

What is overcrowding and severe overcrowding and what can be done about it?



Australian Housing
and Urban Research Institute

Based on AHURI Professional Services report:
Overcrowding and severe overcrowding: an analysis
of literature, data, policies and programs

What this research is about

This research examines overcrowding and severe overcrowding in private and social housing, with a focus on New South Wales. The purpose of the research is to understand the scale and scope of overcrowding and severe overcrowding, including trends, causes, impacts and what can be done to reduce its impact.

The context of this research

The 2016 Census showed a 37 per cent increase in homelessness in NSW since 2011, with severe overcrowding being a key driver of this increase. People living in severely overcrowded dwellings constituted 45 per cent of all homeless people in NSW on Census night 2016. This project is part of the implementation of the *NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018–2023*.

What is overcrowding and severe overcrowding and why does it matter?

Overcrowding occurs when a household does not have enough space to accommodate all of its members adequately. The Canadian National Occupancy Standard (CNOS) is the most commonly used measure of overcrowding in Australia and is used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

The measure assesses the bedroom requirements of a household by specifying that:

- there should be no more than two persons per bedroom
- children less than five years of age of different sexes may reasonably share a bedroom
- children less than 18 years of age and of the same sex may reasonably share a bedroom
- single household members 18 years and over should have a separate bedroom, as should parents or couples and
- a lone person household may reasonably occupy a bed sitter.

Severe overcrowding is defined by the ABS as households that need four or more additional bedrooms and is considered a form of homelessness. Overcrowded households need three additional bedrooms; the ABS categorises them as being marginally housed and therefore at **risk** of homelessness. However, the CNOS is based on Western cultural norms and may therefore not be applicable to some key groups experiencing overcrowding, such as migrants, overseas students and Indigenous people.

The overcrowding rate measures the incidence of overcrowding as the

number of affected households per 10,000 of the population. It is an important measure of overcrowding as it compensates for any changes in overcrowding that may be due to population growth.

Severe and persistent overcrowding is most problematic and affects householder's control or ability to manage normal household functioning, reduces dwelling cleanliness, causes injury and property damage. It is more likely to result in greater anxiety or stress, poorer health and child development outcomes, household conflict and forced mobility or homelessness.

The link between persistent overcrowding and homelessness is not well understood. Migrants and tertiary students experiencing overcrowding do not tend to experience high rates of homelessness, while Indigenous people experience both high rates of homelessness and overcrowding. It is possible that the former have access to family resources and social networks formed through living with relatives and friends, that protect from other forms of homelessness. Conversely, it is possible migrants and students have trouble accessing homelessness services.

Table 1: Number of people experiencing overcrowding, by age, NSW, 2016

Age group	Severe overcrowding (CNOS 4+)	Per cent	Other overcrowding (CNOS 3)	Per cent	NSW population by age group
Under 12	2,264	13%	5,462	17%	31%
12–18	1,482	9%	3,483	11%	
19–24	3,929	23%	7,064	22%	
25–54	7,790	46%	13,961	43%	41%
55+	1,353	8%	2,534	8%	28%
Total	16,818	100%	32,504	100%	100%

Source: ABS 2016

How many people are experiencing overcrowding and severe overcrowding and where does this occur?

The number of people experiencing severe overcrowding and overcrowding in NSW and Australia is increasing

In Australia, the number of persons occupying severely overcrowded dwellings increased from 41,370 in 2011 to 51,088 in 2016 (23% increase). The number of persons in overcrowded dwellings increased by 32 per cent from 60,878 in 2011 to 80,908 in 2016.

Severe overcrowding has more than tripled in NSW, from 5,120 persons in 2001 to 16,818 persons in 2016 (see table 1). In 2016, the rate of severe overcrowding in NSW (22.5 persons per 10,000 population) was marginally higher than in Australia (21.8 persons per 10,000 of the population, see figure 1). However, the rate of overcrowding where households require three additional bedrooms was markedly higher in NSW (43.5 per 10,000 of the population) compared to Australia (34.6 per 10,000 of the population).

Severe overcrowding is concentrated in Sydney, particularly in Auburn

Auburn and Inner Sydney recorded extreme increases in severe overcrowding between 2011 and 2016 (increases of 51 to 108 persons per 10,000, see figure 2). Severe

overcrowding increased to a lesser degree in inner city and south western suburbs. National data shows that 71 per cent of all severely overcrowded dwellings are rented (private and social rental) and the majority (73%) are separate houses. In most areas of Sydney, the rate of severe overcrowding has been increasing.

Families and migrants make up the largest cohorts of overcrowded households

Most persons (83%) experiencing overcrowding live with their family or in multiple family households (table 2). Young persons under the age of 25 made up 45 per cent of those experiencing severe overcrowding in NSW in 2016, which was well above the proportion of young people in the NSW population (31%) (see table 1).

The rate of severe overcrowding among tertiary students more than doubled from around 32 persons per 10,000 in 2011 to 65 persons per 10,000 in 2016, which is much higher than for persons not attending educational institutions (11 and 18 persons per 10,000 of the population in 2011 and 2016 respectively) (see figure 1).

Migrants are overrepresented in overcrowding. In 2016, in NSW, around 72 per cent of those in severe overcrowding and 63 per cent of those in other overcrowding were born overseas. Between 2011 and 2016 the rate of severe overcrowding among migrants in NSW rose from 84 per 10,000 to 130 per 10,000 (figure 1). Severe overcrowding is especially

apparent among migrants from Asian countries. In 2016, one fifth of all persons in severe overcrowding came from Southern and Central Asia; another 19 per cent came from South-East Asia. Overcrowding affects migrants regardless of English proficiency. Note that there may be overlap between groups, e.g. a person can be a migrant and a tertiary student.

Indigenous overcrowding

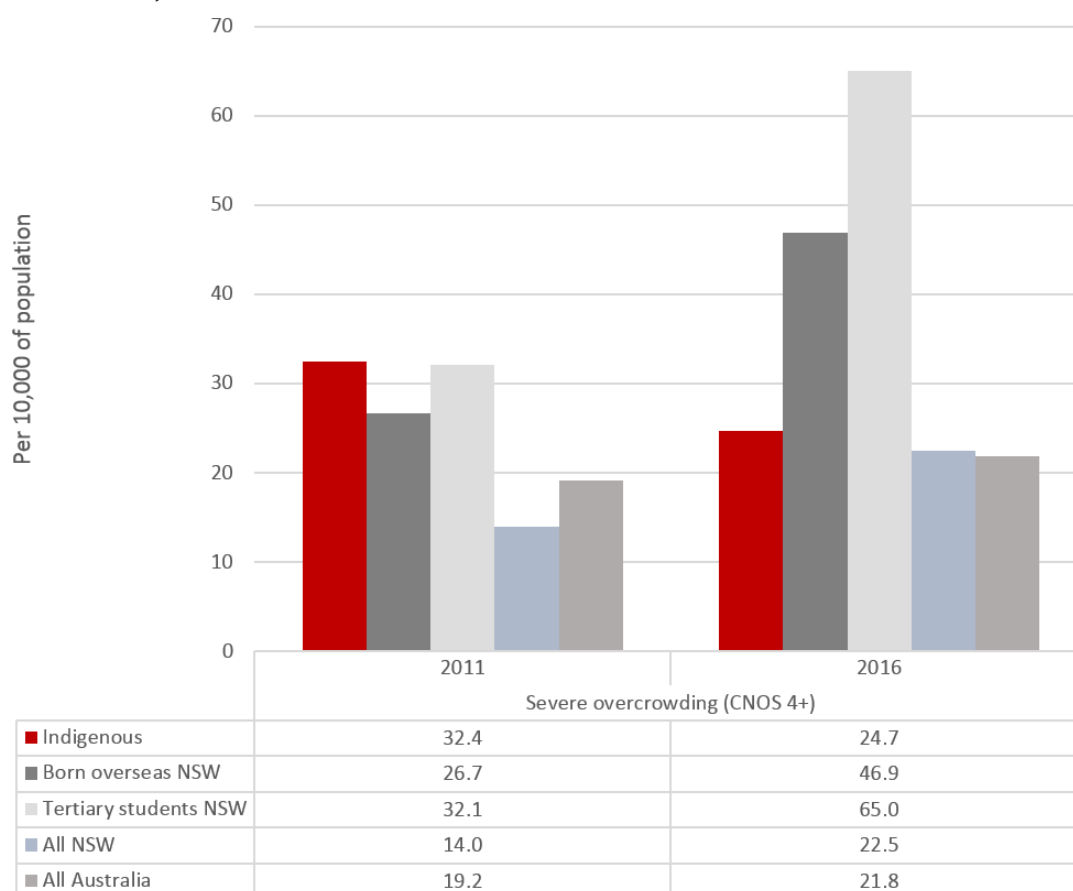
While the absolute number of Indigenous people in severe and other overcrowding is increasing, rates of severe and other overcrowding for Indigenous people are decreasing. This is because the growth in numbers is offset by population growth; i.e. the number of overcrowded and severely overcrowded Indigenous households is declining as a proportion of the total population. In NSW, the rate of severe overcrowding in 2016 was on par with that for the non-Indigenous population (25 and 24 persons per 10,000 respectively); the rate of overcrowding among Indigenous households was 65 persons per 10,000 in 2016 (45 persons per 10,000 for the non-Indigenous population).

Why does overcrowding occur?

Structural and individual factors drive overcrowding

Overcrowding is driven by the combination of high rents and low incomes. Overcrowding is more prevalent in locations of housing

Figure 1: Rate of persons experiencing severe and other overcrowding (per 10,000 of the population) Australia and NSW, 2011 and 2016



Source: ABS Census 2011 and 2016

affordability stress (households on low incomes that face higher housing costs) and tight housing markets (low rates of rental vacancy). Locations with more social housing and higher rates of unemployment are significantly linked to severe overcrowding. However, overcrowded households are increasingly likely to reside in areas with lower unemployment, suggesting that people may live in overcrowded

dwellings in order to access work or education. Availability of suitable housing stock (e.g. for large families) is a contributing factor for overcrowding.

Household circumstances such as family growth, the migration process, and high rates of temporary mobility (especially in Indigenous contexts) contribute to overcrowding. Economic drivers like low income, housing

affordability pressures and landlord profit also play a significant role.

Individual and cultural factors also impact overcrowding. Locations with high numbers of Indigenous people, migrants, and large families are all significantly related to the incidence of overcrowding.

Table 2: Composition of households in severely overcrowded dwellings (CNOS +4), Australia, 2016

Household composition	Number of severely crowded dwellings	Number of persons in severely crowded dwellings	Per cent of all persons in severely overcrowded dwellings
One family household	2,241	17,580	34%
Multiple family household	2,349	25,237	49%
Lone person household	0	0	0%
Group household	1,214	8,278	16%
Visitors only	0	0	0%
Total	5,806	51,088	100%

Source: ABS Census 2011, 2016

What is the impact of overcrowding?

Adverse impacts of overcrowding

Overcrowding and severe overcrowding can negatively affect households and individuals through a loss of privacy, reduced sociability, increase in conflict in the household and increased risk of forced exit into homelessness. It can adversely affect physical and mental health, as well as childhood development and educational outcomes. Overcrowding might also impact on property owners through property damage.

Households make a range of adaptations to manage overcrowding

Households respond to overcrowding with a range of measures, such as repurposing living space and garages

for sleeping space or sacrificing privacy in bedrooms. Some leaseholders cope with these adaptations well, but others struggle, which can cause them additional stress and can affect their ability to retain the lease.

Benefits of overcrowding

Living together confers several benefits, such as pooled budgeting, reduced costs of accommodation and family and community connection. These positive impacts are often weighed up by individuals against the potential negative outcomes.

Exits from overcrowding

It is difficult to know how long an individual stays in overcrowded conditions due to a lack of good longitudinal Australian data. There are several pathways by which individuals and households exit overcrowding. Some exit into more suitable and less crowded accommodation, some

remain in overcrowded conditions for long durations, while others exit overcrowding into other forms of homelessness.

What can be done about overcrowding and severe overcrowding?

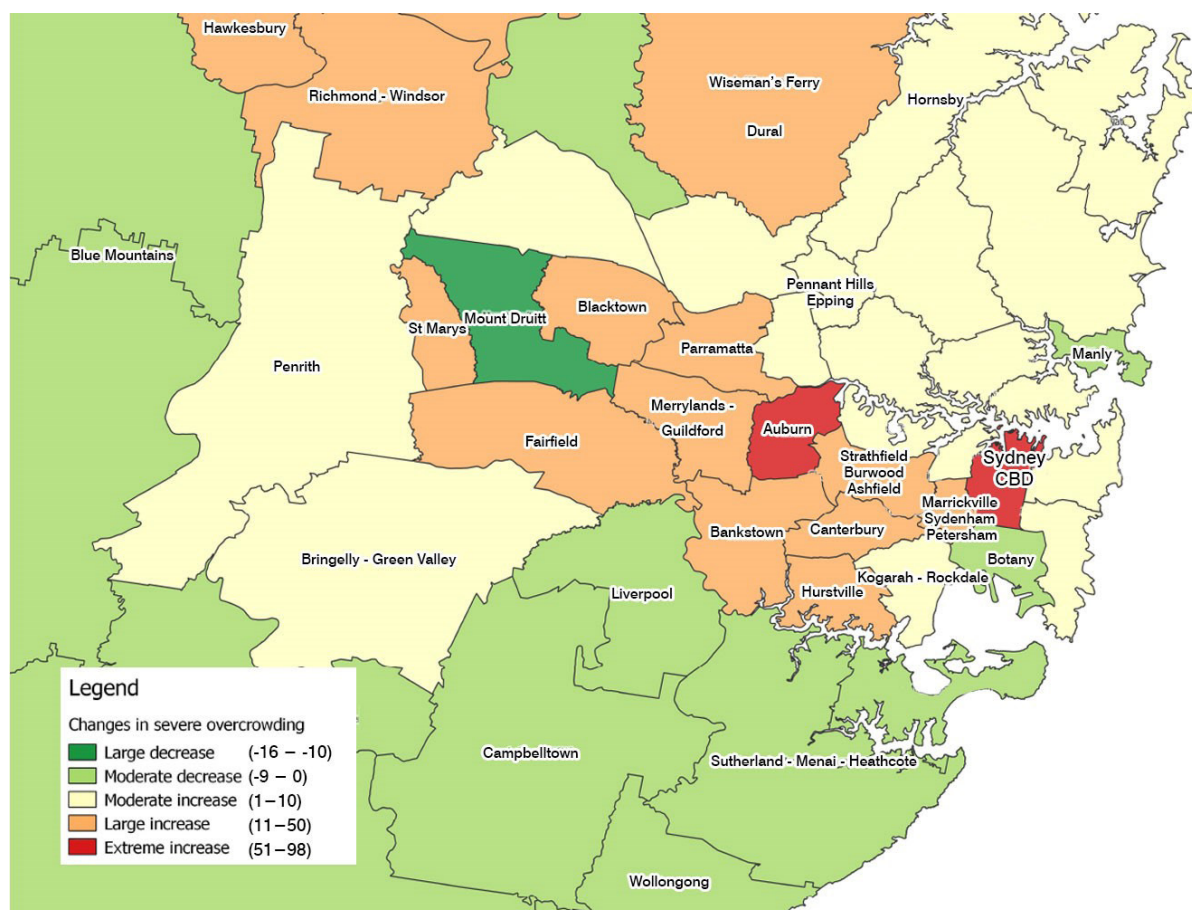
People experiencing overcrowding are not a homogenous group and nuanced policy approaches and interventions are required.

Working with key groups affected

Severe overcrowding could be addressed by working with key groups affected, such as migrants, Indigenous persons and tertiary students and those that are well placed to represent their interests.

This should involve consultative approaches to working with organisations; working with existing

Figure 2: Changes in severe overcrowding in the Greater Sydney Area, rate per 10,000 of the population 2011–2016



Source: Based on ABS Census 2011 and 2016

social networks in order to preserve householders' social capital; and culturally appropriate measures of overcrowding.

Better access to housing

A lack of appropriate and affordable housing is a key driver of overcrowding.

There is a need for more affordable and appropriately sized and designed social and private rental housing that can cope with higher numbers of residents (e.g. large families) and is appropriately designed for their needs. Discrimination in the private rental market contributes to poor housing accessibility for groups with higher rates of overcrowding. Programs that reduce discrimination against these groups would contribute to alleviating overcrowding.

Programs to enable people to transition out of overcrowding

Severe overcrowding could be addressed by culturally tailored and targeted programs, for example by providing support for migrants to navigate housing markets, and bonds or bond guarantees to assist migrants in accessing private rentals. This could include programs that provide homelessness related supports to overcrowded households.

Regulation

Revising laws and regulations to reduce overcrowding may be effective if done sensitively and in collaboration with affected groups.

This will need to be combined with measures to address the underlying causes of overcrowding and increase the availability of alternative accommodation. Planning laws could be used to foster new affordable and safe forms of shared tenure like new generation boarding houses. There is a need to strengthen processes to enforce compliance with regulation, complaints and remedies processes.

Education

Some key groups experiencing overcrowding (e.g. international students and recently arrived migrants) lack knowledge of tenancy rights and the Australian rental market. Education campaigns for these groups and landlords would be a first step to remedy this. More intense interventions include the provision of outreach services with case management support for renters at risk and those with special needs.

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Methodology

The research reviewed the Australian and international literature on overcrowding, and analysed data from the Census of population and housing.

Further information

TO CITE THE AHURI RESEARCH, PLEASE REFER TO:

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