

More than a million Australians live in poor housing

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Over one million people in Australia are living in poor housing and, of those, more than 100,000 are in dwellings regarded as very poor or derelict.

A report published last month found that 1,093,600 people, or nearly 5 percent of the population, live in poor housing. The health of residents in these households was more likely to be rated as being only fair or poor compared to those living in better quality housing.

The study, entitled “Poor housing quality: Prevalence and health effects,” was conducted by researchers at the University of Adelaide. They found that official statistics do not account for a “hidden fraction” of the population that is in dire circumstances.

Many families live in precarious and unstable conditions, due to a combination of unaffordable housing, lack of a secure tenure and poor quality housing, plus inadequate access to social and employment networks. In the major cities, tenants in overcrowded dwellings have a lower health status, and children in poor quality dwellings are more likely to have long-term health issues, including a greater likelihood of asthma and respiratory disease.

When it comes to public housing, only about 42 percent is in good condition. Some 20 percent of public housing tenants live in very poor to derelict conditions. Responding to the report, a public housing resident in Port Lincoln, South Australia, provided a glimpse of the shocking conditions. Identified only as Muzz, he told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “I live in a Trust home with asbestos and no heating or cooling but it’s a home nonetheless... so many people have no home and will just struggle to exist.”

The report’s lead author Associate Professor Emma Baker said: “There is a strong body of research linking poor quality housing to measureable impacts on mental,

physical and general health.

“We know that damp, cold or mould in homes can cause or exacerbate respiratory illnesses like asthma, and overcrowding can promote communicable disease, but just living in poor quality housing has been linked to anxiety, depression, and a range of other mental health conditions.

“Poor housing makes the already disadvantaged even worse off. Younger people, people with disabilities and ill health, those with low incomes, the unemployed or those in part-time employment, indigenous people, and renters are much more likely to be found in the emerging slums of 21st century Australia,” she said.

The largest proportion of poor quality housing is in the rental housing market, both private and public or social housing. Nearly half, 47 percent, of all indigenous Australians, who are among the most exploited and disadvantaged layers of the working class, live in poor quality housing.

Those who owned their own homes or held mortgages accounted for 80.5 percent of those who occupied homes of good to excellent condition. However, many families who have mortgages are teetering on a knife’s edge. Couples and families often rely on two incomes to repay mortgages of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Australian housing costs are among the most expensive and unaffordable in the world, “and that plays a big role in people not being able to afford the quality of dwelling they need,” Baker told Fairfax Media.

Over the past three decades, the cost of private housing has soared. From 1991 to 2011, the average price of houses in Australia grew sharply by 263 percent, compared to an average after-tax income growth of only 95 percent.

This is producing a mountain of debt. In 2014, the mean home equity was at \$427,847, compared with a mean home value of \$618,276. The mean household debt was \$190,429 on unappreciated mortgages. Job losses, or loss of working hours can thrust many families into poverty, when confronted by unrepayable debts.

At the same time, for many the rental market is unaffordable. In Sydney, one of the most expensive cities in the world, median weekly rents range from a low of \$400 for a house and \$390 for a unit in the outer suburbs to a staggering \$1,750 for a house and \$720 for a unit in the wealthiest areas.

Hundreds of thousands of working-class families experience housing stress—more than 30 percent of their income is allocated to housing costs. To avoid housing stress, a family or individual living in Sydney would need to earn about \$1,800 a week, and in broader NSW, \$1,500.

Yet the minimum wage is only \$672.70 a week, while the maximum unemployment payment for a single adult without children is just \$237 a week. In May 2016, the average weekly pay for a full-time worker in NSW was just \$1,160.20.

Home ownership is declining, and is now at its lowest level in 50 years, marking an historic reversal from the post-World War II period of rising ownership. According to the best estimates, home ownership was at 51.7 percent in 2014, down from 57 percent in 2002. These statistics include those paying off mortgages. In 2011-12, outright home ownership was only 31 percent.

The Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, on which the report's data was based, demonstrated the ever-growing gulf between the wealthy and the poor. Between 2002 and 2014, the average net wealth of the top 1 percent of households more than doubled, from \$3,905,912 to \$8,491,287. By contrast, the mean net household wealth recorded for the lowest 10 percent was \$6,148 in 2002 and only \$10,820 in 2014.

Report lead author Baker appealed for remedial action, saying: "We believe governments need to take steps to ensure the supply of affordable and reasonable quality housing, otherwise we are destined to become a nation scarred once again by slums, reduced life chances and shortened lives."

But despite occasional government lip service to

providing affordable accommodation, the housing crisis has continued to worsen. It is driven by soaring prices that are producing a bonanza for property developers, real estate speculators, finance houses and construction giants. Capitalism systematically subordinates the needs of millions of people to the demands of private profit, with a terrible price being paid by the working class, particularly its poorest and most vulnerable members.



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