

# **'THIS IS NO PLACE FOR A CHILD'**

The experiences of homeless families in emergency accommodation

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# INTRODUCTION

*'Sometimes he's screaming when he's back here saying "I hate mummy's house I don't want to be here". What can I say to him? I don't want to be here either. It breaks your heart watching him cry like that, knowing what he had before.'* L, 24, Mum

Successive governments have failed to build the housing we need for decades. This has pushed up the price of housing, making homeownership unaffordable to many families on average incomes, and led to a shortage of genuinely affordable social housing. As a result, more and more low-income families live in insecure private rented accommodation where rents take up almost half their income. Dwindling access to housing benefit and legal advice is leading to thousands of hard pressed families losing their home.

The devastating results of the housing shortage are now being felt by over a hundred thousand children. As of the

end of June 2015, 105,000 children were homeless in Great Britain - the equivalent of four in every school<sup>1</sup> and the number of homeless children is rising. Because there is a shortage of suitable homes, more and more homeless families are forced to spend more time in bed and breakfasts (B&Bs) and hostel accommodation, where families have to share facilities with others. The number of homeless families living in B&Bs alone has grown from 590 in June 2009 to 2,700 in June 2015 - more than four times as many.

For this report, twenty families shared their experiences about living and raising their children in B&Bs and hostels. We also spoke to six school workers about the impact of homelessness on their school. The research tells the stories of homeless children, their living situation, how it affects their day to day life, their health, their wellbeing, their education and their childhood.

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1. The number of homeless children and the number of families living in B&Bs in Great Britain is based on the latest government statistics on homelessness from England ([Department for Communities and Local Government](#)), Scotland ([The Scottish Government](#)) and Wales ([Stats Wales](#)). We calculated the number of children who are homeless in temporary accommodation in Great Britain by adding the total number of children in temporary accommodation in Scotland to the total number of children in temporary accommodation in England. We estimated the number of children in temporary accommodation in Wales using the number of families in temporary accommodation in Wales. We reached a total of 105,251 children in temporary accommodation in [England](#), [Scotland](#) and [Wales](#) at the end of Q2 2015. The number of schools in Great Britain is based on government statistics on the number of schools from England, Scotland and Wales. There are a total of 28,533 schools in Great Britain. Therefore this is equivalent to 3.7 homeless children per school, or four to the nearest whole number.

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## Methods

The research draws on multiple perspectives of the experience of homeless children living in B&B and hostel accommodation. We analysed government data, interviewed twenty parents living in bed and breakfast or hostel accommodation and interviewed six teachers and learning mentors<sup>2</sup> from London schools who had experience working with homeless children.

## Definitions

We focused on families in non-self-contained accommodation, such as B&Bs and hostels. These are places where families share facilities with other residents. We have termed this form of temporary accommodation, 'emergency accommodation'. Government guidance on the use of bed and breakfast accommodation to house homeless families is clear that it is accommodation to be used in an emergency. It is deemed to be unsuitable for families, should only be used when no other suitable housing can be found, and even then, no family should live there for more than six weeks. Other forms of non-self-contained accommodation are not bound by the six week rule. However, the conditions and situation experienced by families living in this accommodation are very similar.

## Data collection

We conducted twenty in-depth interviews with homeless families. We collected standardised information across all the families using close ended questions. We also gathered qualitative information about experiences and feelings through open ended discussion. Interviews were conducted over the phone and in person in the bed and breakfast environment. This gave further insight into the living conditions experienced by families.

We conducted interviews with six teachers and learning mentors in London schools. Interviews were conducted in their place of work. We have referred to all interviewees as learning mentors in the report. These interviews were not intended to be a representative sample of school workers across England. They informed us of some of the struggles that schools face in areas where the housing crisis is biting hard. We also gathered government statistics about homeless families in England, Scotland and Wales.

## Analysis

Qualitative interviews were transcribed and then analysed using thematic analysis. We agreed a set of themes as a framework for analysis. These were based on themes identified in a fieldwork debrief meeting and the themes identified in the interview topic guide. As a mixed methods study, we went through a final process of triangulating the data. This allowed us to review findings from different stages against each other and understand the trends from the evidence as a whole.

## About our sample

We interviewed twenty families. We sampled families by starting with some and using them and our services to meet more that met the criteria. Fifteen families were in London and five were out of London. Fourteen had children aged under 10. Nine had been in their accommodation for longer than six months. We do not claim that it is representative of all families in emergency accommodation. However, it gives us a sense of the types of situations facing families in this type of accommodation and the impact of these situations. Names have been removed for anonymity. All of the words are their own.

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2. Learning mentors are based in a particular school and provide pastoral support to children with social needs.

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# HOMELESSNESS IN BRITAIN

## How many children are homeless?

At the end of June 2015, 105,000 children were homeless and living in temporary accommodation. Their families had all been accepted as statutory homeless by a local authority, who had a duty to rehouse them, however they were unable to do so immediately because of our chronic housing shortage. We know from our services work that many more may be 'hidden homeless' living with friends and family while they try and find a more permanent place to live. Other families may have been homeless but were not recorded in the official statistics because the council's Housing Options service prevented or relieved their homelessness.

The number of homeless children decreased over the course of the decade to 2010. This was due to a range of factors, including increases in the homelessness prevention grant and the granting of new powers to local authorities to assist families before they lost their home. Despite these protections still being in place, the number of homeless families has increased over the last five years.

## Where are they living?

Children in 'temporary accommodation' can live in a variety of types of accommodation: from flats to mobile homes<sup>3</sup>. One in eleven of these homeless children live in 'emergency accommodation' (see 'definitions' for how we use this term). This includes B&Bs, hostels and other shared accommodation. These are places where families share facilities with other residents. They can be large buildings. For example, one of the families we spoke to during this research lived in one room, shared a building with

forty nine other families – all strangers - a kitchen with twelve other families and a bathroom with twenty people. Some families that we spoke to had been living in this type of accommodation for over a year.

There are special rules in place in order to limit the use of some shared accommodation. Bed and breakfast accommodation is not considered suitable for children. Therefore local authorities are required not to place families with children in bed and breakfasts unless it is an emergency and then for not more than six weeks. However, other forms of non-self-contained accommodation are not covered by these restrictions. Attention often focuses on B&Bs because of the specific restrictions. However, we frequently see comparable conditions in other non-self-contained accommodation. We have looked at all self-contained accommodation, in order to draw this out.

Because of the shortage of affordable housing, councils are having to use emergency accommodation to house homeless families more and more. Its use has grown substantially in recent years: The number of families living in B&Bs alone is more than four times higher than six years ago. In the last year alone, the number of families in B&Bs in Great Britain has grown by 25%. This is despite restrictions on their use.

More families are becoming homeless and more and more families are having to spend time in emergency accommodation. The next three sections will set out what emergency accommodation looks like, what it is like to live your life in this form of temporary accommodation and finally the impact this is having on homeless children, parents and families.

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3. See further details of some of the places where homeless families are accommodated [here](#)

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## The living space of homeless children in hostels and B&Bs

Families with children rarely experience the most visible symptom of homelessness – having to sleep rough<sup>4</sup>. However, our investigation reveals that children in emergency accommodation are clearly without a home. They do not have the space to live their lives – to play, study, or relax. Nor a place of safety where they can grow and develop.

### Living space

All twenty families were living in just one room each. In one case, this meant that a family of four was sharing a space eight foot by seven foot. There was just enough space for a bunk bed, a cot, a wardrobe, a sink in the corner and space for someone to stand by the door.

All of the families lived in rooms with fewer beds than people. Fourteen parents had to share beds with their children. For example one family with two adults, a three year old and two week old baby had to share two beds pushed together. In another parents had to share a double bed with their two year old while there two school age daughters shared a single bed.

*'Me and my daughter share the bed. She wriggles around all night. Half the time her feet are on my head so I don't sleep properly and there's no place for me to put a little bed or cot.'* S, 30, Mum

*'My daughter is fifteen and she's always been used to her own room. Having to share a bed with your mum. It was just degrading. She didn't tell any of her friends.'* S, 34, Mum

The room was their only living space. It had to accommodate the family and their beds as well as their possessions from their previous home. This left limited space for storing clothes or other essentials. It left limited room to eat, play or carry out normal tasks.

Most families reported that their small room was also in a state of disrepair (beyond their control). Four fifths of families said that their room was poor quality. Many gave examples of disrepair including mould, poorly secured cupboards, stained mattresses, windows that wouldn't close. Three families spontaneously mentioned bed bugs. 'We just see them walking around on our beds'. This made it even harder to relax or sleep in the room and yet they had no other private space to use. Others had serious hazards. This made them fear for their children's safety.

*'The fridge was leaking. There was one plug that was overloaded with leads that was sat in a puddle from the fridge. No fire alarms. Nothing.'* J, 34, Mum

The poor quality of the rooms further restricted the space that families could use, or let their children play in.

*'I wouldn't let K crawl around the room. A 2 year old wants to play [and explore] on the floor but not in there.'* N, 24, Mum

The extent of the cramped and poor conditions that parents told us about was corroborated by learning mentors. Many had experience of home visits with homeless families in their area:

*'I think that sometimes unless you've seen what people are living in, you don't fully understand it, or imagine it. I think sometimes people say oh this is happening, and people don't necessarily think through what it is.'* Learning Mentor

### Other parts of a home

Most families didn't have adequate access to the other component parts of a home (for example a kitchen, living space, bathroom) either. Fifteen of our families shared a kitchen, for some this was with as many as twelve other families. Two of the families interviewed had no access to kitchen facilities at all and three only had a kettle or microwave in their room. This meant that very few had access to facilities needed to prepare and store fresh food.

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4. Of the families in our investigation, three had to spend a night in a car or on the floors of friends after becoming homeless and being unable to secure some accommodation straight away.

Three quarters of the families had to share a toilet and washing facilities. Many facilities were poor quality and unsanitary. All rated the condition of their bathroom as poor or inadequate. A range of safety issues were flagged around the bathroom facilities – including unlockable doors, broken toilet seats, slippery or cracked tiles and even in one case dangling electrical wires and windows that were overlooked by neighbouring properties.

*'Every time I go to the toilet it's disgusting. I found condoms in the toilet, it's always wet, the door to the shower is broken, nappies on the floor. So unhygienic. I have to go with my kids to the shower and the loo. I don't feel safe them going on their own. The other day a guy slipped and broke his leg. I never let my boys go there on their own'* H, 35, Mum

Safety concerns were also raised around the distance from the bedrooms to bathrooms. For several of the parents interviewed, this was a major concern. Bathrooms could be far away from their room, sometimes on different floors. This meant that parents had to coordinate trips to the toilet while supervising their children. They faced the dilemma of leaving children unsupervised in bedrooms, or sacrificing their own privacy when bathing or using the toilet.

*'I don't have a bath here, not only because I'd [be] more filthy getting out than when I got in but because I wouldn't be able to hear [my son] from where the bathroom is if he woke up and cried. I can't take him in there.'* S, 26, Mum

## The rest of the accommodation

Homeless families in B&Bs have very little control over their space. Some people were not able to control the temperature of their room, meaning that rooms were too hot or too cold. Living so close to other families meant that they could overhear conversations and people moving around their rooms. Disturbances late into the night reinforced the feeling for the families that their space was not their own.

*'Some children are still playing at nine and you can hear them jumping on the bed in the room above us'* M, 45, Mum

Families shared worrying stories about other people being able to come and go from their room, even though this was meant to be their only private space. One woman returned from the bathroom to find another resident, who had mental health issues, trying to get into her room while her children were sleeping. Many referred to the fact that management and cleaners had keys to access their rooms which limited their privacy.

*'My door can be opened at any given time. The manager comes in to check my room all the time. I left the light on one day and he came in and turned it off. If I was sleeping and didn't hear him knock then he would enter my room. I don't feel like I got the privacy I need. When he came in to fix my window, my underwear drawer was open and there were a whole load of strange men in the room. I felt disrespected.'* S, 26, Mum

Overall sixteen in twenty interviewees said that their room was not secure enough. With this in mind, many families were worried about who they were living alongside. Families reported living close to people who were fighting, in places where the police were frequently called and where they regularly found discarded drug paraphernalia, condoms or other dangerous items.

*'There's fighting, drugs and prostitution. There's always condoms outside the door. Especially in the car park. The other day my son was asking what's that? I said it's just rubbish.'* H, 35, Mum

Over two thirds of residents said they were concerned about the lack of overall security of the hostel. Some shared stories of people hanging around in communal areas who they suspected of being from outside the hostel. Others spoke about doors being left unlocked and other lax security measures.

*'Every day I get scared.... downstairs there's a door that people leave wide open. We're in the middle of the park so anyone can just walk straight in. the worst thing is that we don't know who's new in here or who doesn't even live here so it's like a gamble with our lives.'* N, 25, Dad

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The rules of the hostels also underlined the feeling that it was not their home. Several families were locked out of the accommodation during the day – some hostels asked residents to vacate their rooms for cleaning or for other management reasons. There were restrictions on visiting and one family said they had to give 48 hours' notice and the phone number and address of where they were going if they wanted to stay away for a night.

Overall, the situation of families in B&Bs shows clearly how these families do not have anything approaching a 'home'. Many families were prepared to accommodate bare rooms or limited space. What is more worrying is examples of dangerous or unsanitary conditions. Not only is the living space cramped and unsuitable, people felt unsafe and vulnerable in their home. The next section sets out how this set up impacts on families' day to day lives.



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## Daily life in emergency accommodation

*'I hated that routine so much. It reminded me, not so much of prison but more of the old fashioned days where you had to boil up the water because there was no gas boiler, using a bed pan and stuff like that. I had to really organise myself. You couldn't just pop in the bathroom and have a bath.'* N, 24, Mum

The major impact of living in a B&B is the length of time it took to undertake ordinary, everyday tasks. From getting washed and dressed in the morning, to doing laundry and preparing meals. The lack of basic facilities, the numbers of people sharing bathrooms or cramped conditions made everyday tasks difficult to get done.

### Early-Morning

Many of the families woke up early – some as early as 5:30am - either because they had to wake up to get children washed and dressed in time to leave for long journeys to work and school, or because they were disturbed by other residents. Getting ready was more difficult. Families had to boil water to wash in or go in to bathrooms to bleach the seats before their children used them. It was difficult to complete basic tasks to get ready.

*'One day I asked my sons to go downstairs because I wanted to change my clothes but they got sent back upstairs and told they are not allowed to stay down on their own. My son was having to stand outside the door waiting for me while I was changing my clothes. The basic things are just so stressful'*. R, 34, Mum

Because accommodation was often far away from their previous homes, the school run was longer and journeys more complicated. Thirteen of the families interviewed had school age children. Ten reported that they had further to travel to school than from their previous accommodation. Many children had to take multiple buses to get to school and journeys were frequently more than one hour. Even when leaving early, they often arrived at school too late to participate

in breakfast clubs, and often late for registration periods and lessons. Some went without breakfast to save time for long commutes and school runs.

*'I get up at 6 in the morning. I don't set an alarm because I'm already awake all night... plus my window is opposite the entry so if it buzzes or cars park then I can hear it. I focus on getting the kids ready for school. They don't have breakfast - they get up early and get ready for school.'* H, 35, Mum

### Work and daytime hours

Restrictions on access to the accommodation made daytimes more complicated. Several families had to vacate their rooms during the day. For families with young children this proved particularly difficult as they had to find ways to occupy their time.

*'I had to leave every day at 10am and had to walk around all day with three children.'* J, 34, Mum

*'We had to be out from half past nine until half past four, everyone had to be out. Some days it was raining. We had nowhere to go.'* D, 21, Mum

Many had to get to work. We didn't directly ask for people's work status. However at least twelve of the families we spoke to had one or both parents in work. Many discussed how difficult it was to balance work with living in the emergency accommodation. They often had long commutes on public transport and struggled with lack of sleep.

*'I was working while we were living there and it was really hard. Trying to stay focused on my daily routines was tough, let alone going to work as well. And then I was trying to be smiley and help other people while I was at work. It was exhausting.'* F, 30, Mum

Parents highlighted the importance of work – those who had jobs were keen to maintain them, and those who did not were looking to get back into work as soon as possible. Of the fifteen families who answered the question, ten said that living in temporary accommodation had

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a negative or very negative impact on their ability to work. Three interviewees said that they had had to give up their job due to the accommodation being too far away. The need to supervise children at all times, being far from family, the challenge of undertaking basic tasks, finding a new home as well as not knowing where they will be living was prohibitive for those looking to enter work.

Families also found it much harder to complete simple household chores. A big struggle for all of the families was washing their clothes. Twelve of the families reported that they had no access to laundry facilities in their accommodation – relying instead on family, friends, and expensive laundrettes. Those who did have access to washing machines spoke about how they were also expensive, often broken or dirty, or if working were in use by the other families.

*'(There is) no washing machine so I have to go [to the] laundry once a week. I wait for my husband and he drops me and picks me up. It takes a minimum of four hours and it costs a lot of money. Minimum £25 every week.'* M, 45, Mum

As well as the need to live in a clean home, many spoke of how important it was to them to keep up appearances – to keep themselves and their families looking clean, smart, and tidy. Not having access to a washing machine was especially difficult for families with young children, or when children were unwell. Some had their sheets washed by the hostel. But if this was infrequent, families were left in a difficult position.

*'if one of the kids wets himself in the middle of the night I have to try and scrub it out and put them back in the bed and all that pissy washing has to stay in the room until the end of the week when I can get it washed.'* L, 24, Mum

## Mealtimes

Mealtimes were difficult in the limited kitchen space available. Three families said they mainly had to rely on local friends and family. This meant families making trips between school, the hostel and friends. Only half of the families mainly cooked in the B&B. The sheer number

of residents meant it was difficult to gain access to shared kitchens for the time needed. The lack of access to storage or access to fridges meant they could not prepare fresh, nutritious food. All highlighted the high cost of this and also concerns about the health implications of eating takeaway food.

*'All the time the kitchen is busy. Everyone wants to cook at the same time. I just do something quickly but it's not healthy and my sons complain because they want to eat proper food. But I don't have time because the kitchen is very busy and very dirty.'* R, 34, Mum

Shared kitchens caused other issues. Families with young children had to bring them into a hazardous food preparation environment in order to keep them supervised. For example as one mother of a three and one year old said: 'trying to cook at the same time as make sure they're not getting burnt or hurting themselves is hard'. Sharing space with so many other people led to people losing their cooking utensils... and even their food. One woman described taking her children to the bathroom while her pizza was cooking in the oven. When she returned, her childrens' pizza was missing.

The majority – 14 – ate as a family on the bed or the floor of their room. Very few had space for a table in their bedroom, and many reported there either wasn't enough space to eat in communal areas or they felt uncomfortable doing so. But this felt unhygienic, and meant that bedrooms felt even less like a place for rest.

*'We'd eat off the bed. Everything was on that bed.'* N, 24, Mum

## Family time

A significant issue for many of the families is that there was inadequate space and facilities for children to do their homework. Most of the hostels didn't have internet access – this made completing homework assignments very difficult. There was limited opportunity for adolescents to find quiet space, away from younger children or others in the hostel. Working in the bedroom often meant there was little room to spread out and they could be disturbed by younger siblings playing. Working

in communal areas meant that parents had to supervise them. They were still disturbed by other residents.

*'He needed internet to do his homework but he couldn't do it. Another reason why the school had the hump with me.'* S, 30, Mum

The size of rooms, restrictions on common areas and the danger of the environment meant it was difficult for children to find places to play or opportunities for young children to blow off steam. One mother showed us the space in her room her children have to play in: a space that was 1 metre by a half meter square. This is inadequate for energetic young children:

*'In the room he's smashed his face on the bedside table, he smashed his front teeth on the sink. he's jumped off the bed, he's tried to climb out the window, the fire door slammed on his fingers. I just keep him in his bed now'* L, 24, Mum

Families generally tried to stay out of each other's way but even if they wanted children to play together, families were limited by hostel rules. This was cited by one mother as one of the biggest challenges of not having a home you can control:

*'You're not allowed in each other's rooms. If I want to talk to my friend I can't just go in her room, I have to call her on her mobile and meet her downstairs. Even prison isn't that bad. Our kids play in 1 bed room but it's not allowed. Sometimes the hostel managers complain because it's not allowed... it's very frustrating'* H, 35, Mum

## Bath time

Bath time was fraught with difficulties. The poor condition of their bathroom facilities made it hard to ensure children were kept clean and rested. Several parents stated that they take their children to family or friends' houses to wash, rather than bathing them in the emergency accommodation. This made coordinating movements even harder. Having to share facilities with so many other families led to a lack of privacy and violations which affected children and their parents.

*'One of the ladies had a son who was about 14. I kept getting tissue and*

*stuffing it in the key hole of the door of the communal toilet. You would be sitting on the toilet and it would suddenly pop back through the door and he'd be stood outside the door looking through. My daughter was 13 and she was absolutely petrified. I had to go to the toilet with her and to the shower.'* S, 30, Mum

## Bedtime

All of the families went to bed early. The entire family had to go to bed at the same time and turn off the light when the youngest child needs to go to sleep. This means that parents and older children have to lie awake in the dark from seven or eight pm – struggling to go to sleep.

*'I used to have time to myself once the kids had gone to bed – but now I just have to lie in the dark. I can't even look at my phone or move because it wakes him.'* S, 26, Mum

*'My fourteen year old would have the hump because she didn't want to go to bed when the four year old did. But we had to turn the light out because they needed to go to sleep.'* S, 30, Mum

Eighteen of the families interviewed reported that bedtime was now more difficult than it was previously. Further difficulties were brought about by the noise of other families, children's anxieties around being in an unfamiliar and stressful environment and the disruption to routine.

*'We don't really have [a bedtime routine]. My daughter used to have a bath every night and it was part of her routine before going to sleep, but we don't have a bath here, and it's really affected her bedtime.'* D, 28, Mum

Younger children woke easily at the sound of movement in the room or outside, and struggled to settle back down. This often resulted in the whole family waking up through the night or very early in the morning.

*'They normally went to bed at seven and they'd be asleep by eight, but because of the pub downstairs they weren't going to sleep till eleven o'clock. They were totally shattered. Then they'd have to get up early, because we had to get everyone to school.'* S, 30, Mum

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*'With the baby, any noise will wake him up which wakes up our youngest daughter and once she wakes up then everyone is up.'* N, 25, Dad

## **Difficult days**

Raising children and juggling work is hard enough in this environment when everything comes together. When a child becomes unwell or a family member is sick or has to work overtime, it becomes almost impossible. Parents shared stories about being made to take sick family members out of bed and outside the hostel while it was closed each day. It was hard to support sick children without your own bathroom or a washing machine.

*'My son got very very ill, so ill that he had to go to hospital, he was violently sick, really really bad. At one point he was sick all over the bedsheets and we explained*

*to them 'oh we're so sorry he's been sick' and they told us they wouldn't wash them. We had to go and get them dry cleaned.'* D, 21, Mum

Other families shared stories of having to boil kettles, bleach bathrooms and inconvenience other residents. One mum, whose son was disabled and incontinent, struggled to keep him clean in a small shared bathroom.

*'I couldn't sit in the toilet with my son at the same time, that's how small it was. I'd have to stand in the hallway to wipe his bum.'* J, 34, Mum

Growing up in emergency accommodation means having to manage to live your life in an incomplete, often poor quality and cramped environment. This has many impacts. In the final section we set out the main impacts on children and families.

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## Impact on children, parents, families and communities

*'(my daughter) is very withdrawn. She was so outgoing before and was above average on all her national levels. She was very bubbly, had lots and lots of friends and could talk to anyone. Now she's withdrawn, she gets quite scared and she's wetting the bed. She'd never done any of that. She'd been out of nappies since she was 18 months old and she's now 7 and she's wetting the bed.*

*I feel very guilty about it. I did the right thing but I beat myself up about it all the time. Health workers were saying that situations like this can trigger a speech delay like (my younger daughter) has. A bit like going through post-traumatic stress in a baby. She's coming up two and doesn't speak. (My son) was very bad, we had lots of self-harming.*

*It was heart breaking to watch the impact on my children.'*

### Impact on children

Parents and support workers shared their thoughts on the impact that homelessness was having on their children, and the children they work with. We have set these out as impacts on mental health, physical health and child development, childhood and education and school.

### Impact on mental health

Seventeen of the parents interviewed felt that their children's mental health had been affected by living in emergency accommodation. Many parents reported issues with anxiety in particular. Children's distress was not only due to the trauma of losing their home, but also from being placed in unsettled and unsuitable emergency accommodation.

*'My six year old has been going to the doctors because he's developed a nervous tick since we've been in that room. He was constantly nervous all the time. He's so unsettled still and he knows that we're still not settled. He's really anxious. He's become violent to his little sister and he was never like that before.... He was never*

*like this before... It's so upsetting to watch the way he's changed.'* S, 30, Mum

This could be very serious.

*'he became really bad hitting his head on the wall, biting himself, ripping his hair out. There was nothing I could do because I couldn't make the room any bigger.'* J, 34, Mum

Many children were fearful of their new surroundings, and worried that they were going to be separated from their parents. The insecurity had a serious effect. Children were often tearful and clingy, not wanting even to be in different rooms to their parents. One parent reported having to take her child to the toilet, as the child would otherwise become very distressed.

*'They are worried... They are crying, saying 'we don't want to leave you'. I explained that that won't happen.'* M, 34, Mum

This was something that learning mentors reiterated in our conversations.

*'You can see it in their eyes that somethings not right at home – it always turns out to be their housing'* Learning mentor

### Impact on physical health

Half of all parents reported that their children's physical health had been affected. This included bedbug bites, fatigue or picking up illnesses going around the hostel. Long travel times and early starts, both from travelling to family and friends' homes or school, as well as being kept awake means it is unsurprising that a major impact is that children are more tired.

*'They're much more tired since living there. She was tired having to get up early to travel into school. Then coming home late. There was nowhere to chill out and relax. Every day was the same. Just confined to the room.'* S, 34, Mum

Sixteen of the families we interviewed stated that it was very true that their children were more tired since living in the emergency accommodation. Several reported that their children had become distressed and tearful due to tiredness.

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*'They are so tired. My older one cries all the time. I say "Why are you crying?" and he won't say. He just cries. This morning he was on the bus and he just started crying, they weren't like that before. They switch moods so fast.'* H, 35, Mum

**Anxiety and stress also had physical impacts on children.**

*'The little one is 4 and she broke out in scabs all over her hands and face.... the doctor said it was a stress disorder that kids get.... a rare form of eczema. She's never suffered from eczema before. As soon as we moved out of the B&B it cleared up and she hasn't had it again. It came on after only a week.'* S, 30, Mum

### **Impact on child development**

Many parents, especially those with younger children, reported that their child's personal development was affected. This ranged from speech, toilet training and bed wetting, to setbacks in learning to walk. This was affected by anxiety but also because it was also difficult for parents to establish routines in the often-chaotic surroundings.

*'Her development was very affected by all the moving. I kept having to stop start potty training because we kept moving. Her development, like her speech was also affected. She'd say a few things but she's kept the same vocab since last year.'* N, 24, Mum

Young children are resilient and it is unclear what the longer-term impact would be. But it is clear that parents were very worried it has had significant impact in the short-term.

*'A health visitor said it was affecting (son)'s development. He didn't walk because when we moved in he was still crawling and there was no space here. She said it set him back because when I was in my flat we were able to move around but when we got here he had to stay in a cot.'* L, 24, Mum

### **Impact on childhood**

One of the strongest impacts was that children were missing out on childhood. Parents reported that losing their home was affecting their children's friendships.

Many families brought up that their children were sad they could no longer invite anyone over or have sleepovers. Others noticed that children were ashamed of their living situation and concealing it from their friends.

*'The other day I heard his brother saying "don't tell [his friend] that you live in a hostel'.* H, 35, Mum

Learning mentors shared stories of devastated children crying when they or their classmates moves away. They also showed how children that had to move away from schools missed out on fun childhood experiences. As one of the learning mentors described,

*'We've had children that have got a part in the school play that they then can't take it... we've got some kung fu certificates from last year that we haven't been able to hand out because the family have moved'* Learning mentor

A further impact on childhood was a loss of safety and security. Some parents said they were worried that their children were worried about them, and felt that they had to try and 'look after' their parents as much as possible. This was reiterated by learning mentors as something they experienced with a number of children, including some as young as seven who felt they needed to support and care for their parents throughout their experiences of homelessness.

*'We took one child who is in temporary accommodation, on a residential for 3 nights, 4 days, and he spent a huge amount of time worrying about how his mum would be coping without him, that was his main worry. So some children were worried because they miss their parents, he was actually quite worried about how his mother would be coping.'* Learning mentor

Living in emergency accommodation meant that children had to witness things that their parents didn't want them to see. Half of parents said that their children have seen things they shouldn't. Children had seen their parents be physically attacked by other residents, had been spied on by other residents and witnessed many scary incidents.

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*'There's a lot [of] drugs and I don't want my kids seeing that... One time he said 'mummy I heard a woman on the phone saying 'I'm going to set fire to your face'' She was saying these things and my son was hearing it. I was so upset and shocked. I don't want my son to hear this sort of stuff. I didn't know what to answer. He was scared.'* H, 35, Mum

The extent of this impact on childhood was shown by learning mentors who compared the experiences of children in temporary accommodation with other children in their school and across the country.

*'There was this whole thing around ten things every child should do before their ten or something, and it's a lovely idea, lovely, but some children aren't even close to that'* Learning mentor

*'I've had children who don't want it to be the weekend. I've had children who are really devastated when school holidays come. Its such a contrast with other children. The hardest thing is those children I cant reassure, I daren't reassure them that they'll be coming back over the holidays. That's hard.'* Learning mentor

## Impact on education and school

Lack of sleep, exhaustion and worry appeared to impact the children's educational attainment. More than half of the families interviewed felt that their children's education or development had been affected by the time they had spent in emergency accommodation. One parent reported her daughter going down a set at school 'because she was so tired'. Others were particularly badly affected as the period of upheaval and uncertainty happened at important times for their education or big exams.

*'It affected her schoolwork big time. She'd started her GCSEs and had nowhere to do her homework or her studying. Her school work really suffered.'* S, 34, Mum

Even relatively brief stays in emergency accommodation had a significant impact on children's education.

*'Their education was put on hold. My daughter was ahead on everything in her class and she just went behind during those two weeks.'* S, 30, Mum

Learning mentors confirmed the impact that homelessness had on children in their school. Tiredness, long commutes, lack of space and poor sleep all took their toll. If children missed the start of lessons they were thrown for the rest of the session.

Many of the parents spoke of the importance of continuity of education and wanted to avoid children having to change schools, particularly as they didn't know where they would be living in a week's time. Some spoke of schools being a central source of support, both social and practical. But it was clear that some parents were upset that their situation had led to an antagonistic relationship with school bureaucracy. They felt ashamed to be placing their children in this situation and ruining an otherwise positive and important relationship with their child's teachers.

*'My son was doing SATs and I was really worried, the school was really on my case. It was like they were annoyed with me, like it was my fault that I'd put them in this situation. They put so much pressure on me. I felt so terrible saying it was because of me. What could I do about it - I was trying my best to get them out of there.'* S, 30, Mum

Our interviews with learning mentors demonstrate that impacts happened both ways. Schools felt they had to provide social services to families whose otherwise normal lives had been thrown into chaos by homelessness. Although not possible to verify, it was striking that most of the learning mentors we spoke to felt they were seeing an increase in parents having difficulties including among families they assumed would be able to cope.

*'It's really increased - and changed. A couple of years ago, an eviction was huge. It was if the family hadn't been paying the rent. This is a new thing. These are people that work, as cleaners, that work in coffee shops, security guards you know, where are these people meant to be living?'* Learning mentor

Schools had to take on a completely different role outside of education. They had to provide emotional support to children who were distracted by tiredness and worry. They also provided basic social

support like hot meals, warm clothes and space for children who couldn't concentrate in lessons to nap during breaks. They also provided a source of stability and support for parents who needed time away from children to sort out their situation. At the same time, schools felt unequipped to take on this role. Particularly when faced with helping families navigate complex legal structures and unclear demands that were so important to the family's situation.

*'They were getting these letters that said if you don't respond to this letter within 24 hours we will take it that you've decided under section whatever, whatever, and he was sitting there going what's this, and I'm reading it and I had to say do you mind if I show it to someone else in the office... because I didn't want to give them the wrong advice. And I'm not an expert in housing, but it's such a huge huge thing'*  
Learning mentor

## Impacts on parents

Living in emergency accommodation and trying to do the best for their children also took its toll on parents. Eighteen out of twenty parents interviewed said that their or their partner's physical health was affected by living in the accommodation. Several parents reported injuries or back pain, skin conditions such as psoriasis brought on by stress, issues around nutrition and illness related to cold and damp conditions. Many suffered from the consequences of being unable to eat well. Problems ranged from poor nutrition, to more serious health problems. Some were adamant that their stay in emergency accommodation was to blame.

*'Being in the B&Bs had a direct effect on my health... I've had one thing after another with my health and it's all been because of this one situation.'* N, 34, Mum

Half of parents interviewed stated that their or their partner's mental health was affected during their time in the emergency accommodation. Anxiety and depression were often mentioned. Many spoke of feelings of despair due to their lack of control over the situation.

*'It's affected me horrendously. Normally I cope with things quite well but this time I didn't... because it wasn't something I could solve, that's why it hit me so badly.'*  
S, 50, Mum

*'You don't really feel up to doing much, I didn't care about eating well for myself. For me, it just didn't matter, even brushing my teeth became a challenge. It was a horrible time.'* F, 30, Mum

Many of the interviewees shared how hard it was to raise their children in the way they wanted. Many families reported feelings of guilt and distress for any negative impacts on their children. Families that had taken all possible steps to prevent the loss of their home still felt a sense of personal responsibility. Even those who had fled violence shared doubts about whether they made the right step to leave an abusive partner.

*'It's harder when you're a family as you just feel that you're not looking after your child properly. The way it makes you feel, I did get really, really bad'* D, 21, Mum

Eighteen out of twenty parents interviewed said that living in emergency accommodation impacted their emotional wellbeing. All stressed that it was harder than they thought, or than other people could understand. For example, when asked – what is the one thing you would want people to know about the experience you have had: One mother said –

*'It not just a roof over your head. I had this conversation with a friend: she was saying 'stop moaning - you've got somewhere to live' but you don't realise the emotional and physical affect it has had on me and more importantly the kids. It's not fair on them at all'* S, 30, Mum

## Impact on families

Living in emergency accommodation had a significant impact on relationships – both with partners and with children. Parents reported arguments and frustration as a result of being 'cooped up'. Many parents also spoke of the need to put on a brave face, and appear strong for their children.



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Maintaining a normal relationship was impossible.

*'If you got a husband, you can't be close together when you're living like this. It's not good for us or our relationship.'* M, 45, Mum

The lack of space impacted families in other ways. Living in a small space meant they had no privacy from each other. Many raised problems like parents and siblings having to change clothes in front of each other and teenage girls embarrassed at having to share a bed with relatives (including brothers and fathers) when menstruating. Parents said their living arrangements made disciplining children almost impossible as there was no way of removing them from the room. Privacy was a major issue, with seventeen of the parents agreeing that they did not have the level of privacy needed for family life. When asked this question, one respondent answered:

*'No, not at all - it's hard ... And then there is stuff when I have my period, it was hard sharing a bed [with my son] and being in the same room.'* N, 42, Mum

Christmas came up in many interviews. Two of the families we spoke to had spent last Christmas in a B&B. Families worked hard to give their children a fun day. But there was a sense that a fun and cosy, family orientated season threw their living situation into even sharper relief.

*'We woke up there on Christmas morning as well which was even worse. That was horrible. We just kind of woke up, opened our presents there then went over to my friend's house and didn't go back there until the evening again.'* S, 34, Mum

Others spoke about hoping they were in more settled home before this Christmas.

*'Christmas is coming and I'm spending it in this room... We just got to sit like ducks and wait... it's a horrible feeling'* L, 24, Mum

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# CONCLUSION

This research shows that emergency accommodation is no place for a child. Yet, as the housing crisis bites deeper, more and more children are again forced to grow up in this environment. Parents that we spoke to described many difficult and upsetting stories:

- Trying to eat healthily with no fridge, no cupboards and no cooking facilities
- Having to leave the accommodation during the day – and walk around in the rain with young children
- The entire family having to go to sleep with the youngest children at 8pm and waking through the night due to shared beds and noise inside and outside the hostel
- Teenage children peered at by other residents while showering
- Parents' concerned that children's development was affected – including children wetting the bed and having delayed speech and walking
- Exhausted children falling behind at school and missing out on friendships and fun activities
- Children worried about their parents, and not wanting to leave their sight
- Families who had fled violence wondering if they had done the right thing by leaving, given the negative effect on their children.

The parents we interviewed were grateful for the support they have. But they craved stability and normality. When asked what they were most looking forward to once they found a settled home, interviewees listed everyday activities. They emphasised the importance of home as a place of safety and normality.

*'Just having a home, having a bath, a washing machine!' D, 28, Mum*

*'Sitting down with both my girls, and my husband, and just sitting there. Just sitting. Somewhere we can all be where we can open our front door and say, this is mine, no-one can take it. Letting my daughter have a friend round, like she used to, letting her go out like she used to. She's become very reclusive and doesn't like going out, she's ashamed.'* S, 45, Mum

This need is so simple to meet. But this situation will not improve until we deal with the reasons why so many families are homeless and can support those who are in such damaging situations.

## Why are there homeless children?

The main reason that so many children are homeless is because of the shortage of affordable housing. England is particularly badly affected. Only half of the 250,000 homes we need each year are built – and the majority of these are set for sale at market rates. The shrinking social rented sector and increasing property prices are pushing more and more families into the unstable private rented sector.

The end of a private tenancy - known as an assured shorthold tenancy (AST) - is now the leading immediate trigger of homelessness in England<sup>5</sup>. The majority of the families we interviewed cited this as the reason they lost their home, this included the landlord wanting to sell their home, or their one year tenancy coming to an end and the landlord wanting to renew<sup>6</sup>. Some of the families we interviewed appear to have been homeless because the landlord acted unlawfully. However, the majority acted well within their rights. The private rented sector is unstable, and families can be asked to move out of

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5. See DCLG, ['Live tables on homelessness'](#)

6. Other families had had to leave after staying with friends or family and some had left situations of domestic violence.

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their home with just one month's notice. Increased demand has meant that rent costs have been spiralling upwards as landlords let their properties to the highest bidder. This causes issues for many families. Notably, as is the case for parents such as D below, some can afford to pay ongoing rent on a monthly basis but do not have the ability to find the large amounts of cash needed to put down a deposit and six weeks' rent to start a new tenancy.

*'[Our] landlord wanted to sell the flat we were privately renting and we couldn't afford another £2500 (to put a deposit down) to rent again, we just didn't have the money. I work but I don't earn that much.'*  
D, 21, Mum

Reforms to social security, such as lowering the benefit cap and freezing Local Housing Allowance rates, have cut away at the safety net that families on low incomes can use to stay in their homes and avoid homelessness while they look for work or shop around for a cheaper property. The Ministry of Justice has reported a marked growth in bailiff evictions from rented properties over the last few years<sup>7</sup>. This suggests that an increasing number of families are not able to find new accommodation when asked to leave by their landlord and are instead reaching the traumatic point of eviction before turning to the council for help.

*'Your whole life crumbles around you. Your whole world. You're worried about your children. I was worried about everything. I can't put into words, because there aren't any words. Shock, disbelief, terror. Everything, it is your worst nightmare come true – someone coming in and locking your front door so you can't go back in there. Seeing your child sobbing.'* S, 45, Mum

Our depleted safety net is also preventing homeless families getting back on their feet. Some families we spoke to about trying to find a settled home said that they hadn't been able to find a private landlord who would accept housing benefit, even if they were working.

Overall, the lack of affordable homes, instability in the private rented sector and the lack of an adequate safety net are resulting in families struggling to keep a roof over their head.

## What can fix this?

Ultimately, this situation will not improve until we deal with Britain's chronic shortage of affordable homes. The government needs to build thousands more homes that are truly affordable and stable for families on low and average incomes, including low cost rented homes. To do this we need a land market that's efficient, transparent and stable and a diverse house building sector, which makes it easier for new and smaller builders to break into the market. We need public and private investment in affordable housing and to give local authorities more power by removing barriers to development and linking infrastructure spending with house building in order to meet local needs<sup>8</sup>.

We also need to introduce more stability into the private rented sector, so families can find a secure home to raise their children. And to build a safety net that is fit for purpose, so that losing your job, or seeing your rent rise, doesn't automatically mean losing your home. This includes ensuring that local authorities are adequately funded to provide suitable temporary accommodation for families when the worst does happen.

In the meantime, we need to assist families who are currently homeless to find a stable place to live, or those on the edge of homelessness. Councils had provided some assistance to the families we spoke to. Many parents found it hard to find a stable home. They used whatever free time they could to find a new home. For example, some learning mentors said they offered to supervise children before and after school while their parents tried to sort out their housing issues. Housing law is complicated and the housing market tricky to navigate. The importance of having the

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7. Ministry of Justice, 'Mortgage and landlord possession statistics: April to June 2015': <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/mortgage-and-landlord-possession-statistics-april-to-june-2015>

8. See more about the shortage of affordable homes in Great Britain and the things that the government can do to fix it here: <http://thehomesweneed.org.uk/>

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support of a trained professional was clear from our interviews.

*'There are no options. It's like a trap. We are stuck in here. We need someone to pull us out.'* H, 35, Mum

Shelter help millions of people facing bad housing and homelessness each year. Our helpline is open every day and our face to face support services alone, help over 60,000 people each year. We offered to put all of the families we spoke to in touch with a Shelter advisor and told learning mentors about our services. Learning mentors were relieved to know there was someone they could send parents to for help.

At the time of the interview, some of the families were now living in more settled accommodation after previous contact with Shelter. They shared the difference it had made to them to have someone to talk to, to explain their rights and to advocate on their behalf. This reassured them,

made them feel less alone, and resulted in positive change.

*'I just felt ill the whole time I was there. My family kept saying 'you look really sick.' It was only when Shelter helped me that I felt remotely better.'* S, 30, Mum

*'Ian helped me through a lot. He was just there for me. He always said if you want to talk about anything just call me, even if you want to just talk about what's going on... he really did help... from the minute I first spoke to him to the last session... If I hadn't gone to Shelter I think we'd still be in a B&B.'* D, 21, Mum

There is so much that can be done to help families in emergency accommodation to realise their dream of a settled home. And much more that can be done to help families that are struggling with their housing. We need to act now, to ensure that by next Christmas, there are less families living in this way, rather than even more.

Shelter helps millions of people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness through our advice, support and legal services. And we campaign to make sure that, one day, no one will have to turn to us for help.

We're here so no one has to fight bad housing or homelessness on their own.

Please support us at [shelter.org.uk](https://shelter.org.uk)

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