

NATIONAL HOMELESSNESS CONFERENCE 2022

Jointly convened by



CONCURRENT SESSION

C2 Overcrowding

How many in a crowd? Assessing overcrowding measures in Australian housing

Prof. Mike Dockery, Bankwest Curtin
Economics Centre, Curtin University

Dr Megan Moskos, Future of Employment
and Skills Research Centre, The University
of Adelaide

Dr Linda Isherwood, The University of
Adelaide

Prof. Mark Harris, Curtin University

bankwest



Curtin University



**THE UNIVERSITY
of ADELAIDE**

Rationale

- The issue of crowding (or ‘overcrowding’) attracts considerable attention in housing policy
- How overcrowding is defined and measured has important implications for funding requirements, the appropriate mix of housing stock, and rules for housing allocation
- Few measures used in Australia actually measure overcrowding directly - instead are based on occupant density, e.g. CNOS
- Critical that policy is guided by measures of overcrowding that meaningfully reflect housing adequacy
- Our research provides a reassessment of the measurement of overcrowding and evidence to guide the development of improved measures

Mixed methods research approach

1. Quantitative Research

- Extensive empirical exploration of the association between density measures and occupant wellbeing
 - Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey (HILDA)
 - Building a New Life in Australia Survey (BNLA)
- Identify density levels associated with adverse effects on wellbeing

2. Qualitative Research

- Interviews undertaken with stakeholders and householders
- Explored lived experience of overcrowding:
 - Factors driving and/or resulting from crowding
 - Understand when occupancy levels can be considered crowded
 - Coping mechanisms

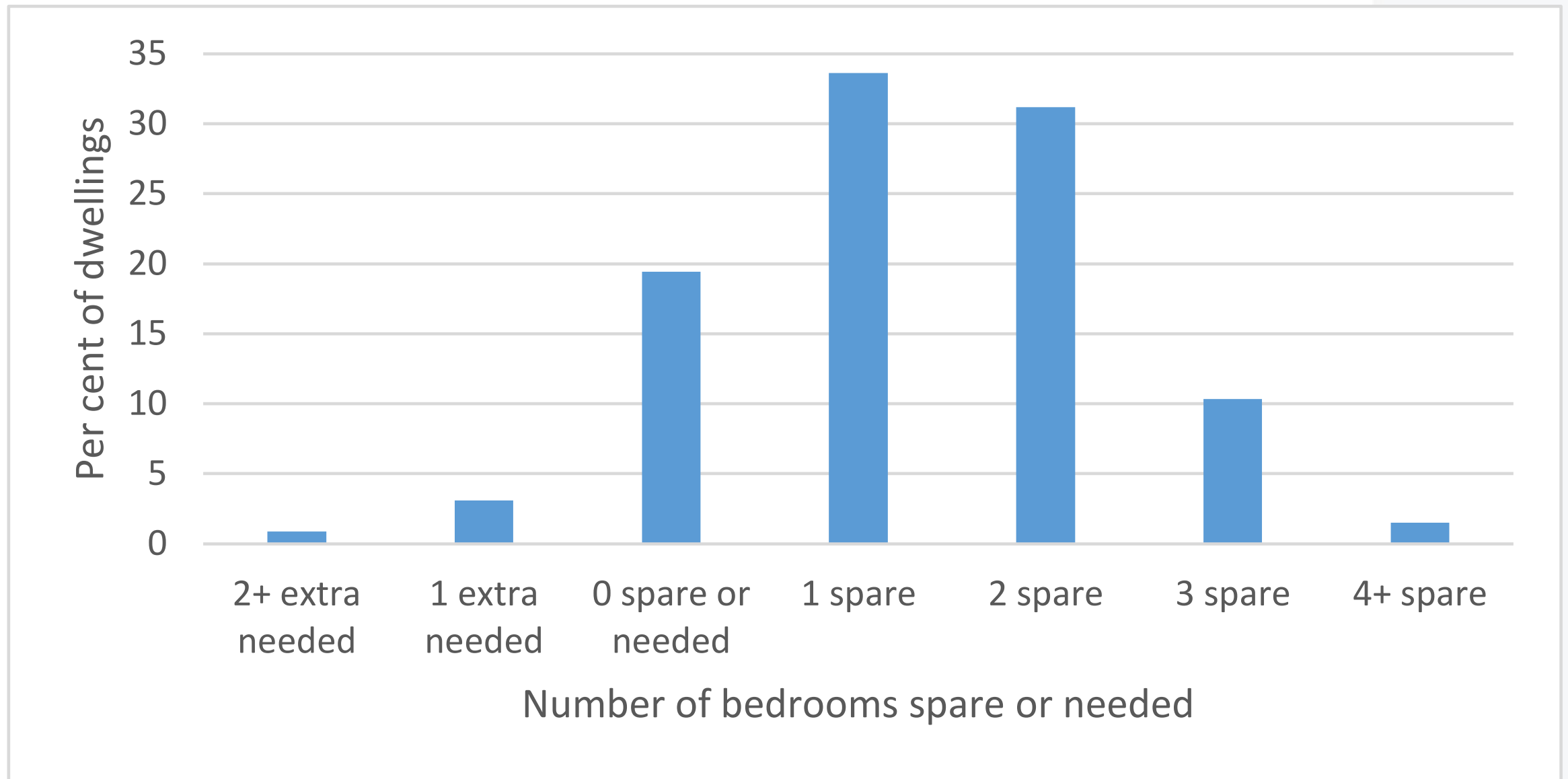
The measurement problem

- Crowding, or ‘overcrowding’, relates to a **subjective** or psychological response to the sense of being too crowded:
 - Lack of control over personal space, lack of privacy
 - Overstimulation/sensory overload
- Instead, measures of overcrowding are based on **objective**, physical measures of inside density
 - Focus on simple and easily observable metrics, such as number of people, or people per bedroom
 - Canadian National Occupancy Standard (CNOS)
- Density measures have, at best, a very tenuous link to actual experiences or feelings of crowding

Empirical challenges

- Only a very small fraction of households in Australia could be considered as 'overcrowded' by any reasonable measure. As measured by the CNOS:
 - The norm is for households to have 1 or 2 spare bedrooms
 - 3-4% of households require additional bedrooms (representing 5-6% of people)
- Effects of greater density are highly nuanced:
 - Different effects for different household members
 - Differing cultural norms around living arrangements and shared spaces
 - Conflation of occupancy and density
- Moderating effects (eg. external supports, strong interpersonal relationships)
- Opposing negative and positive effects of higher density

Housing utilisation, private dwellings, Australia, 2016



Quantitative findings

Extensive, sophisticated multivariate analyses of the HILDA and BNLA data of the relationship between density and wellbeing, and to identify ‘turning points’ in those relationships.

- Looked at measures of subjective wellbeing, mental health and psychological distress
- Among the general adult population, wellbeing declines as the number of occupants in a household increases above two
 - Crowding or just occupancy?
- Adverse effects of increased density apply primarily to parents
 - Small and even positive effects for other adult occupants
- Household functioning is a key moderator of the impacts of higher density
 - Confirmed using a simple proxy of satisfaction with intra-family relationships

Estimated association between household occupancy and mental health

(relative to household with 1 person or couple)



Quantitative findings

- Multiple families living in the same house has large, negative effect over and above any effect of household density
- Models of people's satisfaction with their home show Australians have a strong preferences for large houses
 - Even for households with just 2 or 3 occupants, four- or five-bedroom homes are preferred
- Cultural effects?
 - Australians of Asian background live in higher density households
 - No evidence that they are less sensitive to impacts of higher density
 - Recent humanitarian migrants also live in significantly more crowded housing
 - Wellbeing *increases* with household density beyond levels normally considered as overcrowded
- Simple count of household occupants or occupants/bedroom perform better than the CNOS in explaining variation in wellbeing

Qualitative findings

Qualitative research based on:

- 21 interviews with stakeholder organisations
- 85 interviews with people living in crowded households
 - 43 Indigenous householders (APY Lands, Alice Springs Town Camps, Adelaide)
 - 42 people from CALD backgrounds (Alice Springs, Adelaide, Western Sydney)
- Explored
 - Adequacy of current measures
 - Patterns of living arrangements
 - Factors driving crowding
 - Lived experience of crowding
 - Managing overcrowding

Adequacy of current overcrowding measures

- CNOS acknowledged as key measure to assess overcrowding but many limitations:
 - Inability to account for cultural difference
 - Reliance on survey data - deficient in representing people from Indigenous backgrounds
 - Inability to differentiate between crowded households that function well and those that are dysfunctional and experience issues
- Strong association between homelessness and overcrowding
- Recommended adopting different approaches to assess overcrowding:
 - Collating own data on household numbers
 - ascertain from residents whether living in large household was active choice or not

Patterns of living arrangements

- Three primary types of living arrangements common
 - Family living situations – large nuclear families, multigenerational family groups, extended family groupings

My brother and my brother's partner and children, and my daughter, my daughter's partner and my granddaughter, and my niece. Yeah, more than ten ... Four kids, four daughters and then partner, you know, and ... her partner's brother is staying with them too. And there's her brother and wife and kids, you know. [I: Wow! How big is your house?] Three bedrooms. APYA19-21

- Visitors (particularly for Indigenous households) – part of traditional Indigenous movement and mobility patterns

Other families from other communities come. Sports or funerals. Sometimes they stay four to six months. APYA01-04

- House share arrangements (particularly for CALD households), e.g. multiple families opting to live together to reduce housing costs

...there'd be two families living together, not related necessarily and sometimes they'd both be working part-time, have a bit of income on top of Centrelink, a few kids, and just not be able to crack it in the private rental market SH03

Drivers of overcrowding

- Issues with availability of housing - limited housing stock, difficulties accessing public housing, lack of housing diversity, poor quality housing, discrimination in private housing market
- Cultural norms and obligations - key factor that resulted in some people sharing home with extended family members or visitors
- Patterns of Indigenous movement between remote communities and regional/urban centres
- Personal factors - inability to afford accommodation, limited services in remote areas, escaping challenging circumstances
- COVID-19 pandemic - pressure on households in urban centres to accommodate people unable to return to remote communities, influx of people returning to homelands

Experiences of overcrowding

- Negative effects of overcrowding - privacy, noise, antisocial behaviour, child safety and wellbeing, housework, food theft, family and financial strain
- Positive effects of overcrowding - caring for family members, strengthened family ties, promotion of cultural identity, companionship, financial benefits
- Perceptions of overcrowding: 'comfortably full' or physically large enough to accommodate their family

The house can be crowded as long as the heart's not crowded, you know what I mean? That's how we think about it. So, if you're open-minded about it it's not crowded. ADLC09-14

- Impacts on service providers - additional property repairs and maintenance, provision of intensive tenancy support, assistance to find alternative accommodation

Managing overcrowding

- Housing providers:
 - Considerable flexibility in enforcement of rules relating to tenancy numbers, tenant responsibilities, visitors - recognition of limited alternative/affordable accommodation options
- Household members implemented own rules and strategies:
 - Management of sleeping arrangements, adapting living patterns, trying to keep positive mindset

When it's overcrowded sometimes we like to sleep outside, yeah, and let the children, women and children sleep inside. ASA08

- Restricting alcohol consumption, protecting possessions/food from theft
- I don't buy food ... The youngest one, the baby son, I leave it with him. ASA05*
- Specific strategies to manage visitors - refusing to accommodate unwanted visitors, using support of housing providers or police, making use of outdoor spaces, having a small house and/or dog to deter visitors

Because that's part of my rules, I'll keep doing that because if they don't want to listen to me, they either move out or I get the security or someone to come and remove them, the police... ASA12

Audience Question

- **If we could develop a new measure for overcrowding, what would that look like?**

Policy and practice implications for measuring overcrowding

- Measures of overcrowding based on household composition/number of bedrooms cannot adequately discriminate between crowded and uncrowded households
- Assumptions in CNOS on who can share a bedroom (i.e. age, gender, relationship status) have little validity for identifying crowdedness
- Potential approaches to develop more effective indicators of overcrowding:
 - Incorporation of data that provides more robust indicator of adequacy of living space than just number of bedrooms
 - Accounts for presence of multiple families in household
 - Reframes away from density measures - captures subjective reactions to living in crowded environment
 - Ascertains whether living in large household is active choice that meets needs or not
 - Culturally-specific measures for Indigenous households - take into account cultural norms, regularity of visitors, obligations to accommodate extended kinship networks
- Obtaining assessment of actual housing demand useful for future policy and practice

Questions?