

Briefing:

Overcrowding in England

21 June 2019

Headline findings

- There are 1.36 million children living in overcrowded homes in England – around 11.6% of all children in England.
- There are more than 130,000 (132,318) overcrowded families living in one-bedroom properties – these families contain more than 165,000 (165,315) children.
- In just under half (46%) of overcrowded homes, children are sharing a bedroom with an adult – this could affect as many as 627,000 (627,431) children.
- In more than a quarter (27%) of overcrowded homes, children have to share a bed with someone else – this could affect as many as 368,000 (368,275) children.
- Adults in more than a quarter (26%) of overcrowded homes are forced to sleep in kitchens, bathrooms or hallways because of the lack of space – this could affect as many as 380,000 (383,556) people.
- Parents in more than half (51%) of overcrowded homes worry that their children don't want to come home because of how overcrowded it is – this could relate to as many as 695,000 (695,630) children.
- In more than half (55%) of overcrowded homes, children struggle to do their homework because of the lack of space – this could affect as many as 750,000 (750,189) children. This includes 14% – as many as 190,000 (190,957) children – who find it totally impossible.

1. Introduction

There are many types of housing need. While attention is understandably often focused on the most extreme forms – including homelessness and, in particular, rough sleeping – there are others, such as overcrowding. These are much less visible and yet impact on a greater number of families and people.

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 paper we examine the scale of overcrowding as it is measured in the latest English Housing Survey for which the full dataset has been released, as well as the impacts on families and children of that overcrowding, using a survey carried out by ComRes.

2. English Housing Survey analysis

To establish the scale of the issue, we looked at English Housing Survey (EHS) data for 2016/17. At the time of writing this was the latest data available. We used the End User Licence dataset published through the UK Data Archive. This household-level survey data includes a measure against the bedroom standard, as well as numbers of people and numbers of children in each household.

We focused our analysis on families. For the purposes of this analysis we defined a family as a household including one or more dependent children. The number of dependent children in the household was thus used as the key defining variable, rather than the “household type” variable.

The variable for the number of dependent children in the 2016/17 dataset is topcoded at 5+ children. As households with larger numbers of children are obviously more likely to experience overcrowding, we felt it necessary to put a more definite figure on the average number of children in these households. To this end we used the previous year’s data (which was not topcoded) as a benchmark for an average number of children within these larger households. This average was then incorporated to the calculation of the total number of children in overcrowded and other households. Comparing these totals – the number of children in overcrowded families (1.36 million) and the number of children in all households (11.76 million) – allows us to express the former as a percentage of the latter, at 11.6%.

The headline numbers are as follows:

Overcrowded families	600,168
Children in overcrowded families	1,363,980
Total number of people in overcrowded families	2,839,195

Cross-referencing the overcrowding figures with property sizes shows that there are 132,318 overcrowded families living in one-bedroom properties – these households contain 165,315 children.

Number of bedrooms	1	2	3	4	5 or more
Overcrowded families	132,318	227,080	198,755	32,979	9,035
Children	165,315	517,717	580,698	68,653	31,595

3. Survey on the impacts of overcrowding

To supplement our analysis of the EHS, we engaged ComRes to conduct a survey of households living in overcrowded homes, asking questions about the impact that overcrowding has on their lives. Given the difficulty of engaging with households in this position, the sample size was small, at just 102 households. Percentages of responses were applied to the headline totals of households, children and people obtained from the EHS analysis. These figures should be treated as indicative, given the small sample size.

The main findings are as follows.

3.1 In just under half (46%) of overcrowded homes, children 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 apply. The figure above was based on all households that indicated that at least one of the following was true for their household's living arrangements:

- There is an adult sharing a room with just one child
- There is an adult sharing a room with more than one child
- There is an adult sharing a room with just one teenager
- There is an adult sharing a room with more than one teenager.

Applying 46% to the total number of children living in overcrowded households gives a ceiling of 627,431 children that could be sharing a bedroom with an adult.

3.2 In more than a quarter (27%) of overcrowded homes, 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
- There are two or more children or teenagers sharing a bed.

Applying 27% to the total number of children living in overcrowded households gives a ceiling of 368,275 children that could be sharing a bed with someone else.

3.3 In more than a quarter (26%) of overcrowded homes, adults always or quite often have to sleep in places such as a living room, bathroom, corridor or kitchen due to overcrowding.

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?

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	34%
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	36%
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	18%
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	8%
Can't remember	4%

The 26% figure is based on the sum of those who answered “quite often” and those who answered “almost always or every night”. Applying 26% to the number of people other than children in overcrowded families gives a ceiling of 383,556 people who could be sleeping in a room that is not bedroom due to overcrowding.

3.4 In more than half (51%) of overcrowded families, parents worry that their children don't want to come home because of how crowded it is.

Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement: “I worry that the children don't want to come home because of how crowded it is.”

Strongly agree	22%
Somewhat agree	29%
Neither agree nor disagree	23%
Somewhat disagree	8%
Strongly disagree	18%
Don't know	1%

The 51% figure was arrived at by adding together those who strongly agreed and those who somewhat agreed. Applying 51% to the total number of children living in overcrowded households gives a ceiling of 695,630 children whose parents worry about this.

3.5 In more than half (55%) of overcrowded homes, children struggle to do their homework because of the lack of space.

Question: Would you say that it is possible for the children and/or teenagers you live with to do their homework in your home?

Yes it is possible for them to do their homework	44%
Yes it is possible for them to do their homework, but it is difficult because of the lack of space	41%
No it is not possible for them to do their homework because of the lack of space	14%
Not sure	1%

The 55% figure was arrived at by adding together those who said it was difficult and those who said it was not possible. Applying 55% to the total number of children living in overcrowded households gives a ceiling of 750,189 children that are affected in this way. The 14% of households where it is not possible translates to a possible figure of 190,957 children.

3.6 45% of overcrowded families argue a lot because their home is crowded.

Question: Would you or would you not say your family argues a lot because your home is crowded?

My family argues a lot because our home is crowded	45%
My family argues a lot but not because our home is crowded	22%
My family does not argue much	24%
My family does not argue at all	10%

Applying 45% to the total number of overcrowded households gives a total of 270,076 families affected in this way.

3.7 87% of overcrowded families have had their health negatively affected by 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. Only 13% of respondents said that their and their family's physical health is not affected by how crowded their home is. This indicates that a total of 87% experience some form of negative impact.

Applying 87% to the total number of overcrowded households gives a total of 522,146 households; applying this figure to the number of overcrowded children gives a ceiling of 1,186,663 children whose health could be adversely affected.

3.8 85% 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 15% 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 85% experience some form of negative impact.

Applying 85% to the total number of overcrowded households gives a total of 510,143 households; applying this figure to the number of overcrowded children gives a ceiling of 1,159,383 children whose mental health could be adversely affected.

3.9 Adults in 81% 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 19% of respondents said that their personal relationships are not affected by how

crowded their home is, indicating that 81% of respondents have experienced some form of negative impact.

Applying 81% to the number of overcrowded households gives a total of 486,136 households affected in this way.

The individual responses break down as follows:

How are your personal relationships affected by how crowded your home is?	%	Households affected	Maximum number of adults affected
My partner and I don't get time alone	43%	258,072	634,342
I don't feel able to start a new relationship	23%	138,039	339,299
My partner and I fight a lot	15%	90,025	221,282
My relationship with my partner has got worse	15%	90,025	221,282
My partner and I have split up	9%	54,015	132,769
My relationship with my partner has got worse or My partner and I have split up	22%	132,037	324,547
My personal relationships are not affected by how crowded my home is	19%	-	-
My personal relationships are affected by how crowded my home is (inferred from previous question)	81%	486,136	1,194,924

Note that the bottom row is not a sum of the different elements as respondents could choose more than one option. Note also that the last column in the above table shows the **maximum** number of adults affected – the real number is likely to be lower in particular where respondents' relationships have ended, as the previous partner may no longer reside in the overcrowded home.

3.10 Almost two thirds (64%) of parents in overcrowded homes worry their children are too embarrassed to bring friends home

A total of 64% of respondents either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement "I worry that the children in my home are too embarrassed to bring their friends home". Applying 64% to the number of children in overcrowded homes gives a ceiling of 872,947 children whose parents worry about this.

3.11 More than half (58%) of parents in overcrowded homes worry their children are getting into trouble more

A total of 58% of respondents either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement "I worry that the children are getting into trouble more". Applying 58% to the number of children in overcrowded homes gives a ceiling of 791,108 children whose parents worry about this.

Appendix – The bedroom standard

This description of the bedroom standard – and how it is calculated for the purposes of the English Housing Survey – is taken from House of Commons Library Briefing Paper 1013, [Overcrowded housing \(England\)](#), published October 2018:

“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. A separate bedroom is allocated to each married or cohabiting couple, any other person aged 21 or over, each pair of adolescents aged 10-20 of the same sex, and each pair of children under 10. Any unpaired person aged 10-20 is paired, if possible, with a child under 10 of the same sex, or, if that is not possible, he or she is given a separate bedroom, as is any unpaired child under 10. 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.”