

Future of families conference

Overcrowding and children's wellbeing

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Dame Rachel de Souza
Children's Commissioner for England

Over 3 years into her 6 year term
which began March 2021

Former teacher, headteacher
and founder and CEx of a family
of schools

Role of the Children's Commissioner

- established by Children Act 2004, strengthened by Children and Families Act 2014
- gave responsibility for promoting awareness of children's views and interests
- remit, data powers, and independence enhanced 2014.
- this gave the Commissioner special responsibility for the rights of children who are in or leaving care, living away from home or receiving social care services.
- geographical remit: we speak for wider groups of children on non-devolved issues including immigration (UK) and youth justice (England and Wales).

Children and housing inequality

Children experience poorer quality housing than adults

We examined overcrowding because it is the best available child measure of poor quality housing available in Understanding Society

Understanding Society research springboard project team

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Overcrowding

- Includes situations where different-sex children aged 10 or over share a bedroom, parents sharing a bedroom with a child, more than two children in a bedroom, and using rooms such as kitchens and living rooms as bedrooms.
- We used the most common measure, the UK government's 'bedroom standard' measure, which is also used by the Office for National Statistics in census analysis.
- Understanding Society covers households so the analysis excludes i.e. hostels and traveller sites.
- Analysis covers the UK, 2009 to 2022 (waves 1 to 13).

Overcrowding findings

- A relatively flat trend over time in children living in overcrowded households.
- Rates were consistently and persistently much higher in London. West Mids second worst.
- Strong association with ethnicity - children from a black ethnic background most likely to be experiencing overcrowding (35%) white least likely (8%).
- Overcrowding risk is low for households of up to 4 people, above 50% for households containing 7 or more people.

Overcrowding findings

- Household composition – overcrowding was higher in households with children containing (in order) 3+ adults, lone parent households, 3+ children, 1-2 children
- Close association with household income quintile (in the expected direction)
- And tenure (social housing most overcrowded, owner occupied least, private rented in between).

Findings on overcrowding and child mental well-being

- Children living in overcrowded homes were more likely to have parents who reported that they were worried about their child's health at age 3, 5 or 8.
- Overcrowding was statistically significantly associated with poor child mental well-being (cause for concern Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire scores of 10- to 15-year-olds) after controlling for household structure, ethnicity, tenure, equivalised household income, and the age and sex of children.

Implications of overcrowding findings

- Little policy attention has been dedicated to overcrowding per se.
- Bedroom tax/removal of the spare room subsidy aims to promote the reallocation of the social housing stock to better match households' size and needs. Took effect in April 2013 in Great Britain, reducing the benefit incomes of households deemed to have one or more spare bedrooms.
- Findings imply the need for a targeted policy focus on overcrowding, given the range of policy aims and instruments which may have affected the trends observed, and lack of progress in reducing the problem.



Thank you

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