

What impact does a child's housing have on their development and wellbeing?

THOUGH LESS IMPORTANT THAN SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS, HOUSING PLAYS A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN CHILDREN'S PHYSICAL, SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL AND COGNITIVE OUTCOMES. POLICY-MAKERS CONCERNED ABOUT CHILD DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES SHOULD BE ESPECIALLY CONCERNED TO ADDRESS HOUSING FOR CHILDREN OF SOLE PARENTS AND INDIGENOUS FAMILIES.

KEY POINTS

- The statistical links between aspects of young children's housing and their wellbeing outcomes were quite modest. For example, most of the variation in child health outcomes—up to 95 per cent—remained unexplained, either because there were important variables not observed in the data set or because such outcomes are random in nature.
- Housing played a small though significant role in shaping outcomes of children's physical health. Living on a farm or in a more liveable neighbourhood also contributed to better physical health.
- Children's social and emotional outcomes were mostly affected by housing variables that adversely affect the quality of relationships—such as frequent moves, renting rather than owning and being in financial stress.
- Crowding had the largest negative impact on children's learning outcomes.
- Urban planning that featured parks, playgrounds and other open areas was likely to be conducive to children's development and wellbeing even if achieved at the expense of a higher density of actual dwellings.

This bulletin is based on research conducted by Associate Professor Alfred Michael Dockery, Associate Professor Rachel Ong, Dr Garth Kendall, Dr Jianghong Li and Dr Simon Colquhoun at the AHURI Research Centre—Curtin University. The research investigated whether housing factors play an important role in child development and wellbeing in Australia.

- The children of sole parents and Indigenous Australians were particularly affected by their inferior housing positions. There is a case for closer targeting of existing housing assistance programs for these groups and the development of forms of assistance that address their particular needs.

CONTEXT

The Coalition of Australian Governments (COAG) adopted a *National Early Childhood Development Strategy* which focused on health, safety, early learning and wellbeing outcomes of children aged 0–8 years. This study informed the strategy by investigating the role that housing and housing policy play in improving outcomes for children.

Understanding how housing policy might improve Indigenous child health and welfare outcomes is relevant to the *Closing the Gap* Indigenous reform strategy.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research conducted multivariate regression analysis using three waves of data from *Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC) and two waves of data from *Footprints in Time: The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children* (LSIC).

Child outcomes were measured across three domains: physical, social/emotional and learning.

Four main categories of housing influence were tested for their impact on children's outcomes: housing tenure, physical conditions and adequacy, housing affordability and neighbourhood effects.

KEY FINDINGS

Modest empirical associations between housing factors and key indicators of children's development and wellbeing

The proportion of variation explained by all variables specified (including socio-demographic variables) was relatively modest. The vast majority of variation in infant and preschool health

outcomes (95%) remained unexplained—either because of unobserved variables or random factors.

Table 1 shows the impact on child welfare outcomes from various housing variables.

The variable that was most important in explaining child health outcomes was 'parenting styles'. A 'warm' parenting style lifted an infant from the 50th (middle) percentile of outcomes to just below the 58th percentile. Housing factors exerted a small but significant influence on child wellbeing outcomes.

In terms of children's *physical health*, better physical types or conditions of housing all had positive impacts on health, especially living on a farm which lifted outcomes by 4 percentile points for infants and 8 percentile points for pre-schoolers. Neighbourhood characteristics had the greatest positive impact in terms of the housing effects analysed.

Negative impacts on child health came from unstable housing (frequent moves), whether the parents were in receipt of housing assistance and housing stress (which reduced infant health outcomes by 3.5 percentile points and pre-schoolers by 4.5 percentile points). The measured impact of dwelling condition was relatively low: living in a dwelling assessed as 'well kept' as opposed to 'badly deteriorated' was associated with just a 2 percentile improvement in outcomes from the 50th percentile.

Insecure housing tenure remained the most important issue for *socio-emotional* outcomes, with frequent moves and renting both having negative impacts. Households in receipt of housing assistance and experiencing housing stress were negatively correlated with socio-emotional outcomes, which suggested parental stresses were transmitted to children. Children living in a unit also experienced negative outcomes relative to those living in a separate house, suggesting that confined spaces may also undermine outcomes.

Children's *learning outcomes* were poorer in lower socioeconomic neighbourhoods. Crowding (including lack of separate study spaces or separate bedrooms), renting and receipt of housing assistance also undermined outcomes.

The improved child outcomes across all indicators of neighbourhood liveability, together with the positive physical health effects of living on a farm, showed the benefits to children of having greater opportunities to play, explore and be physically active within a safe neighbourhood environment. Concerns about raising children in high rises are not necessarily valid if those places also provide adequate places outside to play.

Housing appeared to play a minor role in transmitting socio-economic disadvantage, with neighbourhood effects being the main channel rather than dwelling type. However, inferior housing does contribute to poorer outcomes for children from Indigenous and sole-parent families.

No significant links between childhood obesity and housing

No evidence was found of any robust associations between childhood obesity and the physical characteristics of the home or neighbourhood environment, nor between childhood obesity and

housing tenure. Only the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) index of neighbourhood disadvantage proved substantial and highly significant, suggesting that peer-group effects from neighbours of higher socio-economic status reduced the incidence of obesity.

Links between housing factors and child development and wellbeing vary over time

The benefits of higher family socio-economic status on child outcomes generally widened as children age, while parenting styles had larger effects on outcomes for very young children. Neighbourhood characteristics were more important for children from kindergarten age onwards, notably with respect to physical health.

Indigenous children have inferior housing experiences

Indigenous children lived in starkly inferior housing circumstances when compared to non-Indigenous children. Disadvantage faced by Indigenous children increased as children age suggesting that interventions may be required regularly as they age.

Important factors contributing to the inferior outcomes observed for Indigenous children for physical health included inferior neighbourhoods

TABLE 1: HOUSING VARIABLES AND DIRECTION OF SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON CHILD OUTCOMES

Category	Construct	Physical	Social/Emotional	Learning
Housing tenure	Unstable housing	Negative	Negative	–
	Renting	–	Negative	Negative
	Receives housing assistance	Negative	Negative	Negative
Physical conditions/adequacy of dwelling	Dwelling type (unit)*	–	Negative	–
	Dwelling type (farm)*	Positive	–	–
	Dwelling condition	Positive	Positive	Positive
	Crowding	–	–	Negative
Housing affordability	Housing stress	Negative	Negative	–
Neighbourhood environment	Condition of nearby buildings	–	Negative	–
	Neighbourhood livability	Positive	Positive	Positive
	Neighbourhood facilities	Positive	Positive	–
	Neighbourhood socio-economic status	–	Positive	Positive

Notes: - denotes that the variable was not statistically significant in either direction

* relative to separate house.

and poorer physical condition of dwellings. Poorer socio-emotional and learning outcomes resulted from living in public housing and greater crowding.

Housing assistance affects outcomes for children

Families on housing assistance lived in more crowded housing and less liveable neighbourhoods. Being in receipt of housing assistance had the largest negative impact for pre-school aged children.

Recipients of Commonwealth Rent Assistance faced greater housing affordability stress and had less housing stability. Their children had significantly poorer outcomes in each of the three domains, with the worst outcomes observed for children in public housing, and learning outcomes the domain most affected. The largest contribution to these lower outcomes came from the pre-existing socio-demographic characteristics of these families. The results imply that the resources invested in housing assistance programs provided an effective safety net, in terms of adequacy of housing, for those families and their children.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings suggested a more important role for neighbourhood effects over the characteristics of individual dwellings in promoting the wellbeing of children, particularly once they pass toddlerhood. Urban planning that features parks, playgrounds and other open areas are likely to be conducive to children's development and wellbeing even if achieved at the expense of higher density living. Neighbourhood amenity should be taken into consideration when

allocating public housing properties to families with young children.

To the limited extent that housing policy can address socio-economic inequality, social resources would best be directed to improving neighbourhood amenity and the quality of schools in poorer neighbourhoods.

There may be a case for a higher level of assistance for families with pre-school aged children, with the aim of reducing housing related financial stress and housing instability.

Parents and housing and education practitioners need to be aware of the importance of separate bedrooms for positive learning outcomes for school-aged children.

Policies to improve outcomes for children from sole-parent families should seek to promote more stable housing tenures.

Efforts to address Indigenous disadvantage must commence at infancy and continue through the life course.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 80651, *Housing and children's development and wellbeing: evidence from Australian data*.

Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: www.ahuri.edu.au or by contacting AHURI Limited on +61 3 9660 2300.

ahuri.edu.au



ADDRESS Level 1, 114 Flinders Street Melbourne Victoria 3000 TELEPHONE +61 3 9660 2300
FACSIMILE +61 3 9663 5488 EMAIL information@ahuri.edu.au WEB www.ahuri.edu.au

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