

Better
Housing
Briefing

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**Black and
minority ethnic
communities'
experience of
overcrowding**

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Key messages

- 1 The definitions used for 'overcrowding' are out of date
- 2 Overcrowding is a growing problem, especially in the private rented sector
- 3 There are insufficient larger homes to address existing needs
- 4 Overcrowding has negative impacts in terms of health, education and family relationships
- 5 Black and minority ethnic households are more likely than white households to be living in overcrowded conditions – this is particularly the case for Bangladeshi and Black African households
- 6 A number of measures have been identified that could help to address overcrowding.

Introduction

The issue of overcrowding, how it can be defined and what steps can be taken to resolve it, has been recognised as a major, and increasing, problem. The National Housing Federation has warned that three million people will be living in overcrowded homes within three years. It expects a 20 per cent rise in the number of families living in overcrowded homes by 2013 (Lloyd, 2010). This briefing paper examines this issue with a particular focus on the experience of black and minority ethnic communities.

1 What is meant by 'overcrowding'?

Despite pressure for the term 'overcrowding' to be redefined, the legal definition is very strict and has not been updated since 1935. If accommodation is too small for a household, under the law that household may be considered to be living in overcrowded conditions. In other words, a household may be legally overcrowded if there are insufficient rooms or there is too little space for the number of people who live there. Two 'standards' apply: the 'room' standard and the 'space' standard. The [1985 Housing Act](#) (Part X, Section 325) states that:

The room standard is contravened when the number of persons sleeping in a dwelling and the number of rooms available as sleeping accommodation is such that two persons of opposite sexes who are not living together as husband and wife must sleep in the same room [with the caveat that 'children under the age of ten shall be left out of account'].

(HM Government, 1985)

According to the 1985 Act (Part X, Section 326), 'a room is available as sleeping accommodation if it is of a type normally used in the locality either as a living room or as a bedroom'. The number of people of the same sex (unless they are a same-sex couple) who can sleep in one room is restricted by the size of the room (the space standard). As a general rule, housing with the following number of rooms for sleeping can accommodate the following number of people:

- 1 room = 2 people;
- 2 rooms = 3 people;
- 3 rooms = 5 people;
- 4 rooms = 7.5 people;
- 5 or more rooms = 2 people per room.

The floor area of a room must also be taken into account in determining how many people can sleep in that room. This is specified in the Act (Part X, Section 326, Table II) as:

- floor area: 110 square feet (approximately 10.2 square metres) = 2 people;
- floor area: 90–109 square feet (approximately 8.4–10.2 square metres) = 1.5 people;
- floor area: 70–89 square feet (approximately 6.5–8.4 square metres) = 1 person;
- floor area: 50–69 square feet (approximately 4.6–6.5 square metres) = 0.5 people.

Under the housing legislation, the permitted number of persons in relation to a dwelling is *whichever is the less of*:

- the number specified above in relation to the number of rooms in the dwelling available as sleeping accommodation;
- the aggregate for all such rooms in the dwelling of the numbers of people specified in the floor area table in relation to the floor area specified for each room.

To further complicate matters with regard to the above calculations:

- Children under one year old are ignored.
- Children under ten years old and over one count as half a person.
- Rooms under 50 square feet are ignored.

The definition of what constitutes 'overcrowding' is not, therefore, as straightforward as it may initially appear.

Why is overcrowding increasing?

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The strict definitions referred to in the previous section need to be set against the context of a mismatch between a growing population, changing household structures, the type and supply of housing available and consequent growing levels of overcrowding. In London, for example, the supply of new one- and two-bedroom flats has increased at the expense of family housing – the supply of three- and four-bedroom homes in 2008–09 was (at 13 per cent) less than half the level it had been ten years previously (GLA, 2009, p. 8). The new supply of larger homes is insufficient to address the level of overcrowding.

Alongside this, the conversion of larger family accommodation into smaller flats or bedsits, while helping to meet the growth in number of households due to a rise in the number of one-person households, has had the effect of decreasing the number of adequately sized properties for larger households.

In brief, the increase in overcrowding can be attributed to a number of factors, including:

- a lack of new larger (three- to five-bedroom) social rented housing;
- loss of larger social rented properties through 'right to buy' and other loss of larger properties through conversion;
- government limits on use of temporary bed and breakfast accommodation;
- hidden homelessness (people sleeping in the homes of friends or relatives). The homelessness charity Shelter suggests that this might be more likely among certain black and minority ethnic groups, especially Asian households, and may arise from a need to accommodate family and community members coming from abroad or because strong cultural ties prevent the hosts from asking their guests to leave. The presence of concealed nuclear families within extended families can contribute to overcrowding (Shelter, 2004, p. 4).

Overcrowding is clearly a growing problem. However, it should be noted that the impact of overcrowding is not uniform across tenure types. Although it is relatively static in the private (owner-occupied) sector, it is rising in the social rented sector and rising dramatically in the private rented sector (Cookson and Sillet, 2009, p. 3).

3 The national picture

According to the National Housing Federation: 'Around 565,000 households in England were classed as overcrowded in 2008 and an estimated 2.6m people are expected to be living in overcrowded conditions by 2011' (NHF, 2009, p. 3). Figures published by the Department for Communities and Local Government in February 2010 (Twinch, 2010) showed that there were 654 000 overcrowded households in England in 2008–09, which was described by Shelter as the highest level for over fourteen years (Shelter, cited by Twinch, 2010).

Overcrowding varies widely by region, tenure type, household and (as detailed below) ethnicity. The rate of overcrowding is highest in London (6.8 per cent in 2008: CLG, 2009). In London, turnover in social housing has slowed, while housing waiting lists have nearly doubled. Overcrowding rose in London between 1991 and 2001 after previously having fallen for 30 years; in 2001, one in twenty households was overcrowded, compared to one in twenty-five in 1991 (GLA, 2009, p. 23). This increase was greatest in social housing. In 2008, 32 000 households in London were severely overcrowded (i.e. had two or more bedrooms fewer than they needed) (GLA, 2009, p. 25).

4 Impacts of overcrowding

The detrimental effects of living in overcrowded conditions have been well documented. For example, Campbell Robb, Chief Executive of Shelter, has stated that 'Overcrowding is a huge blight on children's lives, with devastating consequences for their health, education and future chances' (cited in Twinch, 2010). It is not, however, just the children who suffer. Research into the needs of Birmingham's Somali community (Jones, 2007, p. 30) identified negative impacts on, for instance:

- the physical, mental and emotional well-being of all family members;
- future prospects: for example, for young people.

With regard to the former, a review produced for the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in 2004 noted that:

The evidence points towards a small relationship between overcrowding and aspects of the health of both children and adults. Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that overcrowding in childhood affects aspects of adult health. ... There is mixed evidence of a relationship between overcrowding and mental health.
(ODPM, 2004, p. 8)

Specific health issues that have been identified as being related to overcrowding include:

- respiratory conditions;
- gastric conditions;
- meningitis;
- tuberculosis (TB): research in London noted that an increase in overcrowding mirrored a rise in TB infections – London boroughs with above-average overcrowding also had an above-average TB infection rate (London Housing, 2004, p. 6).

With regard to education, the review noted that:

Children's education may be affected by overcrowding directly, through a lack of space for homework, as well as indirectly because of school absences caused by illness, which may be related to overcrowding.
(ODPM, 2004, p. 6)

Shelter has highlighted the negative impacts that overcrowding can have, not only in terms of health and children's education, but also in terms of family relationships, particularly with regard to lack of privacy and children arguing or fighting (Shelter, 2005). Overcrowding can exacerbate stress and depression and can also, in some cases, lead to the breakdown of relationships (CLG, 2007).

Overcrowding and black and minority ethnic households

Data from the 2001 Census shows that black and minority ethnic households are more likely than white households to be living in overcrowded conditions (see Figure 1). The Census (ONS, 2006) found that:

- Overcrowding is greatest among Bangladeshi and Black African households, with more than two-fifths of Bangladeshi and Black African households (44 and 42 per cent respectively) being overcrowded in 2001 (seven times the rate of White British households at 6 per cent).
- Bangladeshi households were the largest, containing an average of 4.5 people. Overcrowding may be associated with larger households, but household size alone does not explain the variation in overcrowding by ethnic group.
- Pakistani households were larger than Black African households, but had lower rates of overcrowding.
- Black African households were more likely than any other ethnic group to live in social rented accommodation in 2001 (50 per cent). Overcrowding may also be related to factors such as the availability of adequate housing in different parts of the country.

Similarly, a paper produced by the Housing Corporation and the Chartered Institute of Housing stated that:

BME households tend to live in more overcrowded conditions, and overcrowding is most severe among Pakistani, Bangladeshi and black African households. These three groups also have the highest numbers of children. Overcrowding may also be related to multi-generational living arrangements, the shortage of large properties in the social sector, clustering in areas where overcrowding is particularly severe (such as London), and low incomes. Bangladeshi households are more affected than any other ethnic group, with nearly one quarter living in overcrowded conditions.
(HC/CIH, 2008, p. 8)

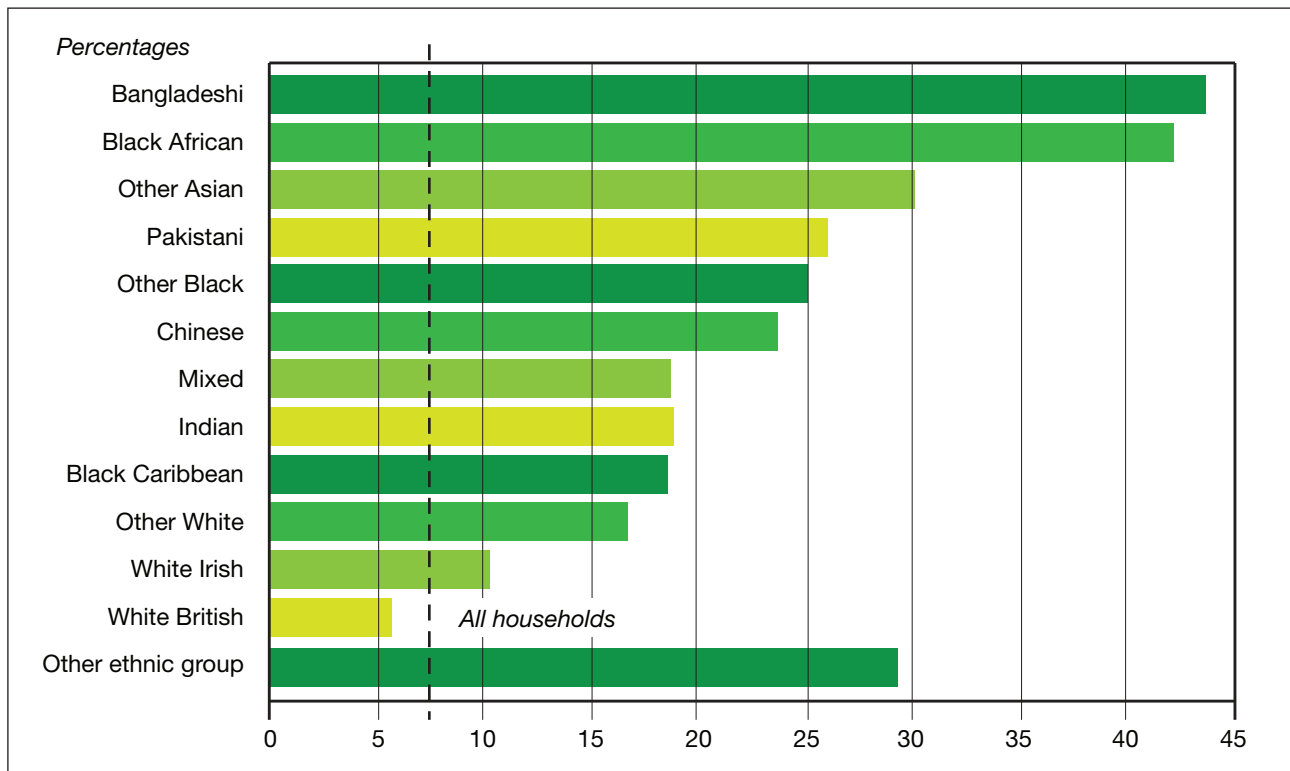


Figure 1 Overcrowded households: by ethnic group, April 2001, Great Britain (Source: Office for National Statistics)

Both Shelter and the Department for Communities and Local Government also endorse the figures from the Census. Their findings include that Bangladeshi households in London are five times more likely to be living in overcrowded conditions than White British households ([London Housing, 2004](#), p. 3), with over half of Bangladeshi children nationally living in officially overcrowded conditions ([Shelter, 2004](#), p. 4). Nationally, black and minority ethnic households are on average seven times more likely than white households to live in overcrowded conditions ([Shelter, 2004](#), p. 4). The rate of overcrowding for black and minority ethnic groups is higher than for white households across all types of tenure ([CLG, 2009](#), p. 37).

Overcrowded families from black and minority ethnic groups are twice as likely as White British families to be severely overcrowded. They are also more likely to feel that overcrowding has had a negative effect on them ([Shelter, 2005](#), p. 9). Research into the needs of the Somali community in Birmingham ([Jones, 2007](#)) highlighted a number of the factors that can lead to a disproportionate incidence of overcrowding within a specific community, including:

- family size – eight-person households were common;
- a limited range of housing options;
- concentration in the social housing sector or in poorer private rented properties and inability to access other sectors;
- desire for specific geographical locations (where affordable accommodation is in limited supply);
- decline in the availability of larger stock in the social housing sector (due to the 'right to buy' and a slowing down in turnover of larger dwellings);
- local authority approaches to homelessness.

As a result of these factors, the research found that: '*Access to housing of a sufficient size is problematic ... The primary effect of this is that many Somalis are living in severely overcrowded conditions*' ([Jones, 2007](#), p. 15).

Data from London ([GLA, 2009](#), p. 25) shows that levels of overcrowding experienced by different groups are not just down to household size, but are the result of the interplay between household size, availability of appropriate accommodation and ability to access such accommodation. Further, for any given household size, overcrowding is higher in black and minority ethnic households, which suggests that higher overcrowding rates among such households have less to do with family size and more to do with poverty and poor housing. The assumption that people are responsible for their own overcrowded conditions simply by having more children is, therefore, a dangerous one. Rather than jump to this conclusion, housing providers should discuss the underlying causes of overcrowding in order to better understand both those causes and the conditions in which families are living.

6 Remedial measures

A number of examples of good practice adopted by housing providers in order to tackle overcrowding can be identified. These include:

- *Targeting under-occupiers.* Islington Council gives under-occupying tenants high priority on the housing register as well as an under-occupancy grant for each bedroom released. Tower Hamlets Council prioritises under-occupying tenants for rehousing, as well as giving a cash allowance for moving to smaller accommodation. Hackney Council allows under-occupying tenants a second bedroom, which can be particularly attractive to older tenants as it allows them to have someone to stay ([Shelter, 2005](#), p. 30).
- *Knock-throughs.* Tower Hamlets provides resources for an annual programme to knock through adjoining properties to reduce overcrowding ([Shelter, 2005](#), p. 31).
- *Cash incentive schemes.* Tower Hamlets' cash incentive scheme provides grants to tenants to purchase a property in the private sector, giving priority to those releasing larger accommodation ([Shelter, 2005](#), p. 31).
- *Tailored interventions.* In order to lessen the impacts of overcrowding, Camden Council has developed packages of tailored interventions around space management, education, play and parenting, which aim to help overcrowded families either to stay where they are by improving their quality of life or to move elsewhere by providing high quality housing advice ([CLG, 2007](#), p. 5).

- *Using the private sector.* Kingston upon Thames Council has obtained large family-sized units in the private sector on long leases, to be used by overcrowded Council tenants (for up to four and a half years) as they seek appropriately sized public sector housing (CLG, 2007, p. 6).
- *Prioritising overcrowded households.* The City of Westminster awards extra points to the most overcrowded households to give them priority to move into larger housing (Cookson and Sillet, 2009, p. 14).

None of these initiatives is specific to any one ethnic group, but, given the disproportionate representation of black and minority ethnic households (particularly Bangladeshi and Black African households) among those living in overcrowded conditions, their implementation should have a greater impact on black and minority ethnic communities living in housing stress.

Conclusion

Overcrowding is a growing problem, with a range of negative effects. Housing providers need to discuss how they can best (and most thoroughly) monitor its impact and how this can feed into the identification of solutions. This will require a more 'holistic' approach to monitoring, drawing not just on housing data, but also on data from other agencies, such as Primary Care Trusts and education providers.

While households of any ethnicity can be living in overcrowded conditions, black and minority ethnic households are more likely than white households to be overcrowded. This is not simply the result of household size, but rather is due to the interplay between variables such as household size, property size, property availability, location and ability to access other housing options. As a result, there are no simple 'one size fits all' solutions. The most pressing need is clearly for the building of new social housing of sufficient size, but that is not going to happen immediately. In the meantime, housing providers could learn from the good practice already developed by others (e.g. those identified in the previous section) and draw on the range of methods they have used to address this problem.

Resources

The following websites give information that may be useful to anyone wanting to look in more depth at the black and minority ethnic communities' experience of overcrowding.

Chartered Institute of Housing
www.cih.org

Communities and Local Government
www.communities.gov.uk

From Communities and Local Government the following may be of particular interest:

Tackling Overcrowding in England: Lessons from the London pilot schemes and sub-regional coordination
www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/tacklingovercrowdingengland

Tackling overcrowding in England: An action plan
www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/pdf/10.pdf

Human City Institute
www.humancity.org.uk

Local Government Information Unit
www.lgiu.gov.uk

National Housing Federation
www.housing.org.uk

Office for National Statistics
www.statistics.gov.uk

Shelter
www.shelter.org.uk

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