

Britain: an acute social divide in housing

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“Against the Odds: An investigation comparing the lives of children on either side of Britain’s housing divide,” published by the British homeless charity Shelter, highlights the terrible problems faced by children forced to live in temporary accommodation.

The report was compiled from 6,940 face-to-face interviews with families that included 12,727 children as well as 3,477 self-completion questionnaires by children aged 11 to 15. It shows what life is like on the wrong side of the housing divide in Britain today.

Its key points are stark reading, particularly at a time when this Labour government is in the midst of a programme with the ostensible aim of pulling children out of poverty.

There are 1.6 million children in Britain currently living in bad housing. This is the equivalent of one in seven children, or 14 percent. Children living in bad housing, as against those living in adequate housing, are:

- * twice as likely to have been excluded from school,
- * almost twice as likely to suffer from poor health,
- * three times as likely to feel unhappy about their families,
- * Almost twice as likely to suffer from bullying, and
- * nearly twice as likely to leave school without any GCSEs (general school leaving qualification).

There are nearly 310,000 children living in Britain today in bad housing who suffer a long-term illness or disability.

In a single year, more than 57,000 children who live in bad housing are excluded from school.

Children living in temporary accommodation will often have to change schools several times in a year. The impact of this on the educational and emotional well-being of the child is psychologically and emotionally disruptive and upsetting. As a result, many children are not able to form stable and secure relationships with adults and their peers.

In an earlier report by Shelter, “Living in Limbo,” parents reported that children missed on average 55 school days (equivalent to a quarter of a school year) due to the disruption of moving. They often have to move far away from the schools they have been attending, and it can be impractical for the child to remain at the same school without having to travel long distances to and from school.

The report included information taken from teachers in contact with children who were homeless. In one case, a teacher reported that a child who was sleeping rough was still attending school.

Children who have to live in temporary accommodation often have behavioural problems and can present a major challenge for schools. As a result, they will often be excluded. The report includes the work of Dr. Tanya Byron, who highlighted the impact of bad housing on children’s health. She explains, “Stress (from living in overcrowded housing) can manifest itself in disruptive behaviour at school or, conversely, in a child becoming withdrawn.”

Nearly 66,000 children aged 11 or older living in bad housing do not have a quiet space to do their homework.

The report insists, “The link between living in bad housing—be it overcrowded or in poor physical condition—and health problems in children is unequivocal.”

Children living in bad housing are almost twice as likely to suffer from poor health as other children. They are up to three times more likely to suffer respiratory problems.

A substantial number of children interviewed said they had problems sleeping, which is linked to slow growth rates. One child explained, “I find sleeping difficult—you can hear the noise of the rats.”

The risk of infection is high. Children described problems such as rats urinating in food-storage areas,

dirty carpets in shared accommodation, dirty walls as a result of dampness, beds shared by two or three children, and bedrooms with up to four other people sleeping in them.

These conditions have to be seen in the light of the housing boom, with prices soaring well out of the reach of many. At the same time, there are no major social housing building programmes.

Milan Katri, chief economist of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, has reported that the number of households has been growing at 200,000 a year, yet new building has been running at between 140,000 and 160,000 a year. And due to government policies over the last 20 years, there have been hardly any new council houses built. Shelter recommends that a further 20,000 new houses per year be built in the social housing sector beyond present figures.

The number of houses/flats built each year is currently running at 3.1 per thousand of the population. For the year 2002, the UK built fewer houses than in 1921. Tony Key, professor of real estate economics at the Cass Business School in London, stated that this undersupply of housing has led to a huge distortion in the UK property market. Huge profits are being made, while many people are left at the mercy of private landlords or homeless with little hope of ever being able to find secure accommodation.



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