

Understanding children's housing in Australia: a data framework



What this research is about

This project examines the available data on children's housing and wellbeing and current policy in Australia to highlight how housing affects children's health and development. It provides policymakers with a guide to the different housing situations children face, identifies significant knowledge gaps and related risks, and proposes priorities for policy-relevant data collection and evidence development.

Why this research is important

The impacts of Australia's housing crisis on children have received less attention than for other population groups. Accessible data collections rarely focus on them. Yet households with children are particularly affected by poor quality and insecure housing, and children's physical vulnerability and dependence on caregivers increases the related risks to their wellbeing. This underscores the need for stronger data insights to support earlier intervention, better targeting and more accountable policy for children.

Based on

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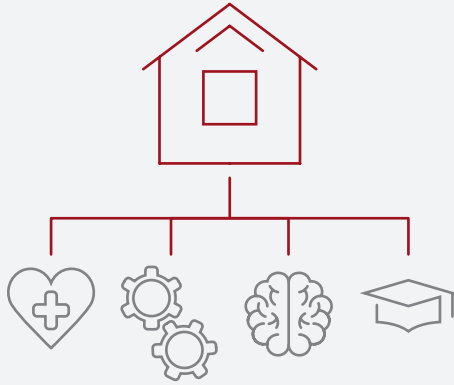
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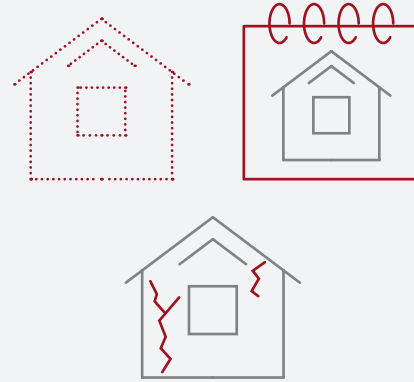


At a glance

There is growing evidence that housing shapes children's health, behaviour, development and education.



Housing stability, tenure and condition can affect children, and impacts can compound disadvantage.



Child-focused housing data can support earlier intervention, better targeting and more accountable policy.



Priorities for children's housing evidence include:

- ☒ building early warning and monitoring systems
- ☒ strengthening data linkage and continuity measures
- ☒ expanding and standardising measurement of housing quality.

Key findings:

Housing is a critical determinant of child wellbeing and development

There is growing evidence that housing is a critical determinant of children's physical and mental health, behavioural outcomes, developmental vulnerability and educational attainment.

Children's life outcomes are impacted by housing stability, type of tenure, and physical conditions. These can overlap to compound disadvantage.

Housing shapes children's lives directly, through exposure to affordability challenges and poor-quality environments, and indirectly, through the impacts of parental stress and family functioning, and access to services like education and health.

Housing disadvantage is rarely isolated – it interacts with poverty, remoteness, service access and broader socioeconomic conditions.

Data is fragmented and significant gaps persist

National surveys and linked administrative datasets provide valuable insights, yet no single dataset captures the full range of housing dimensions alongside health, education and other outcomes across childhood.

Children's perspectives are rarely captured, with housing often examined through adult-focused datasets. Tracking of children who spend time across multiple households is difficult. Housing coverage in administrative data is limited because it remains largely a private domain.

Measures of affordability, overcrowding and housing quality lack standardisation across datasets. Australia's data foundations are strong, but strategic enhancement and harmonisation are required to build a coherent, child-focused housing evidence system.

Poor housing hits children hardest during key life transitions

Impacts of poor housing matter most during children's key developmental transitions, such as starting school. Housing instability and disruption can compound disadvantage.

Children's housing circumstances are changing

Families with children have become more reliant on mortgage debt and private rental over the past two decades. This has increased affordability and insecurity stress.

Residential mobility is common in childhood. It is concentrated in the private rental sector, where instability risks are greatest.

Many children experience multiple housing risks that compound over time. This reinforces the life-course implications of housing disadvantage.

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Housing condition problems – including major repair needs and thermal discomfort – remain concentrated among lower-income and especially First Nations households.

A small but persistent proportion of children experience homelessness.

Policy actions:

This research provides a practical roadmap to achieve a more integrated evidence base that supports a child-centred approach to housing data, policy and practice.

Build early warning and monitoring systems

There is an opportunity to develop early warning and monitoring systems that make children's housing circumstances more visible within existing data and service infrastructures.

This could include the collection of child-relevant housing indicators (e.g. recent moves, affordability stress, dwelling problems) within universal and near-universal systems such as maternal and child health, early childhood education, schools and primary care services.

Such indicators could contribute to local service planning and earlier, targeted intervention.

Strengthen data linkage and continuity measures

Improved linkage between housing assistance data, education records, and health and social service datasets could enable more systematic analysis of how housing moves intersect with school changes, service use, and health or developmental outcomes.

Enhancements to longitudinal surveys, such as more detailed questions on reasons for moving, multi-home living arrangements and schooling continuity, would improve the analytical power of existing data.

Expand and standardise measurement of child-relevant housing conditions

There is a clear case for expanding and standardising the collection of child-relevant housing condition measures across key surveys and administrative systems.

'There is an opportunity to develop early warning and monitoring systems that make children's housing circumstances more visible within existing data and service infrastructures.'

Incorporating indicators on thermal comfort, damp and mould, crowding, safety and basic amenity into population surveys such as the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey would strengthen the evidence base linking housing conditions to children's health and development.

The Australian Housing Conditions Dataset provides a platform that could be further leveraged or linked to child outcome data to better understand the distribution and impacts of poor housing environments.

Research design:

This project was conducted across three research streams.

Stream 1 reviewed current research and available data on children's housing and wellbeing in Australia, identifying potential links with children's outcomes and gaps in the literature.

Stream 2 used key national datasets identified in stream 1 to examine children's housing circumstances and how they have changed over time, particularly regarding tenure, stability and conditions.

Stream 3 created the evidence priorities roadmap outlined above. It was guided by the evidence collected in streams 1–2 and two policy workshops with key stakeholders.

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