

Briefing:

Overcrowding in England

April 2023

Key findings

- In four in ten (41%) overcrowded homes, children are sharing a bedroom with an adult.
- In one in four overcrowded homes (26%), children are having to share a bed with someone else.
- Over half of all respondents (52%) have had to sleep somewhere other than their bedroom, such as a living room, bathroom, corridor or kitchen due to overcrowding.
- Parents in more than half (53%) of overcrowded homes worry that their children are too embarrassed to bring friends home because of how overcrowded it is.
- In almost half (48%) of overcrowded homes, children struggle to do their homework because of the lack of space.
- 76% of overcrowded families have experienced an adverse impact on their health due to overcrowding.
- 77% of overcrowded families have had their mental health negatively affected by overcrowding.

1. Introduction

One of the strongest indicators that all is not well in our housing system is the level of overcrowding experienced by people in all tenures. Overcrowding in the social sector is indicative of a shortage of available housing of the right size, and in the private sector it is indicative of the affordability issues faced by households in trying to find a home large enough for their needs.

In this paper, as well as looking at the scale of overcrowding as measured in the English Housing Survey, we look at the impacts on families who deem themselves to be living in overcrowded conditions. These impacts include health issues, relationship issues, behavioural issues in children and feelings of shame.

2. English Housing Survey analysis

The most commonly used measure of overcrowding is the bedroom standard. This was developed by the Government Social Survey for use in the 1960 housing survey. While it is not legally enforceable, it is commonly held to be a realistic and useful measure. Under the standard, **the number of bedrooms needed by a household is calculated according to the composition of the household in terms of age, gender and relationships. The household is deemed to be overcrowded (“below standard”) if they have fewer bedrooms available to them than this calculated figure.** This calculation is outlined in more detail in the Appendix – in this analysis we use the updated 2011 definition.

The English Housing Survey is an annual sample survey looking at housing issues. For the following analysis we used the published dataset relating to the year 2020/21, the latest available at the time of writing¹.

These figures only include families, i.e. households including dependent children. We counted all families deemed to be “below standard” as measured against the bedroom standard as noted above.

The headline numbers are as follows. We have also imputed the number of adults in these households by simply subtracting the number of children from the overall number of people:

Overcrowded families	745,820
Children in overcrowded families	1,894,454
Total number of people in overcrowded families	3,409,216
Adults (total people minus children)	1,514,762

The total number of children in England according to the English Housing Survey is 11.36 million. This means that **one in six of all children in England are living in overcrowded conditions.**

¹ More recent headline figures are available but these do not allow the analysis we have done here

Looking at the incidence of overcrowding (amongst all households, not just families) by ethnicity, we can see that households from minority ethnic groups are more than three times as likely as white households to experience overcrowding.

	White	Minority ethnic
Below standard (overcrowded)	2.7%	9.8%
At standard	25.3%	41.6%
Above standard	72.0%	48.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

By breaking down the figures by tenure, we can see that nearly half of overcrowding is located in social rented housing.

	Overcrowded families	% of all overcrowded families
Social renters	355,852	47.7%
Private renters	242,751	32.5%
Owner occupiers	147,215	19.7%
Total	745,818	100.0%

Cross-referencing the overcrowding figures with property sizes shows that there are 151,724 overcrowded families living in one-bedroom properties – these households contain 194,245 children.

Number of bedrooms	1	2	3	4	5 or more
Overcrowded families	151,724	254,775	246,896	77,207	15,216
Children	194,245	656,291	733,629	272,567	37,720

3. Impacts of overcrowding

We engaged Savanta to conduct a survey of households living in overcrowded homes, asking questions about the impact that overcrowding has on their lives. The fieldwork took place 13-16 December 2022. The sample comprised of England-based adults (aged 18+). Given the difficulty of engaging with households in this position, the sample size was small, at just 207 households. Percentages of responses were applied to the headline totals of families, children and people obtained from the English Housing Survey analysis. Given the small sample size, these figures should be treated as indicative.

3.1 In just under half (41%) of overcrowded homes, children or teenagers are sharing a bedroom with an adult.

Respondents were asked to indicate which of a number of scenarios was true for their household. As many could be chosen as applied. The figure above was based on all households that indicated that at least one of the following was true for their living arrangements:

- There is an adult sharing a room with just one child (19%).
- There is an adult sharing a room with more than one child (14%).
- There is an adult sharing a room with just one teenager (7%).
- There is an adult sharing a room with more than one teenager (6%).

Applying this headline percentage to the total number of overcrowded families, we can see that this could affect more than 300,000 families (305,786).

If we apply the percentages above to the number of families, then assume one child to be affected in every household reporting that there is an adult sharing a room with one child, two children to be affected in every household where an adult is sharing a room with more than one child, and then the same for teenagers, we can estimate that nearly half a million (492,241) children or teenagers are affected in this way. This breaks down into 141,705 teenagers and 350,535 children.

3.2 In more than a quarter of overcrowded homes (26%), children are having to share a bed with someone else.

This is based on all households who indicated at least one of the following was true for their household's living arrangements:

- There is an adult sharing a bed with a teenager or child (10%).
- There are two or more children or teenagers sharing a bed (16%).

Applying this headline percentage to the total numbers of overcrowded families, we can see that this could affect more than 190,000 families (193,913). If we assume that one child is affected in households where an adult is sharing a bed with a child, and two children are affected in households where children are sharing a bed, we can estimate that more than 310,000 children are affected (313,244).

3.3 In one in four overcrowded families (24%), adults are forced to sleep in rooms other than bedrooms regularly because of the lack of space.

The 24% figure above is based on the sum of those who responded to the statements below (see Table 1 for full breakdown of responses):

- Yes my partner or I have to sleep somewhere unusual such as the living room, a bathroom, hallway or kitchen quite often because the bedrooms are often full (15%).
- Yes my partner or I have had to sleep somewhere unusual such as the living room, a bathroom, hallway or kitchen almost always or every night (9%).

Applying this headline percentage to the total number of overcrowded families, we can see that this could affect nearly 180,000 families (178,997).

Table 1

Question: Do you or your partner have to sleep somewhere that is not a bedroom (such as the living room, a bathroom, hallway or kitchen) because your home is too crowded?	Responses (%)
No my partner or I have not had to sleep somewhere unusual such as the living room, a bathroom, hallway or kitchen at all over the last 12 months.	45%
Yes my partner or I have had to sleep somewhere unusual such as the living room, a bathroom, hallway or kitchen on occasion such as when guests have stayed over.	28%
Yes my partner or I have to sleep somewhere unusual such as the living room, a bathroom, hallway or kitchen quite often because the bedrooms are often full.	15%
Yes my partner or I have had to sleep somewhere unusual such as the living room, a bathroom, hallway or kitchen almost always or every night.	9%
Can't remember.	2%

3.4 Parents in more than half (53%) of overcrowded homes worry their children are too embarrassed to bring friends home because of how overcrowded it is.

This is based on a sum of all households who indicated they either strongly agree or somewhat agree with the following statement:

'I worry that children in my home are too embarrassed to bring their friends home.'

Applying this headline percentage to the total numbers of overcrowded families and children, we can see that this could affect nearly 400,000 families (395,285) and more than one million children (1,004,061).

Table 2

Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?	Agree (Strongly agree/Somewhat agree)	Disagree (Strongly disagree/Somewhat agree)
I worry that children in my home are too embarrassed to bring their friends home.	53%	29%
I worry that the children are getting into trouble more.	44%	34%
The children's behaviour is worsening because of overcrowding.	43%	34%
I worry that the children don't want to come home because of how crowded it is.	42%	39%
The children's education is suffering because of overcrowding.	36%	39%

3.5 Two in five parents (44%) worry their children are getting into trouble more due to their overcrowded home.

This is based on a sum of all households who indicated they either strongly agree or somewhat agree with the following statement (see Table 2):

'I worry that the children are getting into trouble more.'

Applying this headline percentage to the total numbers of overcrowded families and children, we can see that this could affect nearly 330,000 families (328,161) and more than 830,000 children (833,560).

3.6 In almost half (48%) of overcrowded homes, children struggle to do their homework because of the lack of space.

This is based on a sum of all households who indicated the following answer options were true:

- Yes it is possible for them to do their homework, but it is difficult because of the lack of space (35%).
- No it is not possible for them to do their homework because of the lack of space (13%).

Applying this headline percentage to the total numbers of overcrowded families and children, we can see that this could affect nearly 360,000 families (357,994) and more than 900,000 children (909,338).

Table 3

Question: Would you say that it is possible for the children and/or teenagers you live with to do their homework in your home?	Response (%)
Yes it is possible for them to do their homework.	49%
Yes it is possible for them to do their homework, but it is difficult because of the lack of space.	35%
No it is not possible for them to do their homework because of the lack of space.	13%
Not sure.	3%

3.7 76% of overcrowded families have experienced an adverse impact on their health due to overcrowding.

Respondents were asked how their and their family’s physical health is affected by how crowded their home is. Adverse effects included not getting enough sleep, getting ill often, taking a long time to recover from illness, or general ill health. The evidence points towards a relationship between overcrowding and aspects of the health of both children and adults. The most prominent issue cited is a lack of sleep, affecting a third of adults (32%) and a quarter of children (25%). Worryingly, one in five children are often ill (18%) and the same are cited as taking a long time to get better (18%).

Only a quarter of respondents (24%) said that their and their family’s general health is not impacted by overcrowding – suggesting that the majority of respondents experience some form of impact on their health (76%).

Applying this headline percentage to the total numbers of overcrowded families and people, we can see that this could affect more than 560,000 families (566,823) and nearly 2.6 million people (2,591,004).

Table 4

Question: How is your and your family’s health affected by how crowded your home is?	Response (%)
I or my partner are not getting enough sleep.	34%
The children are not getting enough sleep.	25%
The children are getting ill often.	18%
It takes the children a long time to get better after an illness.	18%
The children’s general health is suffering.	15%
It takes me or my partner a long time to get better after an illness.	15%
I or my partner get ill often.	14%
Mine and my family’s health is not affected by how crowded our home is.	24%
Other.	0%

3.8 Children in 56% of overcrowded homes are likely to experience negative health effects.

This is based on all households who said that at least one of these was the case:

- The children are not getting enough sleep (25%).
- The children are getting ill often (18%).
- It takes the children a long time to get better after an illness (18%).
- The children's general health is suffering (15%).

Applying this headline percentage to the total numbers of overcrowded families and children, we can see that this could affect more than 400,000 families (417,659) and more than one million children (1,060,894).

3.9 77% of overcrowded families have had their mental health negatively affected by overcrowding.

Respondents were asked how their and their family's mental health is affected by how crowded their home is. Adverse effects included feeling stressed, being depressed, having to seek medical help or having to take medication for mental health issues. Only 23% of respondents said that their and their family's mental health is not affected by how crowded their home is. This indicates that a total of 77% experience some form of negative impact.

Applying this headline percentage to the total numbers of overcrowded families and people, we can see that this could affect nearly 575,000 families (574,281) and more than 2.6 million people (2,625,096).

Table 5

Question: How is your and your family's mental health affected by how crowded your home is?	Response (%)
I or my partner feel stressed.	41%
I or my partner are depressed.	25%
The children feel stressed.	25%
I or my partner have had to go on medication due to mental health issues.	19%
I or my partner have had to seek medical help for mental health issues.	14%
We have had to seek medical help for the children's mental health.	12%
The children have had to go on medication due to mental health issues.	9%
The children are depressed.	7%
Mine and my family's mental health is not affected by how crowded our home is.	23%
Other.	0%

3.10 70% of overcrowded families have experienced negative impacts on both their physical and their mental health due to overcrowding.

Applying this headline percentage to the total number of overcrowded families, we can see that this could affect more than 520,000 families (522,074).

3.11 A third of overcrowded families (32%) argue a lot because their home is crowded.

The figure of 32% is drawn from the response to the statement:

'My family argues a lot because our home is overcrowded.'

Applying this headline percentage to the total number of overcrowded families, we can see that this could affect nearly 240,000 families (238,662).

Table 6

Question: Would you or would you not say your family argues a lot because your home is crowded?	Response (%)
My family argues a lot because our home is overcrowded.	32%
My family argues a lot but not because our home is crowded.	27%
My family does not argue much.	34%
My family does not argue at all.	7%

3.12 Adults in 77% of overcrowded families have had their personal relationships negatively affected by overcrowding.

Respondents were asked how their personal relationships are affected by how crowded their home is. Negative effects included not getting time alone with their partner, not feeling able to start a new relationship, fighting a lot with their partner, and their relationship with their partner worsening or ending. Only 23% of respondents said that their personal relationships are not affected by how crowded their home is, indicating that 77% of respondents have experienced some form of negative impact.

Applying this proportion to the number of adults living in overcrowded homes, we can see that this could affect more than 1.1 million adults (1,166,367).

Table 7

Question: How are your personal relationships affected by how crowded you home is?	Response (%)
My partner and I don't get alone time.	38%
My relationship with my partner has got worse.	21%
My partner and I fight a lot.	20%
I don't feel able to start a new relationship.	14%
My partner and I have split up.	8%
My personal relationships are not affected by how crowded my home is.	23%
Other.	0%

Appendix – The bedroom standard (2011 definition)

A standard number of bedrooms is allocated to each household in accordance with its age/sex/marital status composition and the relationship of the members to one another. Bedrooms are allocated as follows:

- a) one bedroom for couple (no age base)
- b) one bedroom for single person aged 16 or more
- c) one bedroom for paired adolescents (10-15) same sex
- d) one bedroom for paired children under 10
- e) one bedroom for unpaired adolescents and unpaired child of the same sex
- f) one bedroom for any remaining unpaired adolescent or child.

This standard is then compared with the actual number of bedrooms available for the sole use of the household and differences are tabulated. Bedrooms converted to other uses are not counted as available unless they have been denoted as bedrooms by the informants. Bedrooms not actually in use are counted unless uninhabitable.

This 2011 update of the standard differs from the previous (2006) version in that it lowers the age at which single people are allocated their own room from 21 to 16. In this way it more accurately reflects modern social expectations.