

CANADIAN COUNCIL ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

[Skip Navigation](#)Search: [The Progress of Canada's Children 2001 - related material](#)

Background Paper

March 2001

Physical Housing Conditions and the Well-Being of Children

by Andrew Jackson and Paul Roberts

An increasingly large body of research in both Canada and the United States points to the importance of housing conditions and the type of neighbourhood in which a child is raised as having an effect on their well-being (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation - CMHC, 2000; Boyle, M. and E. Lipman, 1998; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1997; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993). As well, other work shows that the actual physical conditions of children's housing can adversely affect their physical and mental health and well-being (Chaudhuri, 1998).

What are the conditions and housing situation of Canada's children? The CCSD recently investigated this question for the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), mainly on the basis of 1996 Census data (See Kevin Lee and Paul Roberts, "Housing Canada's Children", Perception, June 2000 and CMHC Socio-Economic Series 55-4). While the great majority of Canada's children are well-housed - predominantly in owner-occupied, single family housing - it was found that 516,000 families with children - 15 per cent of the total - were in "core housing need" in 1996. Core housing need means that a person's housing was either inadequate (in need of major repair) and/or crowded and/or unaffordable (more than 30 per cent of pre tax income spent on dwelling costs) and that alternative housing in the community meeting the three standards was not affordable. This situation varied by family situation with approximately 9 per cent of couples with children in core need and 45 per cent of lone-parent families were in core need in 1996. (Canadian Institute of Child Health (CICH) The Health of Canada's Children, 2000, Table 7-18.)

Crowded housing (insufficient bedrooms) is known to contribute to the spread of viral and bacterial infections, while lack of space and quiet due to crowding can lead to poorer school performance. In Canada in 1996, 30 per cent of families with children who rented and 13 per cent of families who owned their own housing were considered to live in crowded housing conditions. (CICH, 2000. Table 10-48.)

Housing in need of repair is another factor that is known to increase the risk of injury for occupants and is associated with cold and damp and other threats to health. In 1996, 16 per cent of families with children who rented and 18 per cent of families who owned their own housing were considered to live in housing in disrepair. (CICH, 2000. Table 10-49)

Building on this work, and with financial support from the Federation of Canadian

Municipalities, the CCSD recently analysed data on housing conditions of families with children available from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) for 1994 and 1996. Since this survey follows a sample of children over time, it is possible to go beyond a simple cross-sectional 'snapshot' view to look at movements of children into and out of poor housing conditions. (Unfortunately the NLSCY does not provide affordability data and only collects data every two years, so there are no data for 1995.)

Table 1 - Housing Conditions of Canada's Children, 1994 and 1996	
Children Living in Housing in Disrepair	
	Per cent (%)
No repairs needed in either 1994 and 1996	88.0
Repairs needed in 1994 and/or 1996	12.0
needed repairs in 1994 but not in 1996	5.6
needed repairs in 1996 but not in 1994	4.5
needed repairs in both 1994 and 1996	1.9
Children Living in Crowded Housing Conditions	
	Per cent (%)
Not crowded in either 1994 or 1996	87.6
Crowded in 1994 and/or 1996	12.4
Crowded in 1994 but not in 1996	3.7
Crowded in 1996 but not in 1994	3.2
Crowded in both 1994 and 1996	5.6
Children Living in Problem Housing	
	Per cent (%)
No housing problem in either 1994 or 1996	77.6
One or more housing problems in 1994 and/or 1996	22.4
One or more housing problems in 1994 but not in 1996	8.0
One or more housing problems in 1996 but not in 1994	6.6
One or more housing problems in both 1994 and 1996	7.8
Source: Prepared by the Canadian Council on Social Development using Statistics Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, 1994/95 and 1996/97.	

Table 1, provides data for children living in housing in disrepair and in crowded housing conditions in 1994 and 1996, and further identifies movements into and out of poor housing.

For the purposes of this analysis, housing was considered to be crowded on the basis of the following method: the number of persons in a household (counting adult couples as

one) minus the number of bedrooms. If the resulting figure was 2 or more, then the house was considered to be crowded¹. This means, for example, that 3 children in 1 bedroom in a two bedroom house, or 4 children in 2 bedrooms in a three bedroom house, would be defined as crowded.

We found that of all families with children, 12 per cent had at least one experience of housing in disrepair over the 3 year period, and 1.9 per cent of all children lived in housing in disrepair in both 1994 and 1996. Over the same three year period 12.4 per cent of all families with children had at least one experience of living in crowded housing and 5.6 per cent of children lived in crowded housing in both 1994 and 1996.

With regard to the long-term exposure of children to poor housing conditions, our findings suggest that crowding is clearly a much more significant problem than disrepair.

Living in problem housing can be defined as exposure to either crowded housing and/or housing in need of repair. A significant minority of children - 22.4 per cent - lived in problem housing at least once in 1994 or 1996. About 1 in 3 of these children - 7.8 per cent of all children - were in poor housing in both of these years.

What effect does living in these housing conditions have on children's well-being? Table 2 provides data on some key measures of child health and well-being by exposure to dwelling problems. The data show that 38.6 per cent of children in housing without a problem were in less than excellent health in 1996, compared to 48.6 per cent of children exposed to a dwelling problem in 1994 or 1996, and 44.5 per cent of children with dwelling problems in both years. For health outcomes, a steadily rising gradient emerges only for being asthmatic in the last 12 months (as a percentage of children who have had asthma) which rises from 38.9 per cent of children with no dwelling problems, to 43.3 per cent with at least one exposure, to 47.2 per cent of those exposed to dwelling problems in both years. The suggestive linkage from exposure to poor housing to being recently asthmatic deserves further research.

Table 2 - Child Outcomes and Dwelling Problems in Canada, 1994 and 1996			
	Combined Dwelling Problems		
Proportion of Children...	No Dwelling Problems 1994 or 1996	One or more Dwelling Problems in either 1994 or 1996	On or more Dwelling Problems in both 1994 and 1996
...in less than excellent health in 1996 (age 2-13)	38.6	48.6	44.5
...who have been in good health less than all the time in the past few months (age 2-13), 1996	11.6	14.3	13.9
...who received special/resource help in 1996 (age 4-11)	7.1	12.8	11.5

...who have been asthmatic in the last 12 months, 1996 (age 2-11)	38.9	43.3	47.2
...with delayed motor and social development scores, 1996 (age 24-47 months)	9.8	12.3	15.5
...with delayed Receptive Language (PPVT-R) scores, 1996 (age 6-7)	14.4	19.7	27.4
...considered to suffer from emotional disorder-anxiety (2-3 years), 1996	14.4	17.3	26.7*
...considered to suffer form hyperactivity-inattention (age 4-11), 1996	9.0	15.2	11.7*
...considered to suffer from aggression (age 4-11), 1996	11.4	16.0	16.9
*Estimate less than reliable due to small sample size			
Source: Prepared by the Canadian Council on Social Development using Statistics Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, 1994/95 and 1996/97.			

While this analysis does not control for other factors - notably income - the health differences which emerge are plausibly related to housing given the risk factors suggested above. Some of the linkage from housing to poorer health is likely to be due to factors associated with poor housing, such as low income. But it is also likely that part of the well-demonstrated linkage between low income and poorer child health runs through the channel of poor housing. Housing conditions and family income are intimately related and connected. At the same time, poor housing and low income are not reducible to one another, since many low income families with children are adequately housed (eg. families who are adequately housed and are in a temporary low income situation; families who pay too much of their income on shelter costs but are adequately housed in physical terms; low income families benefiting from housing support and subsidies, ranging from rent subsidies to residence in co-op housing .)

In addition to these health outcomes, child development measures from the NLSCY which are shown in Table 2 - eg. hyperactivity, anxiety and delayed development of infants and young children - demonstrate a negative link with dwelling problems, several showing a steadily rising gradient. For example, children living in dwellings with no problems were much less likely to have delayed Motor and Social Development skills and Receptive language skills (9.8 per cent and 14.4 per cent, respectively) than children with one exposure to dwelling problems (12.3 per cent and 19.7 per cent), and much lower than children exposed to dwelling problems in both 1994 and 1996 (15.5 per cent and

24.4 per cent).

Conclusions

Our investigation of the housing situation of Canada's children shows that a large number of them face extremely poor housing conditions. As well, these conditions are implicated in affecting the overall well-being of these children. Further information from the NLSCY demonstrates a definite link between length of exposure to dwelling problems and poorer outcomes, with children encountering no dwelling problems performing consistently better on the indicators shown. Lastly, some of the outcomes, though by no means all, reveal a gradient in which children's health, behavioural and developmental outcomes tend to decrease in line with greater exposure to dwelling problems.

Notes

¹It should be noted that this definition of "crowding" is not the same as that used by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). For a full explanation of how the CMHC defines "crowding" and differences with our technique, consult *Core Housing Need in Canada*, (CMHC) 1991.

References

Brooks-Gunn, J., G. Duncan, P. Klebanov, and N. Sealand (1993). "Do neighbourhoods influence child and adolescent development." *American Journal of Sociology*, 99(2): 353-95.

Brooks-Gunn, J., G. Duncan, and J. Aber, eds. (1997). *Neighbourhood Poverty: Context and Consequences for Children*, Vol. 1. New York: Russell Sage.

Boyle, M. and E. Lipman (1998). *Do Places Matter? A Multilevel Analysis of Geographic Variations in Child Behaviour in Canada*. W-98-16E. Applied Research Branch, Human Resources Development Canada.

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) (2000). *Housing Canada's Children - Socio-Economic Series 55-4*

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) (1991). *Core Housing Need in Canada*.

Canadian Institute of Child Health (CICH) (2000). *The Health of Canada's Children, 2000*, Ottawa, Canada.

Chaudhuri, N. (1998). "Child Health, Poverty and the Environment: The Canadian Context" in *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 89, Supplement 1, 1998 May-June

Kevin Lee and Paul Roberts, (2000) "Housing Canada's Children", *Perception*, (June, 2000), Canadian Council on Social Development, Ottawa, Canada.

NOTE: Data analysis for this project was financially supported by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

[The Progress of Canada's Children 2001 - Related Material](http://www.ccsd.ca/pubs/2001/pcc2001/housing.htm)

Canadian Council on Social Development, 309 Cooper Street, 5th Floor, Ottawa, Ontario, K2P 0G5
Tel: (613) 236-8977, Fax: (613) 236-2750, Web: www.ccsd.ca, Email: council@ccsd.ca

[Top of Page](#) | [Home](#) | [Contact](#) | [Français](#)

[Home](#) | [About](#) | [Research](#) | [Publications](#) | [Statistics](#) | [Policy Initiatives](#) | [Events](#) | [Media](#) | [Membership](#) | [Sub-sites](#) | [Links](#)