

The impact of housing problems on mental health

April 2017

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Executive summary

An overview

Shelter in partnership with the research agency, ComRes, explored the relationship between housing and mental health through a two-stage research project in early 2017. This research was central to Shelter's 2017 Spring Advice and Services Campaign, and it is hoped it will provide a future evidence base for the necessary debate on how to reduce the negative impact housing problems can have on people's mental health and usage of health services.

'You should be most happy at home and at work, and if you're not happy in those places, you know, it's going to lead to anxiety and depression.'

GP, Birmingham

Qualitative research with 20 GPs

The methodology

Twenty in-depth phone interviews were conducted between January and February 2017 with GPs in London (four), Manchester (four), Birmingham (four), Bristol (three), Sheffield (three) and Newcastle (two).

Key findings

- GPs spontaneously identified housing issues when discussing factors involved in their patients' mental health presentations.
- Where housing was seen as the sole cause of mental health conditions, the most commonly cited conditions were anxiety and depression.
- Where patients presented with a mental health condition that was linked to problems with housing, the GPs felt they had a knowledge and support gap.

Quantitative research with 3,509 English adults

The methodology

ComRes interviewed 3,509 English adults online between 17th and 23rd February 2017. Data were weighted by age, gender, region and socio-economic grade to be representative of all English adults.

Key findings

- 1 in 5 English adults (21%) said a housing issue had negatively impacted upon their mental health in the last 5 years.
- Housing affordability was the most frequently referenced issue by those who saw housing pressures having had a negative impact upon their mental health.
- 3 in 10 of those who have had a housing problem or worry in the last five years, not only said that it had had a negative mental impact, but that they had no issue with their mental health previously.

Introduction: Why this is important

Housing and mental health in England are both frequently described as in 'crisis'ⁱ, and the relationship between housing issues and mental health has been the focus of increasing debate in recent years, both publiclyⁱⁱ and amongst expert audiences^{iiiiv}. Through Shelter's work helping millions of people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness through our advice, support and legal services, we are well aware of the impacts that housing problems can have on the mental health of families. This all comes against the backdrop of a National Health Service facing increasing demand for its services, and the need to maximise cost effectiveness to meet constrained budgets.

Within this context, Shelter in partnership with the research agency, ComRes, explored the relationship between housing and mental health through a two-stage research project in early 2017. This research was central to Shelter's 2017 Spring Advice Campaign, and it is hoped it will provide a future evidence base for the necessary debate on how to reduce the negative impact housing problems can have on people's mental health and usage of health services. This report will briefly reference Shelter's history of campaigning on issues around the impact of housing issues on the wellbeing and mental health of families. It will then summarise the findings of both pieces of research, seeking to illuminate key themes and insights. It will also establish common themes arising from both pieces of research.

Previous Shelter research on the links between housing and mental health

Previously, Shelter has revealed the emotional strain felt by families trying to keep on top of housing costs as they become unaffordable^v:

"A new YouGov survey from Shelter has revealed the emotional strain faced by millions of families as they struggle to meet their housing costs." (January, 2013)

We have also shown how poor conditions such as damp and disrepair can negatively impact the mental health of people living with these conditions^{vi}:

"those working-age adults living in bad housing are disproportionately at greater risk of poorer general health, low mental wellbeing and respiratory problems including asthma and breathlessness." (August, 2013)

This is an issue we are keen to increase awareness of. Both so that new policy can consider the overlap between housing and mental health, and also, so that people who are struggling with housing issues are aware that Shelter's advice services are here to support them. You can access the full directory of Shelter's advice services at <http://shelter.org.uk/localadvice>

Research: An overview

The findings discussed in this report are from 20 depth interviews with GPs in six English cities and from an online nationally representative survey of 4,103 British adults (3,509 of whom live in England). Both pieces of research were conducted in January and February 2017. All the data cited in this report relates to English adults only.

GPs were asked about their experiences of the links between housing and mental health among their patients. It is worth noting that this is a different group to the general public or the population struggling with mental health problems as not everyone facing a mental health issue will present to their GP. For instance, our quantitative research found that three quarters (74%) of the public who had had a housing problem in the last five years, which they believed had a negative impact on their mental and/or physical health, did not go to see their GP.

This means that GPs are unlikely to have a full picture of the impact housing problems have on the mental health of the general public. Also, whereas the conditions being reported by the GPs are, by definition, medically diagnosed, it is important to note that the mental health conditions cited in the quantitative survey are self-reported and may not be medically diagnosed.

Qualitative research with 20 GPs

“you should be most happy at home and at work, and if you’re not happy in those places, you know, it’s going to lead to anxiety and depression.” GP, Birmingham

The methodology

Twenty in-depth phone interviews were conducted between January and February 2017 with GPs in London (four), Manchester (four), Birmingham (four), Bristol (three), Sheffield (three) and Newcastle (two).

These interviews explored:

- GPs’ understanding of their patients’ mental health in their own experience;
- Whether there were links between housing and mental health;
- The types of mental health conditions experienced by patients;
- The types of housing problems GPs encountered;
- Whether GPs felt supported and confident in their knowledge to address issues of housing and mental health, including additional support they would want.

Following completion of interviews, transcripts and notes from interviews were reviewed and analysed in a thematic manner. The full report is at <http://www.comresglobal.com/polls/shelter-housing-mental-health-survey>

Qualitative research: Key findings

- GPs spontaneously identified housing issues when discussing factors involved in their patients’ mental health presentations.
- Where housing was seen as the sole cause of mental health conditions, the most commonly cited conditions were anxiety and depression.
- Where patients presented with a mental health condition that was linked to problems with housing, the GPs self-identified a knowledge and support gap.

Full results

1. Is there a link between housing issues and mental health problems?

The research found that GPs spontaneously identified housing issues when discussing factors involved in their patients' mental health presentations – both as a sole cause and as an exacerbating factor of existing mental health conditions. Where housing was seen as the sole cause, the most commonly cited mental health conditions were anxiety and depression.

“It’s common, it’s probably, ball park figure of 10 or 20% of the consultations around depression or anxiety probably have an element of housing in them, I’m just plucking that out of the air but that’s my feel of it probably.” GP, Manchester

2. What types of housing issues did GPs link with mental health problems?

Conditions of properties were one of the main housing problems referenced by GPs in the context of their patients' presentations of mental health problems. Affordability of rented housing and insecurity of tenancies were other key issues cited by GPs in the six fieldwork areas.

“There seem to be people who seem to leave social housing and go into the private sector and seem to struggle, then they’re not able to pay the rent for whatever reasons. So, it has a real effect on their mental wellbeing, growth and security.” GP, Manchester

The impact upon mental health of specific housing issues (like damp within properties, benefit changes, and eviction from private rented accommodation) were referenced by a number of GPs. The coincidence of financial pressures such as debt, and housing issues, were also mentioned by some GPs.

“It tends to be things have been stable and then due to changes in housing things have got worse, but they’ve got worse for people who have been coping, probably on the line of coping or not coping. Then, they really do tip over the edge. I’ve seen patients who have committed suicide and things because of changes in their benefits.” GP, London

There were also concerns about housing issues being the cause of mental health problems in children, and that there was a differential impact upon children relative to their parents.

“...In the parents, probably depression in that they’re unable to provide a nice environment for their children. In the children, they just tend to get a little bit, sometimes withdrawn, sometimes a bit anxious and angry – running around the house and getting told off by the parents and things.” GP, Sheffield

3. What are the physical consequences of bad housing that GPs see in their surgeries?

Evidence of deteriorations in physical health due to housing were flagged both prompted and unprompted by GPs. Examples were also given by GPs of housing having a direct causal and aggravating factor on a patient's physical condition, in conjunction with deteriorating mental health.

"...obviously, there are respiratory conditions, for example. You know, your house is wet and mouldy, that kind of thing, that can have an effect on conditions like asthma." GP, Newcastle

4. How capable do GPs feel dealing with housing-related issues?

GPs signalled confidence in speaking with their patients about their mental health conditions. However, interviews revealed that when patients presented with a mental health condition that was linked to problems with housing, the GPs self-identified a knowledge and support gap. Some GPs felt unsure of where to signpost patients, and lacked time to establish what the appropriate service was, in the absence of an integrated point-of-call. In these instances, the mental health presentation would be addressed with the patient's housing problem remaining unresolved – even though GPs had identified it as a contributory factor.

"We've got ten minute appointments. By this sort of patient, we're running over already by twenty minutes, probably. We need to have quick answers. We need to have a quick, sort of, "Who do I contact?" not all of these different services. Which one is going to be the most useful to contact?" GP, Bristol

Quantitative research with 3,509 English adults

The methodology

ComRes interviewed 3,509 English adults online between 17th and 23rd February 2017. Data were weighted by age, gender, region and socio-economic grade to be representative of all English adults.

The questions asked explored:

- Whether respondents had ever experienced a housing problem;
- Whether housing issues had any impact upon respondents' physical or mental health;
- The types of housing problems respondents had;
- The types of mental health problems respondents associated with their housing problem or worry;
- The impact the housing problem or worry had in respondents' own words, through the usage of an open-ended question at the conclusion of the survey.

About the sample and analysis undertaken

12% of English adults surveyed said that they currently had a housing problem or worry.

30% said that they had had a housing problem or worry in the last 5 years, and a further 18% had not had an issue in the last 5 years, but had had a problem or worry in their lifetime.

This is equivalent to close to half of all English adults having had a housing problem or worry at least once in their lifetime (48%). The results below look in more detail at the 30% of the sample who had had a housing problem or worry in the last 5 years. Unless, otherwise stated, the percentages given relate to the full sample of English adults.

Quantitative research: Key findings

- 1 in 5 English adults (21%) said a housing issue had negatively impacted upon their mental health in the last 5 years.
- Housing affordability was the most frequently referenced issue by those who saw housing pressures having had a negative impact upon their mental health.
- 3 in 10 of those who have had a housing problem or worry in the last five years, not only said that it had had a negative mental impact, but that they had no issue with their mental health previously.

Full results

1. What is the mental health impact of housing problems or worries?

Of those adults who have had a housing problem or worry in the last 5 years, such as poor conditions, struggling to pay the rent or being threatened with eviction, 69% said that it had had a negative impact upon their mental health. Common mental health impacts cited later in the survey were long-term stress, anxiety and depression.

1 in 5 of the full English adult sample (21%) said a housing issue has negatively impacted upon their mental health in the last 5 years.

Aggregated to the general population, this would mean that over 8 million adults in England^{vii} have found housing issues negatively impacting upon their mental health in the last five years.

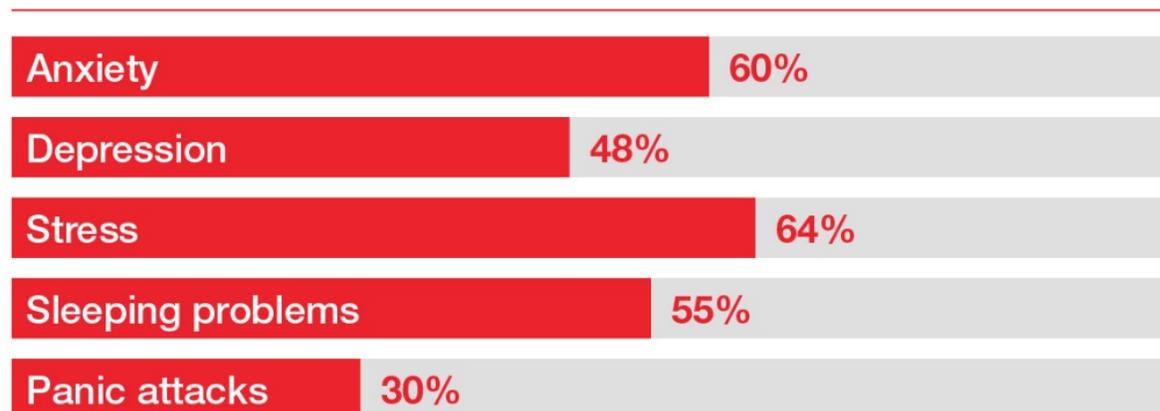
Perhaps even more worryingly, 9% said they had a housing problem or worry currently negatively impacting upon their mental health. Again, scaled to the full English adult population, the numbers of English adults affected in this way, currently, would be in the millions.^{viii}

1 in 5 of the full English adult sample (21%) said a housing issue has negatively impacted upon their mental health in the last five years

2. What specific mental health impacts have housing problems or worries had?

Close to half of those adults who have had housing problems in the last five years and say it negatively impacted on their mental health, have cited that it either contributed to depression, or exacerbated existing problems with depression (48%). Over half (60%) of this group say that it has contributed to the onset of anxiety, or greater levels of anxiety (see graphic).

Adults in England who have had mental health problems due to housing pressures



Percentage of all English adults who have had a housing problem (in the last 5 years), who said that it contributed to mental health issues

In the open-ended question at the end of the survey, a number of people explicitly referenced having suicidal thoughts as a result of their housing problem or worry.

If you are experiencing problems with your housing, please call visit Shelter's advice pages at http://england.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/how_we_can_help

If you are having suicidal thoughts, please contact the Samaritans, freephone **116 123** (UK) or through <http://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help-you/contact-us>

3. What were the types of housing problems or worries which were having a negative mental health impact?

The main housing problems or worries identified by respondents were affordability (12% of respondents) and conditions of their property (12%).

However, it was interesting to note that affordability was referenced most often by those who saw housing issues having had a negative impact upon their mental health (see table on next page).

Table 1: Types of housing issues having a negative impact upon mental health

Type of housing issue	% of English adults with a housing problem in the last five years that has negatively impacted their mental health
Affording the rent/ mortgage / falling behind with rent or mortgage	48%
Being evicted/ having to leave when I don't want to	17%
Repair or condition of property	38%
Bad service from landlord or agent	17%
Problem finding a suitable home	23%

Whilst this may be due to other characteristics (such as age or tenure) which correlate with both affordability issues and poor mental health, it clearly shows the widespread effects a lack of genuinely affordable housing can have, beyond those on an individual household's budget or housing situation.

4. How many people with negative mental health impacts are going to the GP?

26% of those who said that a housing problem or worry had negatively impacted their mental health in the last five years, said that they had gone to the GP with a housing issue. This counts as 5% overall, or 1 in 20 adults.

Scaled to the English adult population, this would run into the millions^{ix}, a clear added burden on an already strained public service such as the NHS.

1 in 40 adults sampled (2.5%) said that they gone to their GP in the last five years with a housing issue related to the affordability of their rent or mortgage.

This suggests significant amounts of pressure on public services, and GPs, may be being generated by housing issues which are not being prevented, or dealt with effectively through professional housing advice or other means of support.

1 in 40 adults (2.5%) said that they gone to their GP in the last five years with a housing issue related to the affordability of their rent or mortgage.

5. Are housing problems creating new issues, or exacerbating existing issues?

Table 2: Distribution of new and existing mental health issues amongst affected adults

Statement	% of all English adults
Before the housing problem or worry, I had no issue with my mental health, (but it negatively impacted my mental health)	9%
The housing problem or worry made a mental health problem that I already had a little bit worse	9%
The housing problem or worry made a mental health problem that I already had a lot worse	3%

As can be seen in the table above, close to 1 in 10 English adults not only say that they have had a housing problem or worry in the last five years, which has had a negative impact on their mental health, but that they had had no issue with their mental health before.

3 in 10 of all adults who have had a housing problem or worry in the last five years, said that not only did the issue have a negative impact on their mental health, but that they had no issue with their mental health previously.

Due to the long-term impacts periods of poor mental health can have, even once the housing problem or worry has been resolved, this finding is cause for concern.

3 in 10 of all adults who have had a housing problem or worry in the last five years, said that not only did the issue have a negative impact on their mental health, but that they had no issue with their mental health previously.

6. What are the physical impacts of housing problems or worries?

17% of the full English sample said that a housing problem or worry they had had in the last five years, had had a negative impact upon their physical health. This is 1 in 6 English adults. Scaled to the English adult population, this again runs into over 7 million people affected in this way in the last five years.^x

In responses to the open-ended question at the end of the survey, individual respondents related physical health symptoms such as hair loss, nausea, exhaustion, dizzy spells and headaches.

Conclusions from the research

Our research shows that from the perspective of both patients and health professionals, housing problems are having negative impacts upon individuals' mental health. Both GPs and members of the public referenced anxiety and depression as mental health problems which housing issues had created or exacerbated. The research also lays bare how poor performance in the public policy area of access to good quality, affordable housing is not only leading to human cost, but that the costs are spilling over into another public policy area (health) which is already under pressure.

Whilst GPs saw property conditions as the housing issue most commonly linked to mental health problems in their surgeries, members of the public were more likely to cite issues of affordability as having had a negative impact upon their mental health. This latter finding, coupled with the finding that only 1 in 4 adults who have had a housing issue which had a negative mental health impact went to the GP about it, indicates that there are many people currently going through housing-induced mental health issues, alone.

Our research has found that not only is housing exacerbating mental health issues, creating more serious issues for people to deal with alone, or with the assistance of health professionals, but according to some it has actually helped create new mental health problems.

Given we are talking about the mental health of millions of adults being affected by housing issues in the last five years alone, the human and social cost of inaction, into the long-term, could be vast. The harmful link between housing and mental health needs to be addressed, as a priority.

How Shelter can help

By recognising the complexity of individual needs, we treat each person and situation as unique. **Our services are designed to advise, guide and support people with all types of housing needs – whether that takes a short conversation or intensive support over several months.** That's why our services are multi-faceted, flexible and responsive to deal with the widest possible circumstances relating to housing problems and homelessness.

We help people by phone, web chat, and through face-to-face advice at our centres and in clients' homes - from self-help to more intensive, individual support and embedded staff. This means we can offer help and advice at every level, depending on what the client needs and how much support they require to act on our guidance.

Across England and Scotland, 79% of our clients found somewhere new to live; improved their living circumstances; or were helped to stay in their home or manage better.

If you are experiencing problems with your housing, please visit

http://england.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/how_we_can_help

If you are a professional in the Health or Housing sector and want to talk to us in more detail about our services, please contact us on 0344 515 2121. You can read more [here](#).

Endnotes

ⁱ Boffey, D., 'Leaked report reveals scale of crisis in England's mental health services' in *The Observer* (13 Feb. 2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/feb/13/mental-health-services-crisis-britain-revealed-leaked-report>;

Donnelly, H., 'A&E crisis deepens with 65 hospital trusts issuing emergency alerts' in *The Telegraph* (13 Jan. 2017) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/13/ae-crisis-deepens-58-hospital-trusts-issuing-emergency-alerts/>

ⁱⁱ See Foster, D., 'Poor Housing is bad for your mental health' in *The Guardian* (4 Feb. 2016)

<https://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2016/feb/04/poor-housing-bad-mental-health>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/housing/support-in-a-housing-crisis/#.WMf-f1XyjGg>;

^{iv} Buck, D., 'Housing and health: Ships that pass in the night?' *The King's Fund* 20. Sept. 2016

<https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/blog/2016/09/housing-and-health>

^v Shelter 'Housing costs cause stress and depression for millions' (2013)

http://england.shelter.org.uk/news/january_2013/housing_costs_cause_stress_and_depression_for_millions

^{vi} Natcen and Shelter 'People living in bad housing – numbers and health impacts' (2013)

https://england.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/726166/People_living_in_bad_housing.pdf

^{vii} ONS, Mid-Year Estimates 2015.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesscotlandandnorthernireland> It was estimated there were 43,108,471 over-18s in England in 2015. The point estimate was 8.9m adults, and the confidence interval was between 8.3m and 9.5m.

^{viii} ONS, Mid-Year Estimates 2015.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesscotlandandnorthernireland> It was estimated there were 43,108,471 over-18s in England in 2015. The point estimate was 3.8m adults, and the confidence interval was between 3.4m and 4.2m.

^{ix} ONS, Mid-Year Estimates 2015.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesscotlandandnorthernireland> It was estimated there were 43,108,471 over-18s in England in 2015. The point estimate was 2.4m adults, and the confidence interval was between 2.0m and 2.7m.

^x ONS, Mid-Year Estimates 2015.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalesscotlandandnorthernireland> It was estimated there were 43,108,471 over-18s in England in 2015. The point estimate was 7.7m adults, and the confidence interval was between 7.1m and 8.2m.

Shelter helps millions of people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness through our advice, support and legal services. And we campaign to make sure that, one day, no one will have to turn to us for help.

We're here so no one has to fight bad housing or homelessness on their own.

Please support us at shelter.org.uk

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