

Examining how overcrowding in Australian households is measured



Based on AHURI Final Report No. 382: How many in a crowd?
Assessing overcrowding measures in Australian housing

What this research is about

This research assess the measurement of overcrowding in Australia and explores the relationships between various household density measures and the wellbeing of occupants.

The context of this research

Groups known to be disproportionately affected by overcrowding include low-income families, Indigenous Australians and those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, particularly recent migrants. People in severe overcrowding can be considered a special group of homeless, given their lack of control over, or access to, space for social relations. Children may be particularly susceptible to the negative effects of overcrowding, especially their education outcomes.

How overcrowding is measured

How overcrowding is defined and measured has important implications for funding requirements, the appropriate mix of housing stock given household structures and rules for allocating families to public and community housing. Few, if any, of the measures commonly used as indicators of the incidence or severity of household overcrowding in Australia actually measure overcrowding directly, instead they are based on occupant density—some configuration of the ratio of occupants to available space. The most commonly used guide, the Canadian National Occupancy Standard (CNOS), sets out the number of required bedrooms for households based on number of occupants, their age, gender and relationships.

However, overcrowding relates to a subjective sense or psychological response to the sense of excessive density.

The key findings

There is a complex relationship between occupant density and wellbeing within and across households. Any measure based only on readily observable metrics of household composition and the number of bedrooms is unlikely to accurately discriminate between households that are overcrowded—in that occupants are suffering significant adverse effects from excessive density—from households that are not overcrowded. While such measures may have some descriptive value, they will not adequately meet informational needs for many policy and practice purposes, including the targeting of assistance.

Experiences of overcrowding

Three primary types of living arrangements were said to be common among overcrowded households:

1. family living situations—large nuclear families, multigenerational family groups and extended family groupings
2. having visitors (particularly for Indigenous households)—as part of traditional Indigenous movement and mobility patterns between communities
3. house share arrangements (particularly for CALD households)—such as where multiple families opt to live together within the same home in order to reduce their housing costs.

The experiences of people from CALD and Indigenous backgrounds living in overcrowded households were explored in qualitative interviews. The interviews revealed substantial negative effects associated with overcrowding, including lack of privacy, excessive noise, incidents of antisocial behaviour, child safety and wellbeing concerns, increased housework, food theft, and family and financial strain. Family strain heightened by overcrowding can lead to irrevocable relationship breakdowns and family violence. Service providers are also impacted by having to manage additional repairs and maintenance, provision of intensive tenancy support and the need to reallocate tenants.

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Some positive effects of larger households were noted, including caring for family members, strengthened family ties, promotion of cultural identity, companionship and financial benefits. Some individuals felt living with a large number of other people was considered to be the natural way that they managed their home and as such their homes felt ‘comfortably full’ rather than overcrowded. The realisation of benefits generally relies on the household being well-functioning.

Some CALD householders (particularly those living in multi-generational households in Adelaide) felt that their homes were physically large enough to accommodate their family. For other respondents, as long as their family life was functioning well, they did not consider their living situation to be overly crowded.

How many homes are overcrowded?

The HILDA analysis, based on the CNOS, finds less than 3 per cent of households required an additional bedroom. The 2016 Census, also based on the CNOS, gives a very similar picture with 96 per cent of households having a suitable number of bedrooms.

The frequent mobility of Indigenous people between remote communities and urban centres was said to make it challenging to obtain an accurate reflection of real population numbers within these locations. It was observed that renting householders may be reluctant to self-report the true number of people actually living within their home (to both the ABS and their housing provider) for fear of the negative implications this could have for their tenancy. It was also noted that some Indigenous people may be reluctant to acknowledge that their home was overcrowded for fear that child protection agencies would become involved and remove their children.

Problems with CNOS

The CNOS also has many limitations including inability to account for cultural differences in living arrangements, reliance on survey data considered deficient in representing people from Indigenous backgrounds (especially those living in remote areas), and inability to differentiate between overcrowded households that function well and those that are dysfunctional and experience issues.

The assessment of the number of bedrooms required by a household (as determined by household size, ages and gender) was felt to be inappropriate when considering diverse patterns of living (CNOS described a house as being overcrowded if more than two persons shared a bedroom).

The steeper decline in wellbeing observed in homes with fewer bedrooms highlights a potential misspecification of the CNOS as a measure of overcrowding. The results suggest any adverse effect of needing an extra bedroom in a small (two-bedroom) home should be substantially greater than the effect of requiring an additional bedroom in a four-bedroom home (e.g. CNOS would have a value of one in both cases and would not pick up this difference). For the application of the CNOS as an indicator of overcrowding, this suggests extra bedrooms required should be given greater weight for smaller homes.

Some stakeholders recognised that the implementation of overcrowding measures took away the rights of people to decide who, and with how many people, they wanted to live with. Respondents were also aware that at times these living arrangements were not necessarily a cultural choice but were imposed upon those living in the household due to a lack of other accommodation options.

Lived experience views on overcrowding

Respondents suggested that a home could be considered to be overcrowded if the occupants were unable to use their home as they wished. For women from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and CALD backgrounds who were sharing living spaces with male residents, this was linked to feelings of a lack of privacy and safety. For children living in overcrowded households, a lack of freedom to play was noted. Some household respondents also described dissatisfaction with being unable to use communal spaces as these were already being occupied, e.g. by people watching TV or children doing homework.

Stakeholders action to measure overcrowding

As a consequence of the perceived limitations of current official measures of overcrowding, some housing organisations have developed their own organisational guidelines as to the number of residents who should be living in a property at any one time. This is based on the size of the property, the age of the residents and the level of housing need. Other stakeholders reported that their organisations were conducting research (e.g. surveys and interviews) to understand the extent of overcrowding for their clients. For these stakeholders, overcrowding needed to be reframed away from a density measure to instead try and capture the personal and subjective reaction to living in a crowded environment.

These approaches should have the capacity to capture personal and subjective experiences of living in overcrowded environments. This includes exploring with residents themselves whether they consider their home to be overcrowded or not, and whether their current living situation meets their needs and works for them. Measures of overcrowding should also take into account the preferred ways of living for households from Indigenous and CALD backgrounds.

The limitations of occupant density measures for identifying overcrowding mean that additional subjective data, described as 'stress measures', are required in settings where it is important to positively identify overcrowding accurately, such as for housing providers and welfare support services. Household or family-functioning is an important moderator of adverse effects of density on wellbeing and should be a priority in the collection of such subjective data. The very low incidence of overcrowding in the Australian population further favours targeted measurement over broad-based surveys in the identification of overcrowding for many policy and practice purposes.

The impacts of overcrowding

The relationship between household density and occupant wellbeing is highly nuanced. Contrary to theoretical expectations, negative associations between occupant density and wellbeing are observed at very low levels of density (that is, in uncrowded households). It should be noted that the magnitude of crowding effects are small when compared to other key variables, such as the positive effect of being married or detrimental effects of having a disability.

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Other impacts identified in the research include:

- Adverse associations between higher household density and wellbeing apply primarily to parents, with small and even positive associations for other adult occupants
- Multiple families living in the same home has a substantial negative impact on occupants' wellbeing in addition to any effect on household density
- Well-functioning households have a greater capacity to manage higher occupant density
- Australians of Asian background live in higher density households but little support is found for the hypothesis that cultural norms leave them less sensitive to impacts of higher density
- Recent humanitarian migrants are significantly more likely to live in overcrowded housing, and wellbeing increases with household density beyond levels that would normally be considered as overcrowding.

Addressing overcrowding

At a systems-level, there is a need to expand the current stock of public housing and there is a need for greater diversity of housing stock, including a range of differently-sized properties that could meet household needs and assist in reducing overcrowding. Public and social housing should be designed in more culturally appropriate ways to better suit how households wish to live.

Addressing issues present within the private rental market—including instances of discrimination and exploitation—was also felt to be required, along with better support for asylum seekers in need of housing.

The broader non-housing service sector also plays a central role in addressing overcrowding. The need for a wraparound service approach to better manage the negative impacts of overcrowded households was highlighted. Effective liaison between housing providers and government services was also considered to support a joined-up approach to overcrowding.

What this research means for policy makers

A key finding is that current measures of overcrowding based on readily observable objective variables have at best a tenuous link to actual experiences of crowding. The research is sceptical that any measure based on such readily observable metrics will accurately identify households suffering adverse impacts of overcrowding, except perhaps at the extremes of the distribution.

Potential approaches to develop more effective indicators of overcrowding and unmet housing demand in large-scale surveys include:

- data that provides a more robust indicator of the adequacy of living space than just the number of bedrooms—this may include floor space, the number of rooms, the number of bathrooms and toilets and, for households with children, outdoor play spaces
- accounting for the presence of multiple families in the household.

The measurement of overcrowding calls for qualitative, rather than quantitative, approaches, or at least some combination of the two, and requires the development of instruments that capture key channels of adverse consequences of excessive density on wellbeing, including feelings of a lack of privacy, loss of a locus of control, symptoms of over-stimulation (such as sleeping difficulties, excessive noise) and risks to safety for children, women and other vulnerable household members. As a key moderator, assessing family or household- functioning would also provide valuable information on overcrowding risks.

Methodology

This research analysed the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey and the Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA) survey and conducted interviews with key stakeholder organisations and people living in overcrowded housing in APY Lands, Alice Springs, Adelaide and Western Sydney.

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To cite the AHURI research, please refer to:

Dockery, A.M., Moskos, M., Isherwood, L. and Harris, M. (2022) *How many in a crowd? Assessing overcrowding measures in Australian housing*, AHURI Final Report No. 382, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne.

Available from the AHURI website at ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/382