

The Colin Wiles blog

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The great housing divide

I suspect that when this pandemic is finally put to bed (if it ever is) then bad housing will be fully exposed as one of the key villains in the spread of the virus and the wider collateral damage caused by lockdowns.

I have written a few blogs and [articles](#) about the deepening inequalities caused by Covid-19, but the latest English Housing Survey's [household resilience study](#) provides further exposure of the harm caused by poor housing and the growing divide between different tenures.

One of the most shocking findings of the study is that the percentage of private renters living in overcrowded properties has doubled over the course of the last year, from 7% to 15%. In December 2020, one in seven private renters were overcrowded compared to only one in 50 homeowners. Almost a fifth (17%) of private rented households had increased in size by at least one person since 2019, compared to only 9% of owner-occupiers and 10% of social renters. This was the result of mass population movements as people switched locations to cope with lockdown. (A home is defined as overcrowded if there are not enough bedrooms to avoid undesirable sharing, given the ages and relationships of those using them.)

Many scientists believe that transmission of the virus within households is a primary spreader of Covid-19, and this is exacerbated within overcrowded and multi-generational households. The [Health Foundation](#) found that, even before the pandemic, people living in poor housing experienced worse health outcomes, with the triangle of quality, affordability and security linking together to determine physical and mental wellbeing.

Obviously, families living in overcrowded rental homes and young people in shared housing are impacted more by the triple whammy of these three factors. But the pandemic has made them even more significant in causing bad health outcomes for those affected. Last year the Health Foundation also [pointed](#) to worsening housing conditions – overcrowding and poor quality housing – being associated with higher risks of mortality from Covid-19. They pointed out that mortality rates were higher in deprived areas and among groups with lower incomes.

Overall, the English Housing survey shows that the pandemic caused overcrowding to increase across all tenures from 829,000 to 1.3 million, but private renters were the most affected.

BAME communities were particularly badly affected by overcrowding, with almost a quarter (23%) of ethnic minority households being overcrowded, compared with 3% of white

households. A whopping 35% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi households were overcrowded. Death rates among some of these groups have been much higher than for white populations (as much as double in some cases) and you have to recognise that overcrowded housing conditions must be playing a significant part in this. Some ethnic groups have also had their livelihoods disrupted to a much greater extent, being much more likely than the population as a whole to work in locked-down sectors or to be self-employed, and to suffer from job insecurity and loss of income.

There is also an intergenerational aspect to this since younger households are more likely to be overcrowded than older households.

On top of this, the survey reveals big differences between tenures in terms of anxiety, unhappiness and loneliness. 14% of private renters and 16% of social renters reported feeling lonely often or always, compared to only 5% of owners. During the pandemic overall satisfaction with life declined across all tenures, but at the end of 2020 owner occupiers had higher happiness scores than renters (a score of 7.2 for outright owners, compared to 6.3 and 6.4 for private and social renters respectively). Similar differences exist for anxiety and scores for the question '*is life worth living?*' with renters faring worse in all cases. But these differences also existed between people on different incomes, with people in the lower income quartiles reporting higher levels of anxiety and unhappiness.

To sum up, those living in the worst, overcrowded properties – many of them in the private sector – and often experiencing job uncertainty and low incomes have suffered the most during this pandemic, not just from mortality but also from the anxiety and stress a caused by living in overcrowded conditions without access to outdoor or indoor space.

But the big picture is that our distorted housing system has forced millions of unwilling households into the private rented sector where overcrowded conditions, high rents and insecurity are causing, at the very least, higher levels of unhappiness, and, at the very worst, death.

I have said it before but I do hope that the post-pandemic public inquiry into the handling of the crisis will shine a massive spotlight on the multiple harms caused by poor housing. We really need a Royal Commission, along the lines of the big nineteenth century commissions that exposed the death and disease caused by unsanitary and overcrowded housing. As ever, one of the key answers must lie in the need to invest in genuinely affordable homes, so that, in the future, everyone has the space they need to work and self-isolate in their home and stay safe. Surely that should be recognised as a basic human right?

About the author

Colin Wiles has worked in affordable housing for almost forty years, for local authorities and housing associations. For the past eight years he has worked as a consultant, working on a range of projects for dozens of clients across the sector. He specialises in governance, service reviews, research and policy work. Colin has written extensively on housing and planning issues for Inside Housing, 24 Housing and The Guardian. He is a co-founder of SHOUT, the Campaign for Social Housing.

