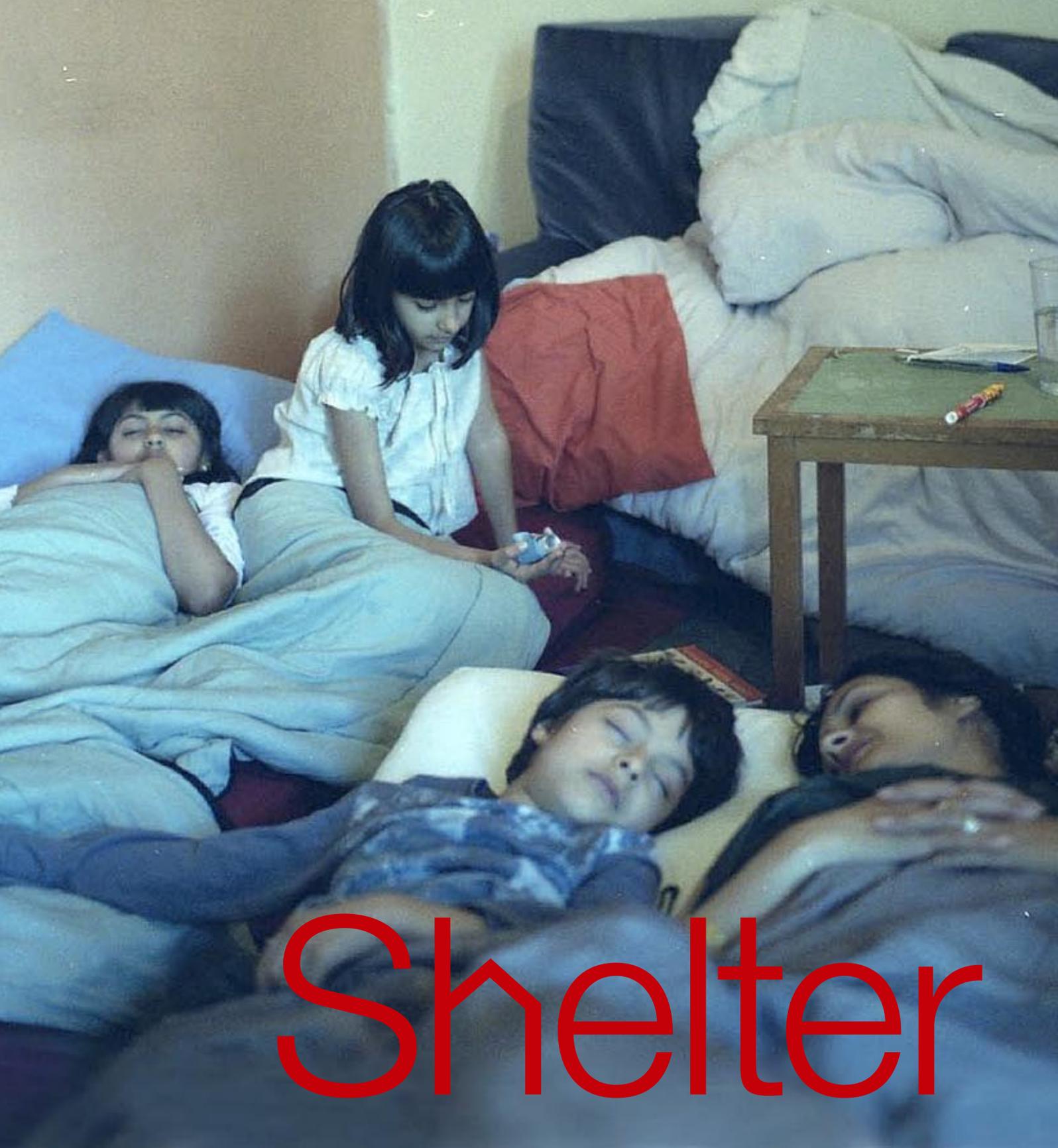


# Full house?

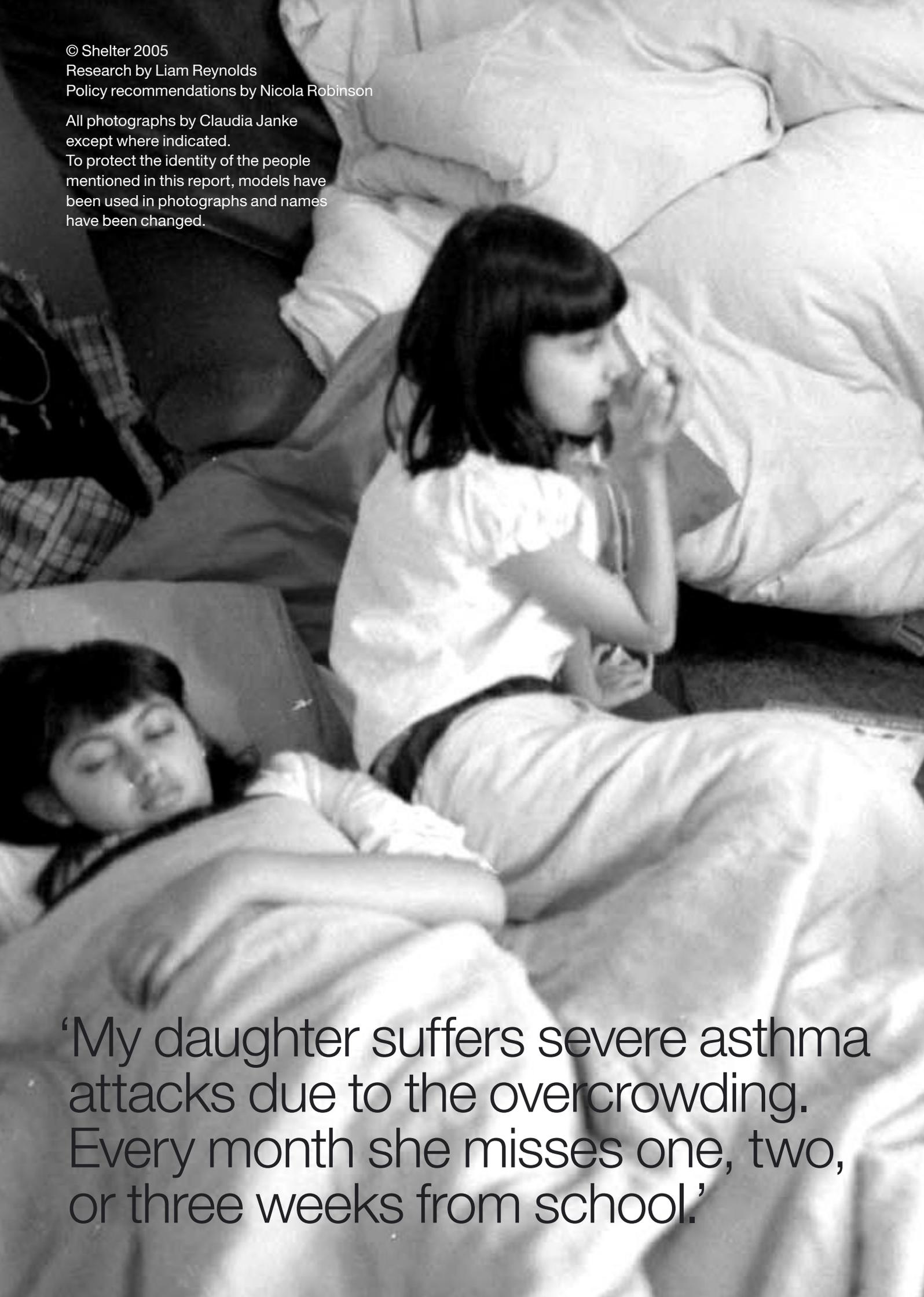
How overcrowded housing affects families



# Shelter

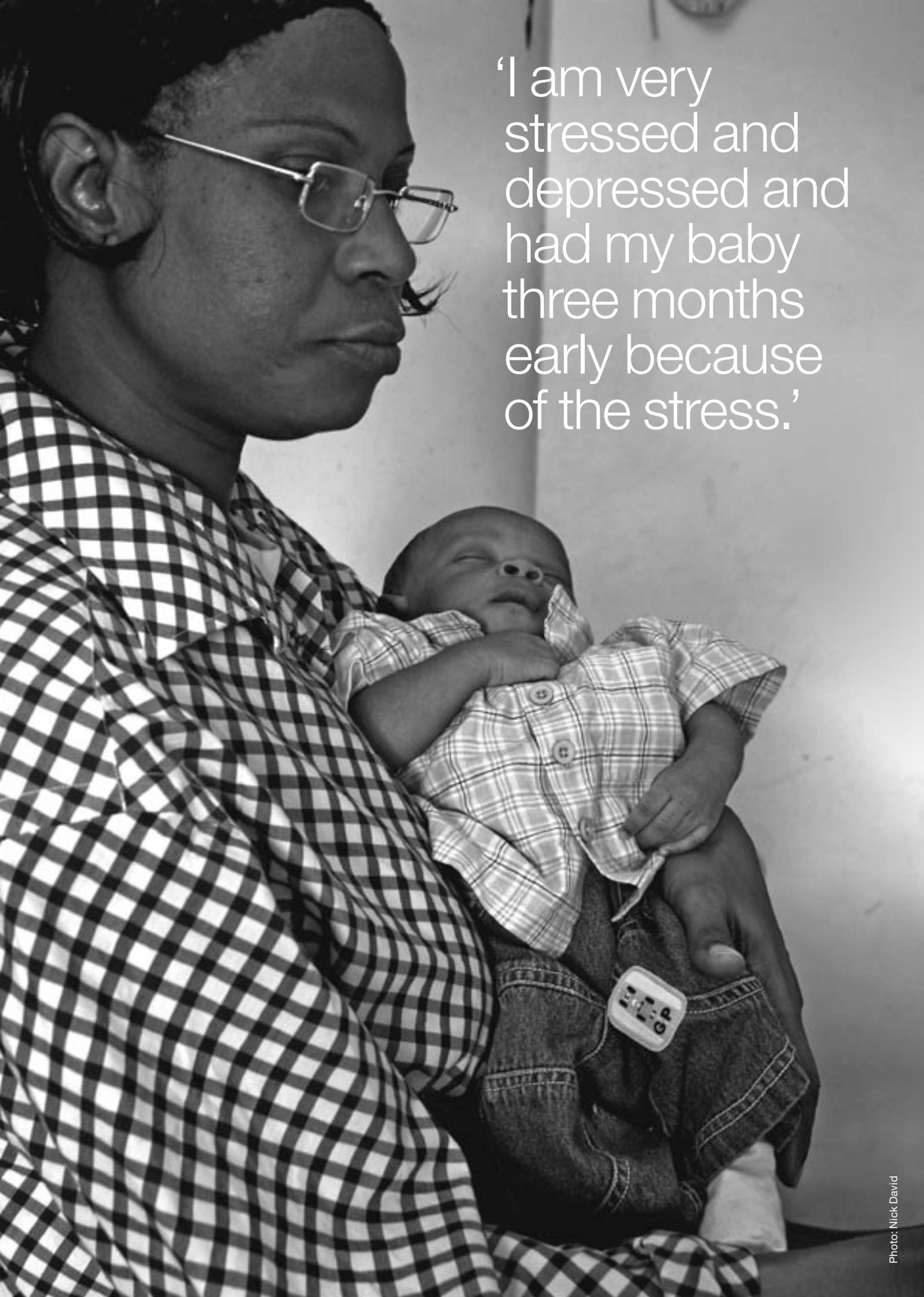
© Shelter 2005  
Research by Liam Reynolds  
Policy recommendations by Nicola Robinson

All photographs by Claudia Janke  
except where indicated.  
To protect the identity of the people  
mentioned in this report, models have  
been used in photographs and names  
have been changed.



‘My daughter suffers severe asthma attacks due to the overcrowding. Every month she misses one, two, or three weeks from school.’





'I am very stressed and depressed and had my baby three months early because of the stress.'

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'... there is not enough room for the children to study in.'



# Foreword

As every parent knows, children need space to play, develop, and do their homework. They also need privacy, especially when they are going through puberty and studying for exams. Adults need space too, to foster healthy relationships with their partners and enable them to care for their families.

In twenty-first century Britain, having adequate space in which to live ought to be a realistic expectation. But more than half a million households across the country are overcrowded according to the Government's preferred Bedroom Standard measure (see Appendix i). And the statutory definition of overcrowding, conceived in Victorian times, hasn't been updated since 1935.

Our understanding of the need for space and privacy has come a long way since then. But official thinking has lagged behind. For one in 10 children in this country, living conditions have more in common with the Dickensian era, when the statutory definition was first drawn up, than those expected of a modern, thriving nation. Children growing up in social housing have, on average, seven square metres less space in which to play and develop, than the national average. Yet for most, their situation is unrecognised by the law.

The research for this report is based on a survey of more than 500 overcrowded households living in social housing, making it the largest study of its kind. Most of those who responded were from average-sized families with one, two or three children crammed into one- or two-bedroom flats. Their testimonies confirm the devastating impact of their living conditions on family relationships, health, and the development and education of children.

The Government has finally woken up to this scandal – it now recognises the link between overcrowding and child poverty and included new powers to amend the statutory definition of overcrowding in the 2004 Housing Act. But meaningful action has been slow in coming. As this report shows, further delay is not an option. Ministers must grasp the nettle and introduce a definition of overcrowding that reflects a modern understanding of the need for space and privacy. As a matter of urgency, they must also invest in the family-sized affordable homes that are so desperately needed.



**Adam Sampson**

Director of Shelter

# Summary

The experiences of 505 overcrowded families – including 152 classed as severely overcrowded according to Government standards – form the basis of this report, which reveals the often shocking realities of living in overcrowded housing.

The findings are presented through facts, figures, and quotes from the families themselves. A few of the families responding to Shelter’s survey were also contacted by telephone for a more in-depth interview about the effects of overcrowding. Their stories feature in this report as case studies.

‘Certain days of the month the girls don’t want to be in a bed with their brother so they sleep in the front room...’

## Sleeping arrangements

Research into sleeping arrangements produced some of this report’s uneasiest reading. Almost all overcrowded families who responded said they were forced to adopt uncomfortable or irregular sleeping arrangements. Fifteen per cent of written comments from families said that sleeping arrangements changed regularly, sometimes on a nightly basis. And this situation became particularly difficult when children of different sexes and ages were living together.

- Three-quarters (74 per cent) of the overcrowded families had children sharing a bedroom with a parent or parents.
- More than a quarter (27 per cent) had children sleeping in living or dining rooms – and this rose to 52 per cent among severely overcrowded families.
- One in 10 families were forced to pair teenagers of opposite sexes in the same bedroom – a figure that rose to one in five (19 per cent) among severely overcrowded families.

Sharing and changing bedrooms caused disruption to sleep on a wide scale. Three-quarters of families strongly agreed that their sleep was regularly disturbed because of their living conditions.

The chaotic sleeping arrangements were an underlying cause of many other effects of overcrowding. These effects fell into three broad categories: family relationships, child development and education, and health.

## Family relationships

Strong agreement that overcrowding harmed family relationships stood at 77 per cent.<sup>1</sup> Out of 14 tick boxes about the possible effects of overcrowding, a lack of privacy was the one that received the highest rate of strong agreement with 92 per cent of overcrowded families selecting it. Eighty-one per cent strongly agreed that overcrowding caused fighting and arguing among their children.

## Child development and education

Seventy-one per cent of families strongly agreed that overcrowding was a damaging influence on their children’s education and development.<sup>2</sup> For 81 per cent of families there wasn’t enough room for their children to play, and seven out of 10 (70 per cent) said that overcrowding made it difficult for their children to study. Of the families who wrote about the effects in their own words, half (49 per cent) noted a problem associated with their children’s education and development.

## Health

A total of 71 per cent of respondents strongly agreed that overcrowding harmed the health of family members.<sup>3</sup>

1. This is the average level of strong agreement to a series of statements on this subject.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

- Eighty-six per cent said depression, anxiety or stress in the home were a result of cramped living conditions.
- Three-quarters of severely overcrowded families also strongly agreed that their children's health was affected by their living conditions, with asthma, which featured in six per cent of written comments, being the single most commonly mentioned ailment.

### **Room size and storage space**

Tiny rooms and a lack of storage space in many overcrowded homes made problems associated with overcrowding worse. Almost a third (32 per cent) of written comments from families concerned box rooms or the lack of space in bedsits and studio flats. Almost a quarter (24 per cent) of these comments referred to a lack of adequate storage space. This lack of space led to increased stress and the likelihood of accidents in the home.

### **Outside space**

The effects of overcrowding were also worse when other problems with housing and neighbourhoods were present.

- Almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of overcrowded families said they did not have access to a safe outside play area for their children and this magnified the impact of overcrowding.
- Three-quarters of those without access to a play area said that the health of their children was harmed by being overcrowded, compared with 56 per cent of those with access.

### **Black and minority ethnic families**

This report confirms that overcrowding disproportionately affects black and minority ethnic (BME) communities.

- Overcrowded families from BME groups were twice as likely as white British families to be severely overcrowded.
- BME families were also more likely to say overcrowding had a negative affect on them. For example, more than three-quarters (78 per cent) of Asian/Asian British families strongly agreed that 'overcrowding harms the education of our children', compared with 53 per cent of white British families.

### **The need for action**

Shelter believes that the Government needs to provide affordable, family-sized homes with reasonable storage and outdoor space to prevent overcrowding. The findings of this research confirm the need for such action, with more than three-quarters (76 per cent) of families who responded pinpointing the lack of larger affordable homes in their local area as the main cause of their housing problems.

Shelter is also arguing that a target be introduced to tackle overcrowding within 10 years. The desperation with which many overcrowded families regard their situation confirms the need for such a target.

- Almost two-thirds (62 per cent) of families said they were 'very overcrowded'.
- More than half (52 per cent) of the families said that they had been overcrowded for more than three years.
- Seventy per cent thought their situation was urgent and needed to be resolved immediately.

# Background

## Research into overcrowding

In Shelter's last report on the subject, *Crowded house*, published in October 2004, statistics and qualitative research were summarised to present a picture of overcrowding in England. This showed that the rate of overcrowding was highest in London and in social housing, and that families from BME groups were much more likely to be overcrowded.

Other recent research in this area has been summarised by the Government<sup>4</sup> and falls into three broad categories: family relationships, child development, and health.

Family relationships are known to be affected by overcrowding. Qualitative research, with small numbers of families, has revealed a link between overcrowding and:

- stress, tension, and sometimes family break-up
- anxiety and depression
- a lack of privacy, particularly for adolescents
- disrupted sleep patterns.

The same studies have also shown that overcrowding can inhibit education and child development by causing:

- difficulties in studying and doing homework
- emotional problems leading to developmental delays for children.

Other studies that analyse data from various censuses and health surveys have linked overcrowding with the following health problems:

- respiratory and infectious diseases
- common mental health disorders
- accidents around the home
- tuberculosis.

'I am married and share a room with twin boys – so four in a room.'

4. The impact of overcrowding on health and education: A review of the evidence and literature, OPDM, May 2004

### Sample and methodology

No previous research into the effects of overcrowding has used a sample as large as the one this report is based on. The report's main objectives were to establish:

- the impact of overcrowding on family relationships, health, and the development and education of children, and how common these effects were
- what overcrowded families themselves thought about their living conditions
- whether the effects of overcrowding varied between groups such as severely overcrowded families and families from BME groups.

We contacted 2,788 households who were on local authority or registered social landlord transfer or waiting lists as a result of overcrowding, in seven areas.\* Addressees were asked to complete a questionnaire on behalf of their family.

The questionnaire consisted mainly of statements with tick boxes. A few questions also asked for families to provide their own written comments. Table 1 shows the overall response rates.

<b>Table 1: Response rates</b>	
Questionnaires sent	2,788
Questionnaires received by deadline	505
<b>Response rates:</b>	
Total	<b>18.1%</b>
White British	18.7%
Other ethnic groups	18.0%
London	18.8%
Outside London	16.3%

Five hundred and five households replied within the deadline. This equated to an 18 per cent response rate and was spread evenly across area and ethnic group. The following characteristics were true of the households who responded:

- 437 were overcrowded according to the Bedroom Standard; 152 of these were severely overcrowded
- 96 per cent had children
- most lived in one-bedroom (37 per cent) or two-bedroom (49 per cent) homes.

The proportion of families that were severely overcrowded or from a BME group was significantly higher in Shelter's sample, when compared with the profile of all overcrowded households in social housing. Both of these groups tended to be more likely to report the effects of overcrowding more negatively. The results in this report have therefore been weighted to account for this. The results are based on the responses from the 437 families that were lacking rooms according to the Bedroom Standard, and this means that the findings are a good representation of the views of all overcrowded families living in social housing. See Appendix iv), Weighting for more information.

\*Hackney, Islington, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Luton, Leicester, Bradford.

‘The children are fighting constantly and they are always falling over things.’



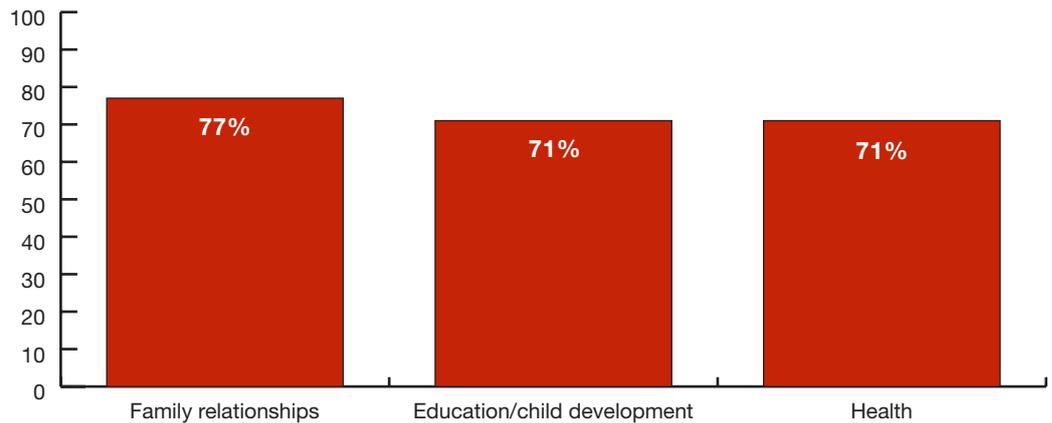
# Detailed findings

‘Me and my partner don’t have a bed as the three children use the one bedroom. I sleep by myself on the sofa and that puts a lot of pressure on our relationship as a couple.’

## Overview

This section summarises the most common effects of overcrowding. Chart 1 shows the average levels of strong agreement to statements on the effects of overcrowding, in the three areas identified by previous research.

**Chart 1: Average proportion strongly agreeing that overcrowding has a negative effect on...**



Bases: 399 to 422 overcrowded families, weighted

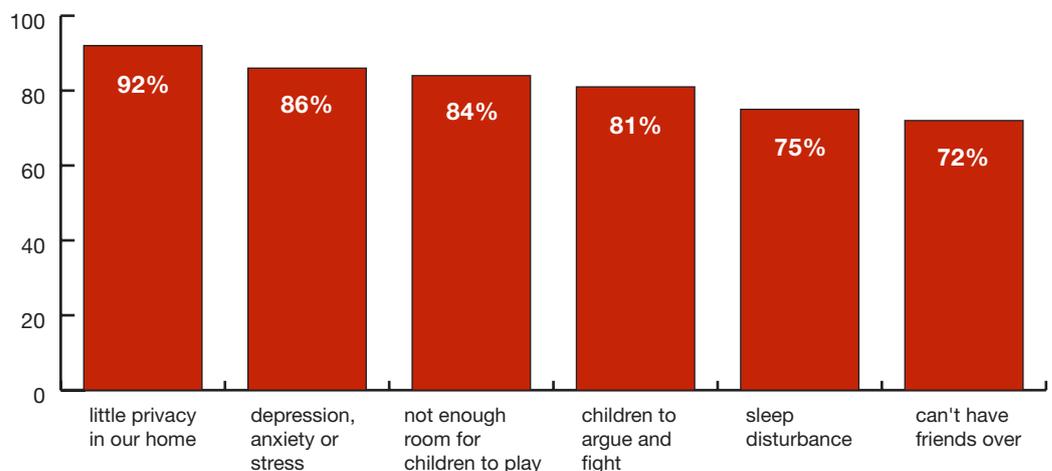
Families described the effects of overcrowding on family relationships in the following ways:

*‘There is no bonding between members of the family.’*

*‘Being overcrowded means no happy life for the family.’*

Chart 2 highlights the problems families were most likely to say occurred in their home, in response to statements on overcrowding. A lack of privacy, depression, and a lack of play space for children were the most common complaints.

**Chart 2: The six effects of overcrowding with the highest level of strong agreement. ‘Being overcrowded causes...’**



Bases: 399 to 422 overcrowded families, weighted

Families made the following comments about the lack of privacy, depression, and having no room for their children to play:

*'It is so appalling that the children have to dress and undress in the toilet, due to the lack of privacy caused by overcrowding.'*

*'Main problems are privacy for the children.'*

*'The overcrowding is causing me to be depressed so much.'*

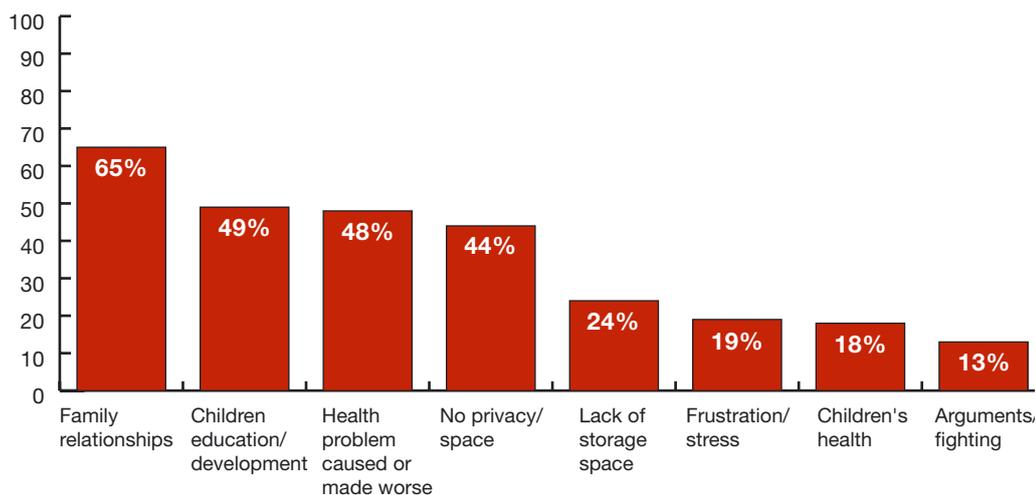
*'This has caused me to have a nervous breakdown due to the appalling conditions.'*

*'Please can we get more space for my children.'*

*'My child has one square metre in which to eat, get changed.'*

When families wrote in their own words about the effects of overcrowding, family relationships, a lack of privacy, child development, and health were the most commonly mentioned concerns, as Chart 3 shows.

**Chart 3: The effects of overcrowding, in families' own words – most commonly mentioned themes**



Base: 288 overcrowded families who wrote about the effects of overcrowding, multiple answers

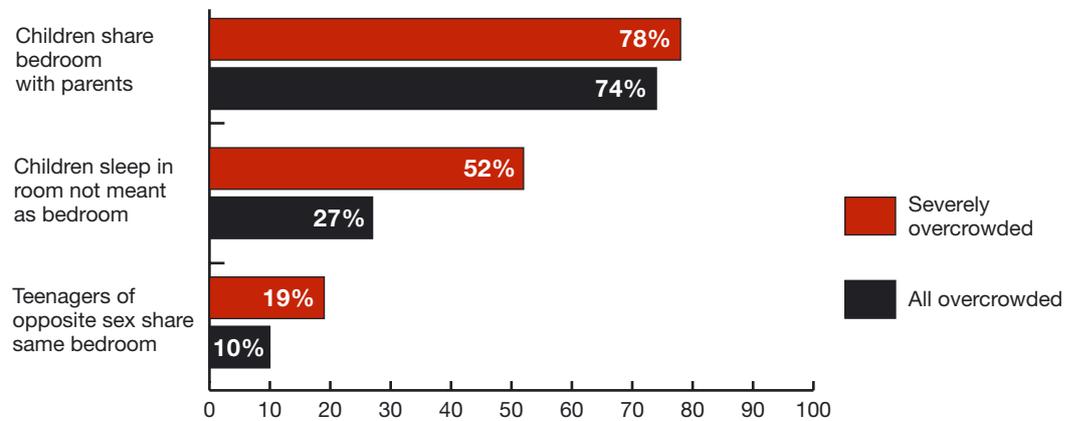
## 1. Sleeping arrangements

All of the most common effects of overcrowding – a lack of privacy, mental health problems, and concerns over children's education and development – were rooted in uncomfortable, and often constantly changing, sleeping arrangements.

Chart 4 shows the proportion of overcrowded families who said that their children slept in the same room as them, that they slept in rooms other than bedrooms or that teenagers of opposite sexes shared a bedroom.

‘Me and my son share one bed and he is getting to that age where he is asking questions. He shouldn’t have to share with me at his age.’

**Chart 4: Children and room sharing. ‘Do any of the following happen in your home?’**



Base: 357 to 400 overcrowded families, weighted

### Children sharing bedrooms with parents

A common problem among overcrowded families (74 per cent) was children having to share bedrooms with parents. This caused most problems when there was:

- more than one child
- older children
- just one bed.

One parent commented:

*‘Me and my son share one bed and he is getting to that age where he is asking questions. He shouldn’t have to share with me at his age.’*

### Children with no bedroom

More than half (52 per cent) of severely overcrowded, and more than a quarter (27 per cent) of all overcrowded families, said they had a child sleeping in a room not designed to be a bedroom. This was usually the living room but some families also used dining rooms or even hallways (in two cases) as space for their children to sleep in.

In many cases children were sleeping in living rooms to avoid the lack of privacy and conflict that often resulted from sharing with a sibling of a different sex or age. Sometimes the adults in overcrowded families sacrificed their own comfort to enable their children to have a bedroom, or to enable them to have a proper relationship with their partners:

*‘The living room floor is being slept on, as two teenagers do not want to share a room.’*

*‘My son of 14 sleeps in the dining room on a sofa chair.’*

*‘Me and my partner don’t have a bed as the three children use the one bedroom. I sleep by myself on the sofa and that puts a lot of pressure on our relationship as a couple.’*

*‘Most of the time, I have to sleep in the living room, just to have some privacy with my partner.’*

### Teenagers of opposite sexes sharing bedrooms

One in 10 overcrowded families, and one in five severely overcrowded families, said they had teenagers of the opposite sex sharing a bedroom, as Chart 4 shows. This was a major underlying cause of many of the most disturbing effects of overcrowding on children, including a lack of privacy and problems with development, relationships, and behaviour:

*'My daughter is 12 years old now and shares a bedroom with her brother. This causes a lot of confusion and arguments.'*

*'My son is 15 years old and he is going through changes and has no privacy.'*

*'My son who is 17 years old has to share a room with his 14-year-old sister who has periods and is very upset most of the time.'*

*'Sometimes my two-year-old might see my daughter changing her [sanitary] pads and copies her when she changes her clothes.'*

*'There is no privacy, my oldest daughter is 15 and my son is 14 and it is really embarrassing for them.'*

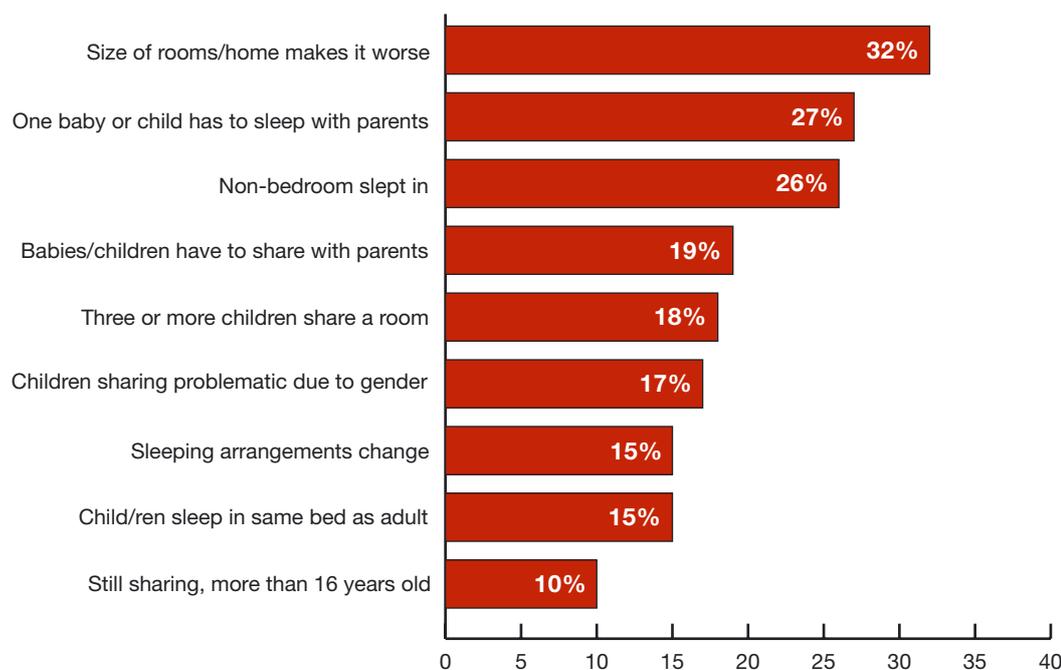
### Sleeping arrangements – in families' own words

Chart 5 shows the most commonly mentioned concerns in families' written comments about the way rooms are shared in their homes. Close to one in five (18 per cent) of those providing written comments said they had three or more children sharing a bedroom, although the Bedroom Standard states that no more than two people should be required to share any bedroom. Respondents wrote:

*'Four children sleep in one small bedroom.'*

*'My teenage daughters have no privacy from their 10-year-old brother as they not only share a room, but a bed as well. According to law this is fine?'*

### Chart 5: The effects of overcrowding in families' own words – room sharing



Base: 269 overcrowded families who wrote about the effects of room sharing, multiple coding

As Chart 5 shows, constantly changing sleeping arrangements were mentioned in 15 per cent of the comments provided by overcrowded families about room sharing. Again, this often took place to accommodate children of different genders and ages:

*'Certain days of the month the girls don't want to be in a bed with their brother so they sleep in the front room or their Mother goes in their bed and [our] son sleeps with Dad.'*

*'My daughter sleeps with her brother some nights, other nights she will be with me. When I can't get enough sleep, I in turn use the living room at night.'*

*'When pressures get high the children or myself sleep in the living room.'*

In a few cases health and environmental factors forced families into regularly changing their sleeping arrangements:

*'We all [couple with two children] share one bedroom, but sometimes we have to sleep in the living room, especially in the summertime, when the rooms get really hot.'*

*'Very often me and my partner sleep downstairs in the living room. This is because we have a daughter who suffers with allergies and asthma and she has sleepless nights, which disturbs our daughter who's at school, so one of the girls and our son very often sleep in our room.'*

*'Our youngest son sleeps with his teenage sister. Two of our boys sleep in the living room. My husband sometimes sleeps in the living room too, due to his illness.'*

And sometimes it was necessary to chop and change rooms and sleep in living rooms just for adults to keep a proper relationship going:

*'Most of the time, I have to sleep in the living room, just to have some privacy with my partner.'*

## Mita's story

Mita Begum is the mother of three daughters aged 11, 12, and 20, and a son of 19. They live in a small two-bedroom flat in east London.

Mita's eldest daughter has her own box room; the other three children share the other bedroom and Mita sleeps on the sofa in the living room.

Mita has lived in this home since 1988, though the sleeping arrangements have had to change frequently over the course of time. Mita says it was very difficult to decide where the children should sleep, but her eldest daughter was the first to need a separate space to study in, so she has had the box room in recent years. Mita says: 'They are all growing up into teenagers and need their own space now. Sometimes the younger ones come and sleep with me in the living room.'

She says that her children suffer from stress and feel 'squashed'. Her eldest daughter is studying for a degree now and Mita feels that having her own room has helped her get there. But she is concerned about her son. 'He failed a year at college and has to re-take that. There is very little space for him to study and that is not helping at all.'

Mita's children aren't able to enjoy a normal social life. 'They don't ever have friends round, it's because of the embarrassment and that they can't take friends to their rooms.'

A lack of storage space makes life even more difficult for Mita and her family. 'It is like a student let here, with boxes all piled up everywhere, because of the storage problem.'

The sacrifice Mita has made in allowing her children to use the two bedrooms while she sleeps on the sofa has been starting to take its toll. 'My health is poor and I have a bad back. I can't sleep well and have had stress-related sick notes. There isn't much the doctor can do about it except sympathise, though. I work part-time, but my work is effected by lack of sleep.'

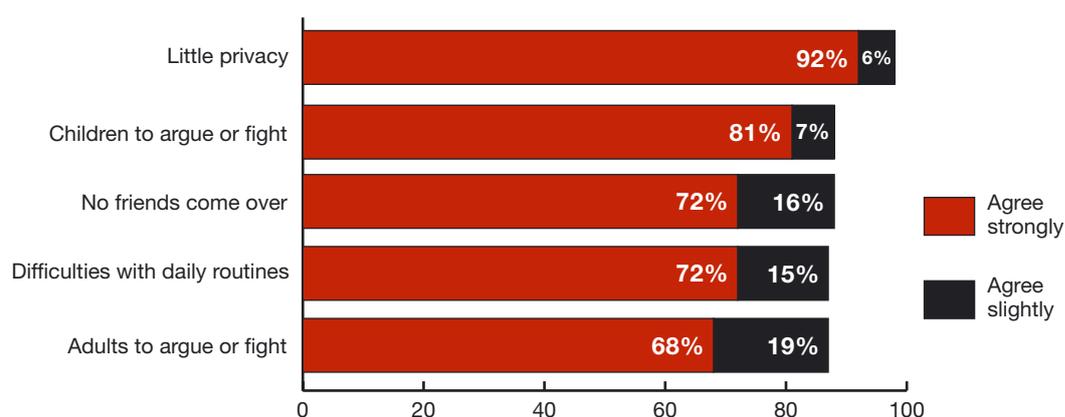
Mita's partner used to live with them. But she says: 'I haven't had a partner in the home for 10 years. The stress, arguments, and lack of privacy broke up my last relationship. Since then it just hasn't been viable for me to have a relationship.'

## 2. Family relationships

Questions on the effect of overcrowding on family relationships attracted the highest average rate of strong agreement in the survey (see Chart 1). The impact on relationships within the family was also the most common theme to emerge from written responses to a question that asked overcrowded families to write more about how their living conditions impacted on them (see Chart 3).

Chart 6 shows the levels of agreement to the statements on family relationships.

**Chart 6: Impact on family relationships – ‘Overcrowding causes...’**



Base: 399 to 422 overcrowded families, weighted

### Lack of privacy

The lack of privacy in overcrowded homes was almost universally highlighted. Families one below the Bedroom Standard (92 per cent), were just as likely to refer to it as those that were severely overcrowded (also 92 per cent).

The lack of privacy experienced by children as a result of uncomfortable room sharing is well documented in the Sleeping arrangements section. But it can affect adults in devastating ways too:

*‘I have split from my partner because of the overcrowding.’*

*‘Having no separate space caused arguments between myself and my ex-partner. We were always on top of each other and even if we went into bedrooms we could hear each other because the flat is so small and walls are thin. We eventually separated.’*

### Causing arguments

Families who said they had been overcrowded for more than three years were more likely to say overcrowding caused arguing and fighting among their children (87 per cent) than those who had been overcrowded for fewer than three years (75 per cent).

*‘The children are fighting constantly and they are always falling over things.’*

*‘My kids always fight and have arguments because they want to have separate bedrooms.’*

*‘The result of my overcrowding is the children always fighting over possessions and space.’*

## Social lives and daily routines

The negative impact of overcrowding on their social lives was felt fairly equally by the families across all groups. Some families wrote:

*'Being overcrowded means no social life, no friends from work come to visit me.'*

*'We cannot have visitors or relatives to come and spend time with us. Therefore, we feel lonely.'*

Severely overcrowded families were more likely to say that their living conditions made daily routines such as washing and preparing food more difficult (83 per cent; one below Bedroom Standard 70 per cent).

*'Overcrowding gives our family stress in our daily routines.'*

*'All routines are made very hard.'*

### Jay's story

Jay Ngogo lives with his wife Sophie and three children – two sons aged 14 and 18 and a daughter aged 16 – all of whom are in full-time education. The five of them share two bedrooms. Jay and his wife sleep in one room and the three teenagers share the other room, spread over two bunk beds.

Noise and disruption in the children's bedroom often disturbs their daughter, so Jay sometimes sleeps on the sofa and their daughter shares with his wife. Jay explains that the members of the family aren't really able to take decisions on where they sleep, they just have to move round to accommodate each other when there are problems.

When the boys are at school they are often late, or have not had enough sleep and can't concentrate. Homework is difficult: they try to do it in the living room, or do it on the PC in their room.

Jay is very worried about the relationships between the children and explains that the children fight all the time, and their room is so crowded with the computer that you can't turn round. The children fight because there is not enough room, and because they can't have their own space: to play music, have privacy and so on. They lose their things and move each other's stuff around and it gets lost. He worries about the social development of his children. 'They don't go out much and they don't like bringing friends home because there is no space.'

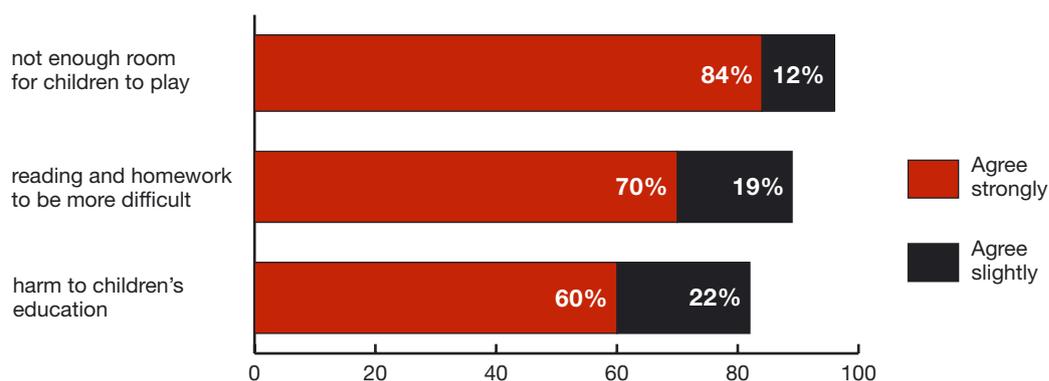
Jay's own health is suffering as he is getting aches and pains from sleeping on the sofa. His working life is also affected by the overcrowding as he doesn't get enough sleep, and the stress makes him tired. He sometimes works on Saturdays, though, to get away from the stress at home. The only time he feels he can really get away from it all is at church on Sundays.

‘Four boys in a small place is too much. They often fight and shout. I feel so alone.’

### 3. Child development and education

The impact that living in an overcrowded home has on children was a major concern for the majority of families. Two of the four most commonly felt effects of overcrowding specifically mentioned children (see Chart 2), and half (49 per cent) of the written comments on the effects of overcrowding concerned the harm caused to children (see Chart 3). The next chart shows the levels of agreement given by overcrowded families to the statements on education and child development.

**Chart 7: Impact on education and child development – ‘Overcrowding causes...’**



Base: 402 to 408 overcrowded families, weighted

Severely overcrowded families were even more likely to strongly agree that overcrowding meant there wasn't enough room for their children to play (91 per cent) and that it caused problems with reading and homework (79 per cent).

#### Young children

Many families with young children were concerned about the effect of overcrowding on the children:

*'I feel that both of my children are taking a long time to develop, such as learning to walk.'*

*'My two eldest children have been affected in that they have developed in a way that could have been quite different had we more space and room to grow.'*

#### Older children

Sharing bedrooms, and the disturbance to sleep that so often came with it, caused most of the disruption to older children's education:

*'My eldest daughter is disturbed by my young child during the night and this affects her education due to the lack of sleep.'*

*'My children do very badly in school because they cannot concentrate and they feel sleepy.'*

There were often particular problems when older children were forced to share bedrooms with younger children:

*'The elder child is not able to concentrate on his education as the one-year-old is all over the place and I can't concentrate either.'*

*'Our eldest son is 15 and doing his GCSEs. He has nowhere quiet and private to study and this is causing him a lot of stress.'*

Or it was just down to lack of space:

*'We feel our children's education and play is severely affected, as there is no space for homework or revision.'*

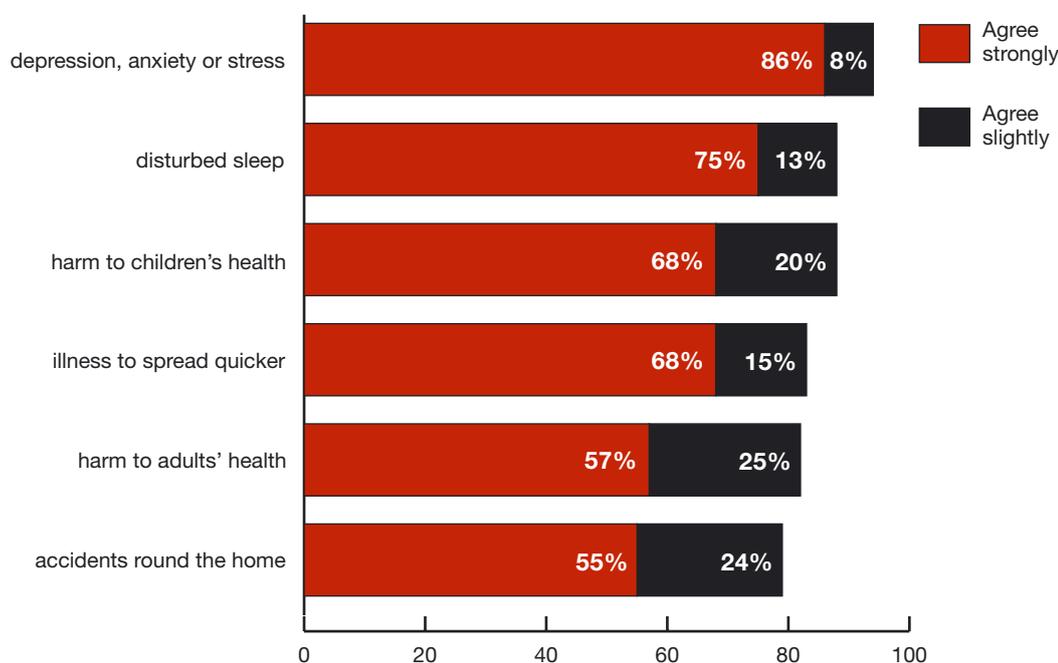
*'There is no space to learn and do homework.'*

## 4. Health

The effect of overcrowding on the health of family members was a major concern. Mental health was the chief concern for adults, but parents were also worried about the physical and mental impact on their children.

Chart 8 shows how families felt overcrowding was affecting their health:

**Chart 8: Impact on health – 'Overcrowding causes...'**



Base: 403 to 414 overcrowded families, weighted.

### Mental health

Severely overcrowded families were even more likely to say their living conditions caused depression, anxiety or stress, with 93 per cent stating this. Written comments included:

*'Overcrowding makes me depressed myself and my kids are not happy.'*

*'I am very stressed and depressed and had my baby three months early because of the stress.'*

*'Being overcrowded has made me a very unhappy person. I no longer have friends and I am very alone.'*

*'Being the mother of three children, I have experienced depression and stress living in a two-bedroom house.'*

### Health – in families' own words

Almost half (48 per cent) of written comments on the effects of overcrowding mentioned an impact on family health (see Chart 3). The health issues most commonly mentioned mirror the results in Chart 8.

- Mental health was mentioned more than physical health.
- Sleep deprivation was very common and a cause of other health problems.
- Concern over the health of children was often paramount, with asthma mentioned most often.

Written comments from families included:

*'Overcrowding causes damp in the house, unable to breathe properly, children suffering health problems like asthma.'*

*'The children's health is grossly affected with asthma, eczema etc.'*

*'My five-year-old girl suffers a severe asthma attack due to the crowding in this house, especially in their room. In every month she misses one, two or three weeks from school.'*

*'If one person is ill, everyone suffers.'*

Families with adults or children with existing, often serious, health problems faced particular difficulties when they were also overcrowded:

*'My eldest daughter is autistic and can be violent. She has to share a room with my son and he often gets hurt and is starting to lash out himself.'*

*'My son has a skin problem which can be nasty and he needs his own room.'*

### Accidents in the home

Severely overcrowded families (63 per cent) and those without access to a safe place to play (64 per cent) were most likely to say overcrowding caused accidents:

*'Being overcrowded causes accidents around the home, because two bedroom council flats are not suited for seven people to live in, so this definitely causes accidents.'*

*'Overcrowding causes accidents between the children, they always trip over objects because there is nowhere to put them.'*

*'No space to put your clothes and things and the rooms are too small so not able to have a wardrobe, meaning that the landing and passage way are blocked, causing accidents!'*

## Sandra's story

Sandra lives in a two-bedroom flat in east London with her husband Michael, her 40-year old Aunt Sheila, and her four children – Ben, 14; Justin, six; and twin boys aged one. The family has been overcrowded for almost three years and Sandra cannot see an end in sight. She says: 'There are no properties available round here'.

Sandra's Aunt shares bunk beds with Ben in one room. Everyone else sleeps in the other bedroom – Sandra, her husband, Justin, and one of the twins in a king-size bed, and the other twin in a cot.

Sandra doesn't recall the family taking an actual decision on the sleeping arrangements. She says they just arrived at the most practical solution, given that the living room is too small for anyone to sleep in and the older child has special educational needs.

Sandra is sure the health of her prematurely born twins is suffering because of the overcrowding. Her eldest son has asthma and she puts this down partly to the damp and overcrowding in their home.

Sandra is especially worried about Ben, who shares a bedroom with her Aunt – 'Ben has no privacy... He already says he wants to leave home and he is only 14.'

She thinks his education is being harmed by their living conditions. She says: 'Ben has nowhere to do his homework, the babies are crawling around everywhere, so he has no chance to sit quietly and read.' She is worried about the general development of all her children: 'They don't get any privacy or social life and lack confidence. This is starting to show up in problems with their behaviour.'

Sandra's own health is also suffering: 'I am very stressed and depressed because our home is so crowded. I've seen the doctor about it. I don't ever sleep well and am always falling over things because there is no space.' Her relationship with her husband is also under pressure and she says they don't get any space or time together to talk and that her husband goes out a lot to get away from their home.

'I have split from my partner because of the overcrowding. Too big a family, too small a house.'

## 5. Room size and storage space

### Room size

Families were not asked about the amount of floor space in their homes in the questionnaire, but it was the most common problem raised by respondents when they were asked to comment on room sharing.

Chart 5 shows that a third (32 per cent) of overcrowded families who provided written comments on room sharing mentioned the small size of their rooms or homes. A lack of space made arranging beds and furniture more difficult, and small rooms sometimes caused extra hazards in the home:

*'Our two bedrooms are so small, so we have to squeeze our two [sets of] bunk beds in and can't fit a wardrobe.'*

*'The size of the rooms is too small. The bed doesn't fit in one of the bedrooms.'*

*'The rooms in my home are what I call box rooms in that nothing else can be placed in there apart from a bed. The chest of drawers and wardrobe are placed in the corridor. Recently I had to make one room into a place for [a] chest of drawers and wardrobe for the girls, as so many accidents were happening in the corridor.'*

A smaller number of families faced particular difficulties because their home was too small. This was felt most strongly by those living in a bedsit or studio flat without enough partition walls. A couple with a child living in a bedsit would fall only one bedroom below the Bedroom Standard, the same as a family in a self-contained, one-bedroom flat with a separate bedroom.

*'Our bedsit is shared – there is one double bed for the parents and a single bed for the two boys. We have to use the same room for breakfast and lunch as there is no other space to go to.'*

*'I live in a bedsit with two young children. I don't get any sleep and my children have sleep problems. I never get any time to myself.'*

### Storage space

A large number of families mentioned problems with storage space – 24 per cent of overcrowded families who provided written comments referred to this (see Chart 3). This was a symptom of being overcrowded, and also a major cause of many of the more noticeable effects. In some cases the lack of storage space meant that possessions had to be foregone or put into storage:

*'We live out of boxes because there is no room for wardrobes. The place is constantly messy because there is not enough storage to keep things.'*

*'It just seems that no matter what I do, the house is always a mess and everyone's crying.'*

*'My eldest daughter has asthma, which isn't helped by the excess dust, which accumulates due to the lack of storage.'*

*'Having to put things in storage, leaving things outside the house, at risk of being damaged. We are unable to acquire decent and necessary things because there is no space. Untidy home environment.'*

*'Unfortunately the children have had to sacrifice toys just to make space.'*

## 6. Outside space

Almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of overcrowded families said that they didn't have access to a safe outside area where their children could play. Families describing themselves as being from ethnic groups other than white British were more likely to say that they did not have access to a safe place outside the home for their children to use (72 per cent).

As Table 2 shows, the lack of a safe play area outdoors significantly worsened some of the effects of overcrowding.

**Table 2**

Effect of overcrowding	No access to safe area (percentage strongly agreeing)	Access to safe area (percentage strongly agreeing)
Harms the health of children	75%	56%
Causes illnesses and infections to spread more quickly	71%	58%
Causes accidents	64%	43%

Bases: 386 overcrowded families, weighted

Many families wrote about how their environment made the effects of overcrowding worse, particularly when they were living in a high-rise home:

*'There isn't enough room for children's play activities, more so because it's a tower block so there's not even play area downstairs.'*

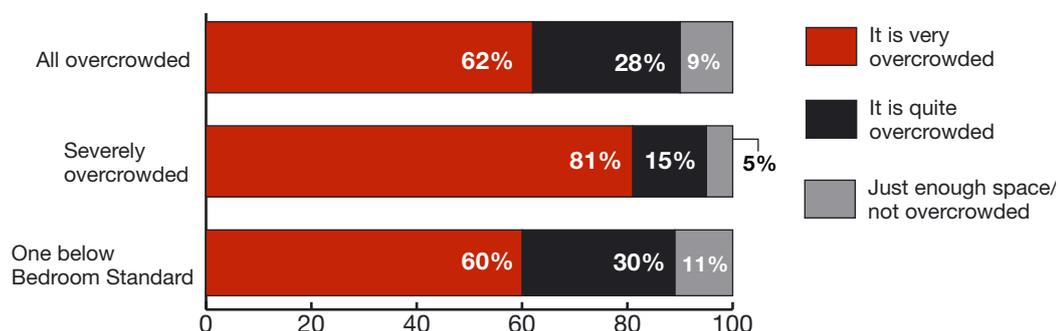
*'The area outside our flat is concrete and there are drunk and mentally ill people that come through this area often, so my children are not safe outside. The park across the road is infested with rats, too.'*

*'I have two sons aged 11 and 13 and a five-year-old daughter. I live in a tower block flat with two bedrooms. My daughter is disabled with severe heart problems. She has no bedroom and stairs to climb.'*

## 7. An urgent need for solutions

This section examines the views of overcrowded families on the severity and urgency of their housing situation. Chart 9 shows that close to two-thirds (62 per cent) of overcrowded families described their living conditions as 'very overcrowded'. It also shows that their perception of the severity of their circumstances correlates closely with their actual Bedroom Standard rating.

**Chart 9: 'How do you feel about the amount of space in your home?'**



Base: 427 overcrowded families, weighted

### Long-term overcrowding

More than half (52 per cent) of families said they had been living in overcrowded conditions for more than three years. And families from black and ethnic minority (BME) groups were more likely to say they had been overcrowded for more than three years, particularly those from black African or Caribbean groups (66 per cent).

Families living in London (54 per cent) were slightly more likely to say their situation was longer term than those living outside of London (47 per cent):

*'Been waiting nine years.'*

*'We've been on the waiting list for years.'*

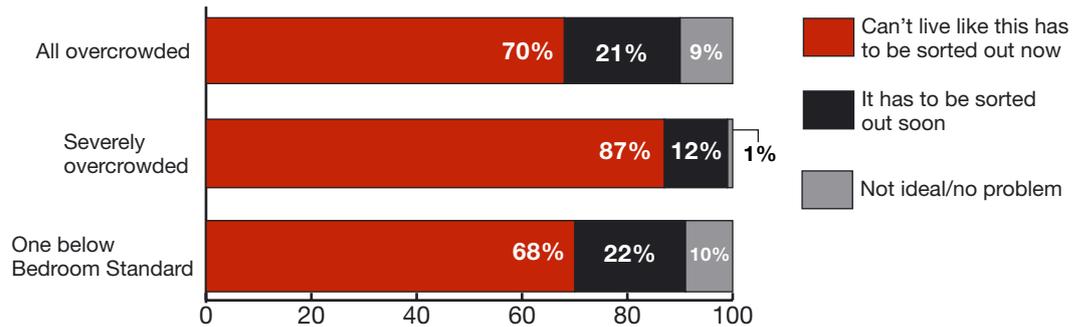
Families that were severely overcrowded were also more likely to say their situation was long-term, with 64 per cent stating this compared with 51 per cent of those one below the Bedroom Standard.

'I feel that both of my children are taking a long time to develop, such as learning to walk... myself, my children and husband are cooped up in one bedroom, which is not good for us physically or mentally.'

### Families taking action

Chart 10 shows that seven out of 10 overcrowded families picked the most urgent descriptor of their situation – 'We cannot live like this any longer, it has to be sorted out now.' Many had taken steps themselves to try to overcome the problem. The vast majority (93 per cent) said they were on local authority and/or registered social landlord waiting or transfer lists.

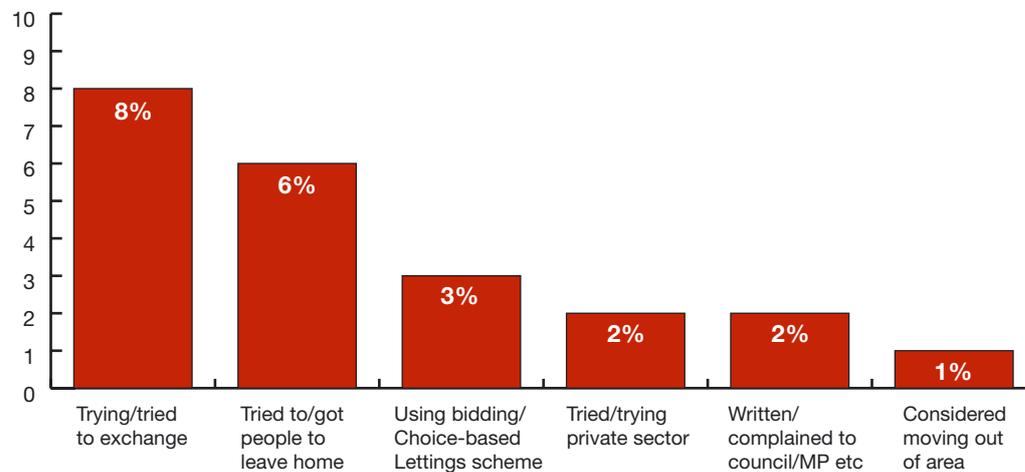
**Chart 10: 'How urgent do you feel your situation is?'**



Base: 424 overcrowded families, weighted

Chart 11 shows other action families had taken to try to alleviate their situation. The scores appear low because all but 'asked people to leave home' were unprompted responses, written in by the person completing the questionnaire.

**Chart 11: 'What other steps have you taken to ease the overcrowding in your home?'**



Base: 421 overcrowded families, weighted

Some families had gone to great lengths to try and resolve their problems:

*'Wrote to the Prime Minister, my MP and the head of lettings.'*

*'I've put up postcards in shops.'*

*'Placed notices up in my local area for an exchange.'*

*'Take more time out of the house in the summer.'*

*'Asking older people to swap (at the council's suggestion).'*

*'Disposed of furniture that I needed and put clothes and other personal belongings in storage. Gave bicycle away.'*

*'Asked my son to leave home.'*

Many families were resigned to the fact that there just aren't enough properties of the right size to go round in their local area:

*'The transfer waiting list is too long and there is not enough properties.'*

Some overcrowded families had tried to access private sector housing to escape their living conditions, but the costs and risks involved were too high:

*'Considered buying, but can't get a mortgage because of low income.'*

**'Being overcrowded has made me a very unhappy person. I no longer have friends and I am very alone.'**

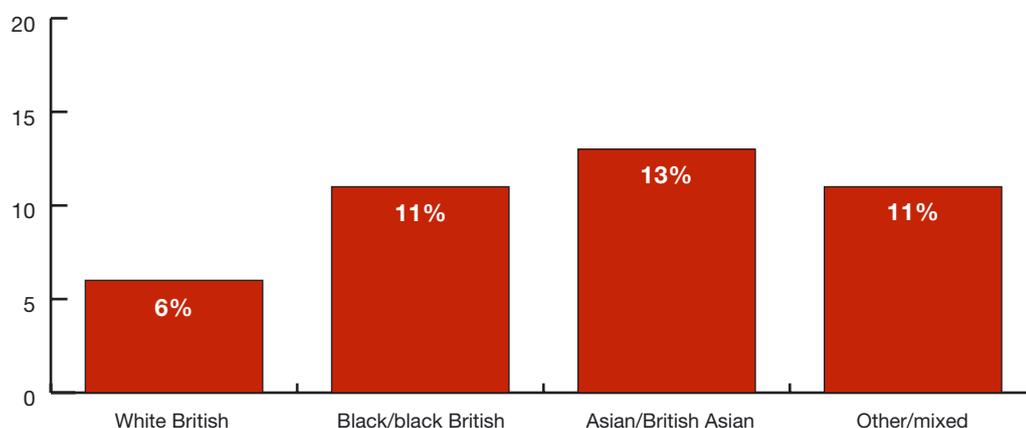
## 8. Black and minority ethnic families

Chart 12 shows that families from BME groups were about twice as likely as white British families to be severely overcrowded. Sample sizes used in the Government's housing surveys are too small to allow this kind of analysis, so this is the best available picture of the differing rates of severe overcrowding by ethnic group. Written comments from this grouping included:

*'There is no space for praying and we have to put our books in our bed.'*

*'The bedroom is too small – under religious grounds parents cannot share same bed in front of a child so mother and child share a bed, father sleeps separate.'*

**Chart 12: Severe overcrowding, by ethnic group**



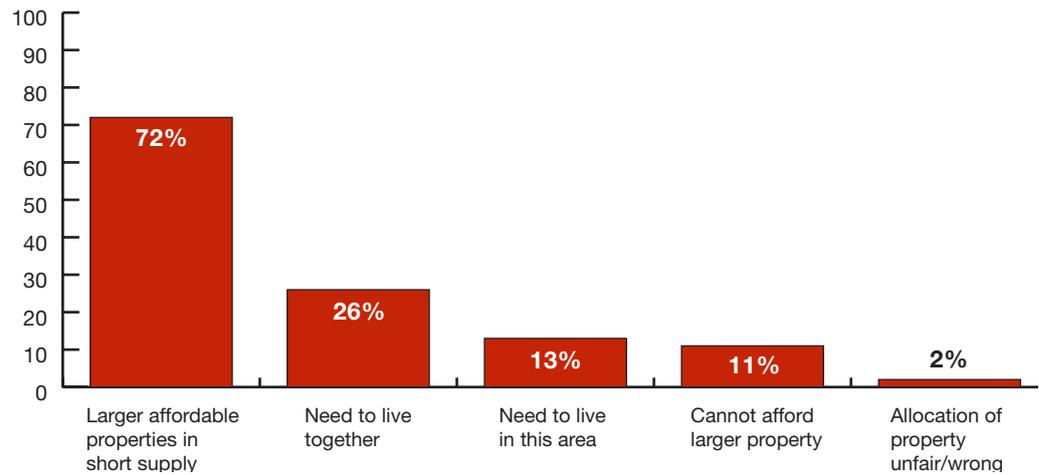
Base: 437 overcrowded families, weighted

Families from black and minority ethnic groups were more likely to strongly agree that overcrowding caused problems with family relationships, education and health. Almost eight out of 10 (78 per cent) of those from Asian or Asian British groups felt strongly that overcrowding was having a negative effect on their children's education, compared with 60 per cent of all overcrowded families.

## 9. Causes of overcrowding – as families see them

Families saw the lack of larger affordable properties as the main reason behind overcrowding. The full results are shown in Chart 13. The two per cent who said that property was unfairly allocated felt strongly about this, because it was written in by them rather than indicated in a tick-box option.

**Chart 13: 'What is the main reason for your household being overcrowded?'**



Base: 519 responses from 410 overcrowded families (multiple answers accepted)

Some written comments blamed overcrowding on the lack of social housing:

*'Our family has increased and no housing is available in or around our area.'*

*'There are very few large council properties with four bedrooms.'*

But families also recognised that there was a role for the regeneration of empty homes to play in solving overcrowding:

*'There are many derelict homes left to rot.'*

*'I've told [the] council the about empty houses in the area...'*

## 10. Good practice – how councils and RSLs are tackling overcrowding

The following examples of good practice were collated during research for this report. They come from councils and registered social landlords (RSLs) participating in the study.

### Targeting under-occupiers

Islington Council's scheme gives under-occupying tenants high priority on the housing register as well as an under occupancy grant (UOC) of £500 for each bedroom released. Since the launch of this scheme in January 2003, Islington has rehoused 387 under-occupying tenants, bringing larger units back into use for families living in overcrowded conditions.

Islington also launched a pilot mutual exchange project this year that enables under-occupying tenants to advertise their property in a choice-based lettings advertisement to overcrowded Islington tenants. If an under-occupying tenant does a mutual exchange, with the council's permission, with an overcrowded Islington tenant, they will also receive the UOC grant.

Tower Hamlets Council's lettings policy also prioritises under-occupying tenants for rehousing, as well as giving a cash allowance for moving to smaller-size accommodation. For each bedroom freed up, £500 is paid and an extra £1,000 is paid if the property is four bedrooms or larger. Using specific Homelessness Strategy funding from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) in 2004/05, Tower Hamlets, for a limited period, was able to offer enhanced grants of £3,000 per room to under-occupying tenants, freeing up 26 tenancies that were offered to homeless families.

Hackney Council provides a further incentive allowing under-occupying tenants a second bedroom. Many under-occupiers are elderly and often have family members to stay so some only wish to move if they can keep a second bedroom. Current policy allows tenants who have four-bedroom, or larger, homes but only need one bedroom to be offered a home with a second bedroom. The local authority hopes to extend this incentive to under-occupying tenants of three-bedroom homes in the future.

In Islington, overcrowded tenants are also being assisted via the council's New Generation Scheme, which aims to offer children aged 18 and over their own accommodation. The general criteria is that applicants must have resided with their family in an Islington council home as part of the original household for the past five years and meet the general criteria of the allocations policy. Applicants are also assessed according to their housing need so any degree of overcrowding in the home is taken into account.

Tower Hamlets Lettings Section also regularly sends information to under-occupying tenants to encourage them to bid for new build homes that become available. Last year it enabled 96 tenants to move to smaller-size accommodation and so brought larger accommodation back into the lettings pool.

### **Knock-throughs**

Tower Hamlets provides resources for an annual programme to knock through adjoining properties to reduce overcrowding. The local authority assesses dwellings that become empty that adjoin the homes of existing overcrowded families. If the adjoining property provides the right size to meet the family's needs, then the property is knocked through to create one larger property. A total of 23 knock-throughs have been completed over the past three years.

### **Cash incentive schemes**

The Tower Hamlets cash incentive scheme provides grants to tenants to purchase a property in the private sector. The council has been able to assist 189 tenants to secure homes in the private sector over the past three years. The majority of the 189 homes released under this scheme to the council have been family-sized homes with two or more bedrooms, as the scheme gives priority to those releasing larger accommodation.

‘Some children  
sleep on the floor  
in bags, they  
take it in turns.’



# Conclusion

This research has shown that overcrowded families face a variety of problems caused, and made worse, by their living conditions. Uncomfortable and constantly changing sleeping arrangements result in a serious lack of privacy – including teenagers of the opposite sex sharing bedrooms – and disturbance to sleep. This leads to increased conflict and often damages family relationships and mental health. Overcrowding also harms the physical health of adults and particularly children.

Parents were extremely worried about the effect overcrowding was having on the development, education, and behaviour of their children.

The stress for parents was increased in the many homes where they felt room space and storage was inadequate. In the worst cases, the stress and lack of privacy was so bad that partnerships and marriages broke down.

To prevent a dire situation worsening, and to limit the long-term damage being done to a whole generation of children through severe overcrowding, it is imperative that the Government takes action now.

Shelter recommends several steps are taken urgently, as detailed in the following Policy recommendations section.



## Policy recommendations

As this report shows, overcrowding has a devastating impact on family relationships, the development and education of children and the health and well being of both adults and children. It is not therefore just a housing issue, it has important implications for social policy more widely and, in particular, the child poverty agenda.

Shelter welcomes the inclusion of a new power to amend the outdated statutory definition of overcrowding included in the Housing Act 2004, which was granted Royal Assent in November of that year. However, despite the support shown by a number of the key agencies for tackling this issue, the Government's long-promised consultation on this has not been forthcoming. Urgent action is needed to put in place a long-term strategy to reduce overcrowding based on a measure that is acceptable by modern living standards, and the provision of the family-sized homes so desperately needed by overcrowded families.

**On this basis, Shelter makes the following recommendations:**

- More affordable, family-sized homes with adequately sized rooms, storage and outside space must be provided. We expect next year's Comprehensive Spending Review to address this.

- A modernised statutory overcrowding standard, which reflects today’s understanding of the need for space and privacy, must be introduced. This should be based on the bedroom standard. This national measure would establish a true reflection of the problem and assist in making more accurate assessments of housing need and, in particular, the numbers of family-sized homes required. We believe such a measure would not overburden local authorities, because it will not create new duties or make existing statutory duties significantly more onerous.
- A target to tackle overcrowding, to be worked towards over the next 10 years must be created.
- There must be a review of the funding and financial practices of both social housing funders and providers to ensure that funding and ‘value-for-money’ criteria do not stop the larger, three- and four-bedroom properties being built. For example, value-for-money criteria could be measured by ‘grant per bed space’ rather than ‘grant per unit’, to encourage the building of larger homes.
- The planning system should provide a better match between the size and type of affordable, particularly social rented, homes needed, and those that are actually delivered. Higher density schemes should include the provision of larger sized dwellings, based on need, and should be monitored on this basis, rather than solely by the number of units provided.
- The acute needs of black and minority ethnic communities must be incorporated into regional and local housing and homelessness strategies.
- An emergency programme of acquisitions and other initiatives is needed to increase the availability of social housing in areas where overcrowding is most acute.
- Additional fiscal and other measures to discourage private owners from leaving their properties empty for long periods of time are needed. These should work alongside the use of Empty Dwelling Management Orders, which provide local authorities with powers to bring private sector empty homes into use, to help meet housing need on a temporary basis.
- More generous and positive incentives are needed to persuade under-occupiers in the social sector to move, and free up larger homes. The financial benefits delivered through incentive schemes vary from one local authority to another and we recommend that these schemes are consistent between areas with similarly high levels of overcrowding.
- Such incentives must be sensitively administered, and be considerate to people’s individual and future needs. For example, retaining a spare bedroom to enable relatives and friends to stay, or ensuring that people are able to receive the same level or improved access to support services in their new home.
- More initiatives to persuade people to move from high-demand to lower-demand areas, such as the LAWN scheme<sup>5</sup>, and the Seaside and Country Homes scheme, are needed. Again, these schemes should be sensitive to individual needs.<sup>6</sup>

5. LAWN helps families move to a new home by promoting partnerships between councils and housing associations that have empty homes or available properties, and those that have a shortage of housing. MoveUK, a new online service for people to find new homes and job placements across the UK will eventually replace the services currently provided by the HOME and LAWN schemes.

6. This scheme allows pensioners to swap their council home for a smaller flat or bungalow outside London and has for many years been a useful way of freeing up family-sized accommodation. It remains popular with pensioners, and there is a long waiting list. One-bedroom flats and bungalows on the coast are much cheaper to build than three-bedroom homes in inner London. So an expansion of the scheme could have an important part to play in easing overcrowding in the short and medium term.

‘There is no space to wind down when we come home from work and bedtime is made more hectic.’





‘It is so appalling that the children have to dress and undress in the toilet, due to the lack of privacy caused by overcrowding.’

# Appendices

## Appendix i)

### Definitions of overcrowding

#### 1) The Bedroom Standard

This report uses the Bedroom Standard as its benchmark. This measure has been used in Government and social research since the 1960s and is widely accepted as the 'bare minimum' a family requires. Currently 473,000 households fall below this standard in England, 180,000 of whom live in social housing.

According to the standard, the following should have one bedroom:

- married or cohabiting couples
- single people more than 21 years old
- pairs of children under 10 years old, regardless of gender
- pairs of children aged 10 to 21 years old of the same gender
- any unpaired person aged 10 to 20 is then paired, if possible, with a child under 10 of the same sex (if that is not possible, he or she is counted as requiring a separate bedroom, as is any unpaired child).

Just over 40,000 households lack two or more bedrooms according to the Bedroom Standard. These families are described as being severely overcrowded in this report.

#### 2) Statutory definition

The current statutory definition of overcrowding dates back to 1935 and was a response to the need to improve slum living conditions in the pre-war period. This means that families must endure extreme levels of overcrowding before the statutory threshold is breached. For example:

- children under the age of 12 months are not counted
- living rooms and even large kitchens are considered acceptable places for children to sleep
- children between the ages of one and 10 are counted as half a person

About 20,000 households are overcrowded by this measure.

## Appendix ii)

### Summary of findings from *Crowded house*

The extent of the overcrowding problem is difficult to measure. The existing measure that the Government uses is out of date and must be changed. For the purposes of this report, figures and statistics will be based on the widely used Bedroom Standard, unless otherwise stated. This decides how rooms can be shared, taking into account the age, gender, and marital status of occupants. More detail on overcrowding measurements can be found in Appendix i).

#### **How big is the overcrowding problem and who does it affect?**

- There are more than half a million overcrowded households in England. Close to 50,000 of these are severely overcrowded, needing at least two more rooms to adequately accommodate all household members.
- Close to three-quarters of overcrowded households are families with children.
- Nearly one child in every 10 in England – 900,000 children – lives in overcrowded conditions. More than 100,000 are in severely overcrowded housing.
- Over a third (35 per cent) of overcrowded households live in London, with parts of inner and east London worst affected.
- In London's social housing, nearly one child in every three lives in an overcrowded home. It is little better in London's private-rented sector, where one child in every four lives in overcrowded conditions.
- Black and minority ethnic (BME) households are more than six times more likely to be overcrowded than white households. More than half of the overcrowded households in London have a household member from a BME group. Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Black African families are particularly likely to be overcrowded.
- While BME groups have a higher likelihood of living in a large household or in the London social sector, other factors such as social deprivation<sup>7</sup> and discrimination in housing<sup>8</sup> are likely to play a part in these high rates.
- Although the highest rates of overcrowding are found in London and in the social sector, there are more than 330,000 overcrowded households outside London. Also, more than 200,000 owner-occupied households are overcrowded.

#### **What impact does overcrowding have on families?**

Living in cramped conditions can have a detrimental affect on children's health, education, and general well-being. Overcrowding can increase the spread of illness and cause unsettled sleep patterns. It impacts on privacy for all family members, and can make it harder for children to find a quiet space to read or do their homework. It can also affect the quality of relationships between parents and children, and between siblings.

7. National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (Social Exclusion Unit 2000) and Social Exclusion Unit website: <http://www.neighbourhood.gov.uk>

8. Housing and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities: Review of the evidence base, ODPM, May 2003.

### **Is the overcrowding problem getting better?**

- No. The latest data from 2002/03 showed the same proportion (2.5 per cent) of overcrowded households in England as there was in 1996/97.
- Census figures show that the number of severely overcrowded households in London increased by 60 per cent between 1991 and 2001 on the measure of persons per room.
- While the rate of overcrowding among some groups, such as owner-occupiers and those living in the south of England, outside of London, has decreased in the last seven years, since 1997 there has been an increase in overcrowding in the social sector, the private-rented sector, and in London.
- Family-sized properties are in great demand in the social rented sector, with close to a quarter of the 1.25 million households on local authority housing registers in England specifically requiring properties with three or more bedrooms.

### **Why is this problem continuing?**

- Social housing, as a proportion of England's total housing stock, has contracted by about a third over the last 20 years. There were 300,000 fewer homes in the social sector in 2003 than in 1997.
- The number of newly constructed units of social housing is low and has decreased each year from 1995/96 to 2002/03. The number built in 2003/04 (13,800) was only just over half the number built seven years previously in 1996/97 (25,200).
- Properties with four or more bedrooms constituted only one in 14 of the newly constructed social homes completed in the last seven years.
- Some 373,000 homes have been lost from the social sector via the Right to Buy initiative since 1997/98. More than 71,000 of these were in London.

### **Is the redistribution of under-occupied or empty homes the answer?**

- Redistributing under-occupied housing will not solve overcrowding. In the London social sector, where overcrowding is most acute, overcrowded households outnumber under-occupied households by almost two to one. However, there is some scope to provide incentives for households to move to smaller properties or lower-demand areas.
- It is not practically or politically possible to propose large-scale redistribution of households, not least because close to 90 per cent of under-occupied homes are privately owned.
- Government initiatives to bring empty homes into use are widely welcomed. However, as the majority are privately owned and rates of disrepair and neglect are high, there is limited scope for significantly reducing overcrowding.

## Appendix iii)

### Profile of Shelter survey respondents compared with all overcrowded families in social housing

	Shelter sample	All overcrowded in social housing
Severely overcrowded	32%	9%
One below Bedroom Standard	58%	91%
At or above Bedroom Standard*	10%	N/A
London	75%	37%
Rest of England	25%	63%
White British	25%	66%
Other ethnic group	75%	34%
One or two people in household	8%	14%
Three people	15%	17%
Four people	18%	21%
Five or more people	57%	51%

Source: Survey of English Housing.

\*The responses from this group were removed from analysis.

## Appendix iv)

### Weighting

Comparison between Shelter sample and all overcrowded in social housing before weighting. All overcrowded in social housing figures are estimated using data from the ODPM's Survey of English Housing.

	White British		Other ethnic groups	
	Shelter sample (unweighted)	All Social housing overcrowded	Shelter sample (unweighted)	All Social housing overcrowded
One below Bedroom Standard	20%	62%	46%	29%
Severely overcrowded	4%	4%	30%	5%

### Weighting diagnostic

This shows that the weighting applied is within statistical guidelines.

Unweighted total	505
Weighted total	437
Min weight	0.1646
Max weight	2.9057
Ratio max to min (ideally <25)	17.6585
Effective weighted sample size	215

## Appendix v)

### Statistical reliability – margin of error

This table shows that results based on all, or close to all of the sample in the Shelter survey are subject to a margin of error of less than 5%.

Universe size (all overcrowded households in social housing)	180,000
Shelter sample size	437
Margin of error on 50% result at 95% confidence level	+ / - 4.68%

## Appendix vi)

### Results table

Question / response	All Overcrowded	Severely overcrowded	One below Bedroom Standard
Describe themselves as 'very overcrowded'	62%	81%	60%
Overcrowding harms children health – strongly agree	69%	75%	68%
Being overcrowded harms the health of adults in our home – strongly agree	57%	65%	57%
Being overcrowded is a cause of depression, anxiety or stress for people in our home – strongly agree	86%	93%	86%
Illnesses and infections spread quicker in our house, because of overcrowding – strongly agree	68%	75%	67%
Our sleep is often disturbed because of overcrowding	75%	81%	74%
Being overcrowded causes accidents around the home	55%	63%	54%
Being overcrowded causes the children to argue and fight	81%	87%	80%
Being overcrowded causes arguments between the adult members of the household	68%	73%	67%
Being overcrowded means there is little privacy in our house	92%	92%	92%
Being overcrowded makes daily routines, such as preparing meals and washing, more difficult	72%	83%	70%
Because of overcrowding in our home it is not possible for us or the children to have friends over	72%	79%	72%
Being overcrowded harms the education of our children	60%	72%	59%
Being overcrowded makes reading and doing homework more difficult for the children	70%	79%	69%
Being overcrowded means that there is not enough room for the children to play	84%	91%	84%
Yes, teenagers of opposite sex share bedroom	10%	19%	9%
Yes, children or teenagers share with parents	74%	78%	73%
Yes, children or teenagers use non-bedroom	27%	52%	24%
No access to a safe outside area to play	63%	76%	62%

## Questionnaire

# Shelter

## Survey on the effects of living in overcrowded housing

Please complete this questionnaire and return it in the reply paid envelope by 24th June 2005. If you complete your name and address at the end of the questionnaire, we will send you a £5 gift voucher. Your individual answers will be treated in strictest confidence and will only be used for the purposes of this survey.

### A: Overcrowding in your home

**Q1: Which of the following best describes how you feel about the amount of space in your home?**

It is **very**  
overcrowded

It is **quite**  
overcrowded

There is just about  
enough space

It is **not**  
overcrowded

If 'not overcrowded' please go to Q11

**Q2: For how long have you felt like this?**

3 months or less

3 months to a year

One to three years

More than three years

**Q3: Does the level of overcrowding in your home change over time, depending on who is living there?**

Yes  No

**Q4: Which one of the following four options best describes how you feel about being overcrowded? (Please tick one only)**

We can't carry on living like this,  
it has to be sorted out now

We can carry on living like this for a little longer,  
but it has to be sorted out soon

We can carry on living like this, but it isn't ideal

We can carry on living like this, it's no problem

**Q5: Have you taken any of the following steps to ease the overcrowding in your home? (Please tick all that apply)**

We are council or housing association tenants and  
are on the transfer list for a larger home

We are on the local authority waiting list  
for a larger home

Asked people to leave home

Other steps taken to ease overcrowding   
(Please write in): \_\_\_\_\_

**Q6a: What is the main reason you think you live in an overcrowded home? (tick one box only)**

**Q6b: Any other reasons you think you live in an overcrowded home? (tick all that apply)**

a) Main reason

b) Other reason(s)

Larger council and housing association properties are in short supply here

We need to live in this area

We cannot afford a larger property

We need to live together

Other reason

(Please write in): \_\_\_\_\_

## B: Overcrowding and health

**Q7: Please tell us how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements, by placing a tick in the appropriate box. (If you don't have children, start at b)**

	Agree strongly	Agree slightly	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree slightly	Disagree strongly
a) Being overcrowded harms the health of the children in our home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) Being overcrowded harms the health of adults in our home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) Being overcrowded is a cause of depression, anxiety or stress for people in our home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) Illnesses and infections spread quicker in our house, because of overcrowding	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e) Our sleep is often disturbed because of overcrowding	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f) Being overcrowded causes accidents around the home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## C: Overcrowding and family relationships

**Q8: Please tell us how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements by placing a tick in the appropriate box. (If you don't have children, start at b)**

	Agree strongly	Agree slightly	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree slightly	Disagree strongly
a) Being overcrowded causes the children to argue and fight	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) Being overcrowded causes arguments between the adult members of the household	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) Being overcrowded means there is little privacy in our house	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) Being overcrowded makes daily routines, such as preparing meals and washing, more difficult	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e) Because of overcrowding in our home it is not possible for us or the children to have friends over	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## D: Overcrowding and education

**Q9: Please tell us how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements by placing a tick in the appropriate box (if there are no children in your home, please go to Q10)**

	Agree strongly	Agree slightly	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree slightly	Disagree strongly
a) Being overcrowded harms the education of our children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) Being overcrowded makes reading and doing homework more difficult for the children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) Being overcrowded means that there is not enough room for the children to play	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## E: Other problems caused by overcrowding

Q10: Please tell us about any other problems you or your family have experienced because of the overcrowding in your home, or expand on the answers you gave in sections B, C and D, above.

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## F: You, your family, and your home

Q11: Please tell us how many of the following there are living in your home, including yourself:

How many adult couples are there? (write in):

And how many single adults over 21 years old:

Male children under 10 years old:

Female children under 10 years old:

Male children / young people 10 to 21 years old:

Female children /young people 10 to 21 years old:

Q12: How many school-age (5-16) children live in your household? (write in)

Q13: How many adults living in your household are in full or part-time work, or training? (write in)

Q14: How many bedrooms are there in your home? (write in)

Q15: Do any of the following happen in your household? (please tick yes or no for each one):

Teenagers of opposite sex share a bedroom Yes  No

A teenager shares a bedroom with an adult of the opposite sex Yes  No

Children or teenagers share a bedroom with their parent(s) Yes  No

Children or teenagers sleep in a room that is not meant to be used as a bedroom Yes  No

Please use this space to tell us more about the way rooms are shared in your home, or to expand on your answers above:

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*Go to Q17 if there are no children in your home*

Q16: Do you have access to a safe outside area for your children to play? Yes  No

Q17: Do you share any rooms or facilities with people outside of your household?

Yes, share a kitchen  Yes, share a bathroom or toilet  Yes, share other room  No

**Q18: Which of the following best describes your ethnic group? (please tick one only)**

- |  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| White British <input type="checkbox"/> | Black or Black British – African <input type="checkbox"/>   | Asian or British Asian – Pakistani <input type="checkbox"/>   |
| White Irish <input type="checkbox"/>   | Black or Black British – Caribbean <input type="checkbox"/> | Asian or British Asian – Bangladeshi <input type="checkbox"/> |
| White other <input type="checkbox"/>   | Asian or British Asian – Indian <input type="checkbox"/>    | Asian or British Asian – other <input type="checkbox"/>       |
| Mixed <input type="checkbox"/>         | Other – please write in <input type="checkbox"/>            | _____   |

**Q19: Which one of the following best describes your home?**

- |   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| Rented from the council <input type="checkbox"/>  | Rented from a Housing Association <input type="checkbox"/> | Temporary accommodation <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Rented, private landlord <input type="checkbox"/> | Owned/ mortgage <input type="checkbox"/>                   | Other <input type="checkbox"/> (please write in) |
| _____   |  |  |

**Q20: Do any of the people in your home live there because their immigration status means there is nowhere else for them to go?**

- |  |  |                                     |
|--|--|-------------------------------------|
| Yes, one person <input type="checkbox"/> | Yes, more than one person <input type="checkbox"/> | No, no-one <input type="checkbox"/> |
|--|--|-------------------------------------|

**Q21: Finally, thinking about everyone in your home, please estimate how often each of the following things have happened in the last month.**

- |   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| a) Number of days missed from work or training                    | _____ days         |
| b) Number of days children missed from school                     | _____ days         |
| c) Number of visits to a doctor/GP                                | _____ visits       |
| d) Number of visits to an Accident & Emergency unit at a hospital | _____ visits       |
| e) Number of hospital appointments                                | _____ appointments |

## G: Thank You

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. This section is optional, but you must complete your name and address if you wish to receive a **£5 gift voucher**. Your personal details will not be used for any purpose outside of this survey, nor will they be given to any third party without your prior consent. We may contact you to clarify the answers you have given on this questionnaire. When you have finished, please return the questionnaire in the **enclosed freepost envelope by June 24<sup>th</sup> 2005**. One voucher per household.

Your name:	
Your address:	Postcode:
Your telephone number (s):	
<b>We would like to telephone some of the people who have completed this questionnaire, to find out more about the effects of overcrowding. Please tick the box below for this:</b>	
I give my permission to be contacted by Shelter to talk more about overcrowding: <input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Please tick the box below if you would like to receive regular campaign updates on Shelter's million children campaign and help end homelessness for the next generation of children.</b>	
Yes, I would like to join Shelter's million children campaign and to receive regular updates. This includes by email, if I have provided an email address. <input type="checkbox"/>	
My email address:	

# Acknowledgements

We would particularly like to thank the 505 overcrowded families who took part in the research.

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Chris Collins and all at Southwark council

Ariella Jackman who assisted with the research, Nick Godden (Tower Hamlets Children's Trust), James Gleeson (ALG)



‘... it’s a tower block  
so there’s not  
even [a] play area  
downstairs.’



‘My children have one square metre in which to eat, get changed.’



‘Unfortunately  
the children  
have had  
to sacrifice  
toys just to  
make space.’



## Bad housing wrecks lives

Registered charity number 263710.  
SEPPOL806

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.

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