

CROWDING, RISK AND HOMELESSNESS:

A STUDY OF SOCIO-SPATIAL RELATIONS

KEY MESSAGES



BACKGROUND

In his thesis recently completed through Swinburne University, Dr Paul Stolz examines residential crowding and the possible risk of homelessness it may pose to young people. The study hopes to improve understanding of the impact of crowding and likely ways to mitigate negative outcomes for young people.

This key messages document provides a snapshot of the main findings. Further details and information are available in our full report, available at kuc.org.au

THE BOUNDEDNESS OF SPACE

- Interviewees for the study clearly articulated the relationship they maintained with the physical place of home. When this space was compromised through the perception of crowding, a sense of home, which provides the building blocks of identity, was lost. Loss of a sense of home includes loss of identity, a place to belong, attachment and security.
- Additional space, experienced by those households receiving a Kids Under Cover studio was fundamental in the reestablishment of a sense of home for young people. The additional space was understood to provide the capacity for privacy, development of identity, sense of belonging and attachment that was often lacking in crowded households. Additional space also provided young people the privacy and quiet required for educational achievement, an important element in the development of greater security in life and prevention of possible future homelessness.
- When limited space and social discord combine, congruence between the spatial and the social is compromised. This compromise can lead to a feeling of being trapped and hence too tightly bound, or a desire for emergence without the foundations necessary for safety within risk. This lack of congruence between the physical and social over time can lead to loss of some symbolic elements of home and a sense of being out of place while in place. Risk of homelessness can result from such incongruence.
- There is a stark difference in impact from, say, the temporary nature of crowding in public spaces and 'primary crowding' which is sustained, constant and inescapable.

“Home needs to be safe and have love. These families will always have people coming and going. They need space to achieve this. The space does not afford this. The kitchen table is important for children to sit at. There is a cultural aspect that this family loves to gather together around food.”

— Julie, caseworker, Southeast Melbourne

THE CONTRIBUTION OF CHAOS

- Examination of the primary data from the interviews with families, and secondary data of case notes sourced from the Kids Under Cover database, indicated household chaos is a significant factor in promoting a risk of homelessness for young people.
- Household chaos described in interviews included a feeling of inability to cope with the pressures of daily living, difficulty with the discipline of children, noise, physical and emotional violence, a sense of drowning or inability to breathe, exhaustion, lack of social and private space, lack of storage, disturbed sleep patterns and lack of routine.
- Chaos within crowded households, combined with spatial compromise, produces a sense of being bound and a feeling of loss of control. This boundedness, described in various ways in the interviews, produces a greater risk of homelessness.



“ I couldn’t get any space or privacy of my own, and in the house the kids would be all over me. I couldn’t study or anything, and I couldn’t have friends over. I felt like I had no things of my own because my sisters would take them and use them. I was angry and frustrated and was doing poorly at school. I felt like I didn’t want to be here. ”

— Zoe, aged 15

ROUTINE AND RITUAL

- Lack of routine or ritual were confirming of impermanence and increased the inadequacy of the social expectations of the household due to crowding. Risk of homelessness was increased.
- The provision of additional space through a Kids Under Cover studio was noted as improving the cohesion of the household and providing an improved sense of belonging, identity and attachment within the family. Family routine and ritual were able to be practiced with less stress and provided amelioration of, rather than exacerbation to, risk of homelessness for young people.

“ The house does not feel like ‘home’ for me. I have no choice about the space, and it does not feel like my space anywhere. I feel like it is just our stuff in the space, and it has always been like that. ”

— Tamara, aged 18



IDENTITY, SECURITY AND BELONGING

- While crowded households may share similar circumstances, the level of risk can vary markedly from one to the other. What this research has shown is crowding is more than simply numerical. Perception of crowding is a valid experience and has a negative impact for both young people and families
- Compromise of space in the place of home from crowding, which has social, physical and personal antecedents, can create the possibility of absence of the dimensions of home that are necessary for development of identity, security and belonging.
- There is unequivocal evidence to show the provision of additional space provides renewed sense of security, safety, belonging, privacy and sense of identity.

DEFINING HOMELESSNESS

- The ABS definition of severe overcrowding as homelessness at a statistical level fails to take account of either the nuances or impact of the perception of crowding.
- Implications for definitional and policy development would suggest the definition used by the ABS remains flawed. Operationalising such a definition, in attempting to ascertain who can be counted as homeless from crowding, is compromised, given that personal, environmental and social factors all play a part.

“ I think the studio just helped me to show me who I was more. It gave me time to think to myself, and I think it helped me grow up a bit more. ”

— James, young studio recipient

ABOUT KIDS UNDER COVER

Kids Under Cover provides young people at risk of homelessness the foundations to strengthen their connection to family, community and education, and make a lasting difference in their lives.