

Better
Housing
Briefing

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**The housing
needs of black
and minority
ethnic disabled
children and
their families**

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Briefing Paper

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Key messages

- 1 There are many ways in which housing can be unsuitable for disabled children and their families. Regardless of the nature of their child's impairment, most black and minority ethnic families with a disabled child will be living in unsuitable housing
- 2 There are many different ways in which a home can be unsuitable, and there are some differences between ethnic groups in terms of the sorts of difficulties they are likely to face. Bangladeshi and Pakistani families are most likely to be living in unsuitable housing and also to have multiple problems with their housing
- 3 A universal problem for families is a lack of space
- 4 Housing condition is one of the common causes of housing unsuitability
- 5 Difficulties with housing are experienced by families who are owner-occupiers as well as by those who rent their homes
- 6 In addition to experiencing difficulties with making structural changes to their homes, families from black and minority ethnic groups are also more likely to have unmet needs in terms of the equipment they require in order to make their homes suitable
- 7 Levels of unmet housing need suggest that most black and minority ethnic families have not been able to address their housing difficulties.

Introduction

The outcomes and life chances of disabled children and their families are, to a greater or lesser extent, affected by the homes in which they live. Inaccessible public spaces and community facilities, societal attitudes, and health and care needs mean that disabled children spend more time in their homes than other children. The importance of that environment is therefore amplified. Disabled children and their families have described how living in unsuitable housing can have wide-ranging effects. These include impacting on all aspects of child development, acting as a barrier to children enjoying everyday childhood experiences, and having a negative effect on the emotional and physical well-being of disabled children, their parents and siblings. Parents have suggested that living in unsuitable housing increases their need for other services (such as short-term care and residential school placements) (Oldman and Beresford, 1998).

Despite the central importance of housing to individual and family well-being, research in this area is limited. Similarly, within policy and practice, the housing needs of disabled children have been neglected compared with other aspects of service provision or other groups of disabled people (Beresford and Oldman, 2000, 2002).

There are, however, certain grounds for optimism (Beresford, 2006). Government reports admit that more needs to be done in terms of addressing the housing needs of disabled children (Department of Health, 2004; Cabinet Office, 2005), and this is reflected in some significant policy developments over recent months. The standard

relating to disabled children within the Children's National Service Framework ([Department of Health, 2004](#)) notes the importance of identifying and addressing families' housing needs. In addition, the Every Child Matters programme ([DfES, 2003](#)) is founded on notions of positive outcomes and inclusion – things that, to a greater or lesser degree for many disabled children, depend on the suitability of the homes in which they are living. Both these policies encourage greater involvement of housing departments in joint working with health and children's services. More specifically, at the beginning of 2006 the means test for the Disabled Facilities Grant for disabled children was abolished. Furthermore, the delivery of the Disabled Facilities Grant programme is currently being reviewed by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and draft proposals suggest that evidence from past research has, to some extent, been taken on board. It is also considering doing further work on the needs of disabled children ([DCLG, 2007](#)).

What is crucial is that black and minority ethnic families are not excluded and actually benefit from these proposed changes and improvements. To achieve this requires a clear understanding of the needs of black and minority ethnic disabled children and their families. The purpose of this briefing paper is to provide an overview of the research evidence on this topic. It is important to note, however, that there is very little evidence on this issue and that what is available is essentially limited to government statistics and three national surveys of families with disabled children, none of which focused specifically on the issue of ethnicity and housing. Importantly, no evidence could be identified which reports on black and minority ethnic disabled children's housing experiences. In addition, the evidence is limited to certain ethnic groups, and smaller or more hidden groups (e.g. disabled children from refugee and asylum-seeking communities) have not been included, or their needs and experiences specifically explored, by research. It is not surprising that this area has been identified as an important but neglected area of research ([Harrison and Phillips, 2003](#)).

The extent of the problem

1

Research has shown that compared with white families, significantly more black and minority ethnic families live in homes that are not suitable ([Beresford, 1996](#); [Chamba *et al.*, 1999](#); [Beresford and Oldman, 2002](#)). Furthermore, black and minority ethnic families are more likely than white families to experience multiple problems with their housing. A national survey of over 2500 families ([Chamba *et al.*, 1999](#)) found that a third of black and minority ethnic families reported at least three different ways in which their homes were unsuitable; this contrasts with one in five white families experiencing this range of housing difficulties.

Resources 1

Reports of research on solutions to housing unsuitability and good practice

Beresford, B. and Oldman, C. (2000) *Making Homes Fit for Children: Working together to promote change in the lives of disabled children*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

Bevan, M. (2002) *Housing and Disabled Children: The art of the possible*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

Summaries of both these reports can be downloaded from the *Findings* section of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation website www.jrf.org.uk

2 Types of housing problems and the families who experience them

The types of housing difficulties experienced by families are shown in Table 1, which demonstrates the range of problems families can experience, including those of space, safety, access, location, housing condition and toilet/washing facilities within the home.

Table 1 *Type of housing problem experienced by families with a disabled child*

Problem area	Percentage of families reporting problem			
	Black/African Caribbean families	Indian families	Pakistani and Bangladeshi families	White families
Family space	64	57	77	53
Size of toilet/bathrooms	41	57	56	41
No second toilet/bathroom	41	50	58	40
Space to use equipment and do therapies	40	38	48	37
Location	39	28	38	38
House condition (i.e. cold, damp)	31	37	45	24
Lack of downstairs toilet/bathroom	24	32	40	32
Access within, and in and out of, the home	21	38	36	32
Carer needs (lifting and handling)	26	26	26	31
Space for storing equipment	27	31	31	19
Safety inside	6	3	3	3

(Source: adapted from Beresford and Oldman, 2002, p. 14)

It is clear from Table 1 that, compared with white families, black and minority ethnic families are more likely to experience difficulties with their housing. In addition, it highlights the differences between ethnic groups in terms of the sorts of difficulties they are likely to experience, and shows that, overall, Pakistani and Bangladeshi families are at greatest risk of living in housing that is unsuitable in multiple ways.

The data in Table 1 also demonstrate the fact that housing suitability is not just an issue of physical access. Indeed, difficulties with a lack of space and poor housing condition are more frequently reported than access-specific issues. This reflects a more general finding from research that all disabled children – not just those with physical impairments – are likely to experience difficulties with their housing (Beresford and Oldman, 2002).

3 The issue of space

Families with disabled children face many demands on space within the home, with regard to both the size and number of rooms. The sorts of demands on space include:

- space to store medical and care items and the child's mobility/postural equipment;
- space to carry out physiotherapy and for the child to use their mobility/ postural equipment;

- toilets and bathrooms need to be able to safely accommodate the child and parent and any necessary equipment (e.g. hoists, changing table);
- space for play (for the disabled child and any siblings) and, for all family members, space for 'time out' from the rest of the family;
- the need for the disabled child to have their own bedroom to avoid disturbing siblings;
- downstairs living space being given over as a bedroom for the disabled child because of difficulties with moving the child upstairs.

Housing condition

4

General population statistics consistently show that black and minority ethnic families are more likely to be living in poor quality housing ([Harrison and Phillips, 2003](#)). As expected, therefore, Table 1 shows a greater proportion of black and minority ethnic families living in poor housing conditions compared with white families. In particular, almost half the Pakistani and Bangladeshi families reported problems with housing condition.

Living in a home that is cold and damp is a significant health risk to children with severe physical impairments (and, hence, no or very limited mobility) and those who are medically frail. Housing condition is, therefore, a key aspect of housing suitability. Families with children such as these, living in poor quality housing, will be using already scarce resources to make living conditions suitable for the child. [Chamba *et al.*'s \(1999\)](#) survey of black and minority ethnic families found that six out of ten families reported heating as an extra cost associated with having a disabled child, and a third reported repairs to the home/furniture as another extra cost. For many families, spending money to keep a poorly insulated and damp house warm, with an inefficient heating system, will mean that fewer funds are available to pay for other things the child or family may need.

Tenure

5

Tenure has been identified as one of the key factors associated with the number or types of housing problem experienced ([Beresford and Oldman, 2002](#)). Therefore, some of the differences between ethnic groups in the sorts of housing difficulties families face may, to some extent, reflect differences in tenure. General population surveys show that black and Pakistani/Bangladeshi families are more likely to be living in social housing compared with other ethnic groups (e.g. [ONS, 1999](#)). Across all families with disabled children, living in council or private rented housing is associated with being more likely to be living in poor housing conditions and lack of space ([Beresford and Oldman, 2002](#)).

Resources 2

Joseph Rowntree Foundation

www.jrf.org.uk

From April 2007, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation is conducting a policy and practice development project on disabled children and housing. It is seeking to inform national policy and support improvements in local practice.

Contact a Family

www.cafamily.org.uk

Contact a Family is a national organisation representing disabled children and their families. It provides advice, information and support to the parents of all disabled children. It has downloadable fact sheets and a telephone helpline. Some of its publications are available in a number of different community languages, and its helpline offers an interpreted service. Contact a Family also runs local projects, several of which work specifically with different groups.

The Family Fund

www.familyfund.org.uk

The Family Fund provides grants to families caring for a severely disabled child in the UK.

6 Equipment

Often, structural changes alone are not sufficient to meet housing need, and equipment also needs to be installed. In essence, equipment which is immovable, fixed or plumbed falls within housing adaptation services and this includes some types of equipment that assist with lifting and handling (e.g. tracking hoists), getting upstairs (e.g. stair lifts, through-floor lifts) and specialist baths, washbasins and toilets. These pieces of equipment may be installed to help the carer and/or to enable the disabled child to be as independent as possible. A national survey looked at use of, and unmet needs for, equipment by disabled children and their families ([Beresford *et al.*, 2002](#)). This found that ethnicity was one of the factors associated with higher levels of unmet need. Compared with white families, black and minority ethnic families had fewer pieces of equipment in the home and greater numbers of unmet needs for equipment. A consultation exercise with key professional groups and organisations conducted alongside this survey revealed high levels of concern that black and minority ethnic families were likely to have unmet needs for equipment.

7 How families respond to unsuitable housing

Moving home or adapting the current home are the two routes by which families can try to deal with housing unsuitability. The systems by which families are supported to do this vary according to tenure and, within social housing, landlord.

Homeowners can try to move or adapt their property. They can apply for a Disabled Facilities Grant to cover the costs of the adaptation; this grant does not provide assistance with the costs of moving. Black and minority ethnic families are less likely to know about this funding source ([Beresford and Oldman, 2002](#)).

For families living in social rented housing, moving (or re-housing) is the more common solution. Among black and minority ethnic families, [Chamba *et al.* \(1999\)](#) found that a third of families had moved, or had been re-housed, in an attempt to resolve housing problems associated with having a disabled child. However, moving did not appear to eliminate housing difficulties. Families who had moved were equally likely to report housing problems as those who had not moved. In contrast, families who were home-owners and had adapted their property were more likely to report that their homes were suitable for their child.

Difficulties with accessing information and services have been identified as key barriers to families with disabled children in addressing their housing needs ([Beresford and Oldman, 2000](#)). Other researchers have found that difficulties with accessing information and communication are a reason for low service take-up among black and minority ethnic families ([Tozer, 1999](#); [Russell, 2003](#)). [Fazil *et al.*'s \(2002\)](#) in-depth work with Pakistani and Bangladeshi families corroborates this. Families participating in this study reported housing to be a particularly difficult service to identify and make contact with. In addition, a number of families found the service unsympathetic and lacking in cultural awareness.

Conclusion

There is compelling evidence on the levels of housing need among black and minority ethnic families. To some extent, this is an issue for all families with disabled children, and changes need to take place more generally within a number of different policy arenas and with respect to funding levels to drive and support improved practice and service provision. Recent and forthcoming policy reforms that affect housing and children's services present opportunities to ensure that the housing needs of families with disabled children are better met. What is essential, therefore, is that these activities are informed by the particular issues faced by black and minority ethnic families. There is, however, limited evidence available on this topic, particularly in terms of families' experiences of living in unsuitable housing and their experiences of trying to resolve their housing difficulties. Both are important evidence gaps.

In terms of the evidence that is available, two key issues are highlighted which appear to contribute to black and minority ethnic families experiencing greater levels of housing need than white families. These are housing condition, and information about and accessing services.

Housing condition is a common cause of unsuitable housing and is more frequently reported as a problem than difficulties more traditionally associated with disability and housing, such as steps and narrow doorways. Unless housing conditions are improved, many families, particularly Pakistani and Bangladeshi families, will continue to live in unsuitable housing even if other housing adaptations are put in place.

The second barrier to resolving housing need, identified by the research, concerns information about, and access to, housing services and equipment. In line with research in other areas, black and minority ethnic families experience greater difficulties than white families with accessing information and services. Specific strategies or activities, developed in consultation with families, are required to address this crucial issue.

Finally, addressing housing needs by adapting or moving are, typically, high-cost solutions. Furthermore, the relationship between poverty and housing condition is well established. Disabled children and their families have been described as the '*poorest of the poor*' (Gordon *et al.*, 2000), and within this group black and minority ethnic families have been found to have lower household incomes than white families (Chamba *et al.*, 1999). Addressing poverty therefore appears to be a vital element in any strategy seeking to ensure that disabled children and their families no longer live in homes that jeopardise their well-being, and have the chance to live as ordinary lives as possible.

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We welcome feedback on this paper and on all aspects of our work. Please email briefings@racefound.org.uk

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