped, overcrowded homes puts a serious strain on the physical and mental health of families. Overcrowded homes are much more likely to suffer from mould, damp and condensation. Mould increases the risk of respiratory infections, and children living in overcrowded homes are much more likely to contract infectious diseases. On top of that, the stress of living in a home that's too small has been shown to take a massive toll on mental health.



When the country went into lockdown, I cried when my kids asked me "mummy were we born in prison?"

Parents have described to us the "living nightmare" of feeling trapped in housing that is not big enough for themselves and their children. Growing up in an overcrowded home can mean not having anywhere to concentrate on homework or enough space to play. It can impact the development of toddlers, who don't have the space to crawl and explore. Being forced to share a bedroom with your kids can mean no privacy, disturbed sleep and a huge strain on family relationships. It can mean bedding down on the floor or sofa; no space for storage; no escape from noise; no room to be alone.

Build social housing

For families trapped in overcrowded social homes, it can feel like there is no end in sight. **There is only one way to end chronic overcrowding in social homes: the government must significantly increase investment in social housebuilding.**

Building at least 90,000 social homes a year would lift families stuck for years in cramped, crowded homes into suitably sized, affordable social homes. A new generation of decent social homes would also end the wider housing emergency, which has pushed too many into unaffordable, unfit private rents, and left tens of thousands in squalid temporary accommodation. **That's why Shelter is calling for the government to put social housing at the heart of its plan to build back better from the pandemic.**

If you have any questions about this briefing, please email Reshima_Sharma@shelter.org.uk.

