



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

RESEARCH

Housing overcrowding and ethnicity: a literature review (summary)

This review outlines the evidence base on the complex and inter-related links between ethnicity and overcrowding.

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Research aims and methodology

The aims of this literature review were to explore what evidence is available regarding how housing overcrowding impacts ethnic minority groups, primarily in Wales, and elsewhere; and the impacts of housing overcrowding and ethnicity on COVID-19 outcomes.

This report was prepared by Welsh Government's Knowledge and Analytical Services based on a set of literature searches carried out by Welsh Government Library Services between 12 August 2021 and 03 September 2021, using a number of academic databases and relevant selected websites.

Keywords with a focus on overcrowding, ethnicities, housing and COVID were used in the searches.

Results were limited to research reports / papers, government research papers and journal articles. While documents published in the last five years were preferred, documents published up to ten years ago were included in the results if considered highly relevant.

A formal weighting system for the identified evidence was not used in the review. However, when reviewing the evidence, increased weight was generally given to documents with a Welsh or UK focus and where the main focus is specifically overcrowded housing and ethnicity. Much of the evidence was secondary rather than primary research and evidence reviews tended to be descriptive rather than systematic. Because of this, the review is limited in its ability to isolate the causalities of overcrowding in the context of ethnicity.

A descriptive literature review rather than a systematic review methodology was utilised to identify context and current thinking and to explore the quality of available evidence on this topic.

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Main findings

Eighty-six documents were identified by the literature searches. The majority of these explored overcrowding within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The remainder related to overcrowding in Wales or other nations of the UK without reference to COVID-19. These documents were all secondary sources, comprising briefings and government reports. There was a lack of high quality, up-to-date primary evidence related to Wales. This may be addressed later in 2022 when preliminary releases of the 2021 UK Census data begin to be published.

The available evidence suggests that ethnic minority groups in the UK are disproportionately affected by overcrowding, across all age groups, in both rural and urban settings, and are also disproportionately affected by COVID-19. In Wales, analysis of 2011 UK Census data shows that around 4.9% of White British people live in overcrowded housing compared with 28.7% of Gypsy or Irish Travellers, 27% of Bangladeshi people and 19.4% of Black people, the three groups most affected by overcrowding. (Price, 2021).

While causality cannot be fully unpicked based on the evidence identified in the literature searches for this review, the evidence points to socioeconomic, systemic and structural factors playing a major part in overcrowding disproportionately affecting ethnic minority households. Evidence of historic discrimination in the UK housing market going back to the Second World War and further was also identified (de Noronha, 2021).

Figures from the UK government show that households from ethnic minority communities are more likely to be overcrowded in all tenure groups (Barton and Wilson, 2021). In addition, overcrowding rates are higher in social and private rented sector households, where ethnic minority groups are overrepresented (Welsh Government, 2020, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2020).

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Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities appear to be particularly severely affected by overcrowding and its associated impacts. However, evidence around Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and housing was found to be severely lacking, and this is likely to mask even more stark inequalities (de Noronha, 2015).

Housing overcrowding appears to be associated with certain poor health outcomes (ONS, 2015), and White British communities have a lower all age ill health percentage than all other ethnic minority groups except Asian/Asian British in Wales (Allen et al., 2015). However, evidence found in the literature searches exploring the relationship between housing overcrowding and general health outcomes was limited.

Fifty-four relevant documents were identified by the literature searches regarding the intersection of ethnicity, overcrowding and COVID-19 health outcomes, reflecting the urgency of the pandemic and the amount of research which has taken place in response to it. It is well recognised that people from almost all ethnic minority groups have poorer outcomes from COVID-19 and higher death rates than White British groups across the UK. Reasons for disproportionate mortality rates are multifactorial, and likely to include living in overcrowded conditions as well as working in higher risk jobs, having a pre-existing medical condition, certain kinds of behaviours which affect health, and systemic discrimination (Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee, 2020).

Conclusions

While it is difficult to unpick the causal relationships between socio-economic and systemic disadvantage, ethnicity and overcrowding, the evidence suggests some ethnic minority groups are disproportionately affected by overcrowding, across all age groups, in both rural and urban settings, and are also disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller

communities appear to be particularly severely affected by overcrowding and its associated impacts.

Evidence pointed to socioeconomic, systemic and structural factors playing a part in overcrowding disproportionately affecting ethnic minority households.

There is a need for high quality evidence around the impacts of overcrowding on ethnic minority groups in Wales. This particularly applies to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. A Race Disparity Unit is currently being established in Welsh Government, and part of the remit of the Unit is to improve data collection and work with communities to restore trust in government data collection and reporting. This may help address data gaps for this group.

While some evidence was identified regarding drivers of overcrowding, this was sparse. Further research into the drivers of overcrowding in ethnic minority communities in Wales is needed.

Further work should explore in greater depth how overcrowding and ethnicity intersect with other protected characteristics.

Much of the evidence identified in the literature searches was based on 2011 Census data. Preliminary releases of the 2021 Census data will begin to be published in 2022, and these data will provide more up-to-date evidence around housing and overcrowding. The release of these data should be utilised to address gaps in the evidence around how overcrowding affects specific ethnic minority groups to differing degrees in Wales.

While the correlation between overcrowding and the impact of COVID-19 appears established, research is still needed to explore the experiences of ethnic minority groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further research into the drivers of overcrowding in ethnic minority communities in Wales would be needed to better understand the impact of overcrowding on ethnic minority communities.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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