

Housing, homelessness and children's social care: towards an urgent research agenda.

Cross, Sally¹; Bywaters, Paul²⁺; Brown, Phil², and Featherstone, Brid²

1: Shared Health Foundation, Manchester. <https://www.sharedhealthfoundation.org.uk/>

2: University of Huddersfield

Corresponding Author

Paul Bywaters.

Email: P.Bywaters@hud.ac.uk

Abstract

Having a secure, safe and affordable home is an essential element in the experience of a 'good enough' childhood. This is not available to a large and growing number of children and parents in the UK because of a structural housing crisis affecting the availability, quality, affordability and regulation of accommodation. There is a clear body of evidence which demonstrates the negative effects of poor housing and homelessness on children's health and development. A much smaller body of work implicates housing policies and conditions in child abuse and neglect but there is a profound lack of good quality data or research about the role which housing and homelessness play in shaping demand for social care in the UK. This article reviews the available evidence, identifying limitations and gaps. Its aim is to open up policy and practice conversations about the increasing significance of housing and homelessness as a critical issue for children's social care in the UK, while making the case for an urgent research agenda.

Keywords

Child protection, children's social care, family support, housing, homelessness, poverty

Teaser text

A secure, safe and affordable home is essential for a good childhood. But large numbers of children and parents in the UK are excluded from this because of a housing crisis. This affects whether homes are available and their quality, affordability and security. Evidence demonstrates that poor housing and homelessness has a bad effect on children's health and development. A much smaller body of evidence also points to a link between housing policies and conditions and child abuse and neglect. But there is a profound lack of good quality data or research about how housing and homelessness affect children's chances of being involved with children social care services in the UK. This article reviews the evidence there is, and identifies limitations and gaps. It aims provoke policy and practice conversations about the increasing significance of housing and homelessness as a critical issue for children's social care in the UK, while making the case for and outlining a new research agenda.

Introduction

In 1966, the Ken Loach film, *Cathy Come Home*, was broadcast by the BBC, highlighting the corrosive effects of homelessness and poverty on family life in the UK. It was watched by 12 million people and was a catalyst for the establishment of the housing and homelessness charity, Crisis. Coincidentally, another key charity, Shelter, was launched just a few days after its showing. Within the film the scenes in which three children were taken into care because their parents could find nowhere affordable to live, made for unprecedented viewing with their impact upon the social work profession continuing to be contested for decades (Community Care, 2006).

Over fifty years later poverty is still a key influence on demand for children's social care and on levels of child abuse and neglect (ADCS 2018; Bywaters, 2020). However, housing and homelessness issues have received little attention in children's social care policy, practice or research in the past decades. For example, the recent review of services to improve outcomes for children in need undertaken by the Department for Education (2018) contains no reference to housing or homelessness in its final report, although the interim report recognised homelessness as a cause of children being in need. During the last decade the housing crisis, outlined below, has led to increasing chronic difficulties for families concerning the affordability, security and quality of their homes and acute stress when homeless and in 'temporary' accommodation. These issues have begun to be identified as creating demand pressure and child protection concerns by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (2018).

Against this background, the purpose of this article is to lay the foundations of work to fill this significant gap by reviewing and summarising evidence about the relationship between housing policy and families' housing conditions and children's social care (CSC) in the UK, identifying limitations and gaps and raising its profile as a key issue for families, services and research. First, we discuss the extent and nature of the housing crisis as it affects parents with dependent children, second, the impact of poor housing and homelessness on children's wellbeing and safety and, third, social care responses. Finally, we highlight some key policy, practice and research implications for CSC. The focus throughout is on the UK, primarily England, with international comparisons drawn where appropriate. The authors acknowledge that the issue of housing for care leavers is important in its own right (for example Wade and Dixon, 2006), but it is not the focus of this article.

The Housing Crisis in England and Implications for families

The structural context in which this paper sits is one of a complex and deeply insufficiently resourced housing system. As a result, the housing system in the UK is widely seen to be in crisis (Dorling, 2015; Lund, 2019). A key driver of the housing crisis in the UK has been the financialisation of the sector as housing has increasingly been accepted as a commodity to be traded and used to generate profit for speculators and financial institutions. At the same time there has been a general decline in the number of dwellings built by local authorities and housing associations in the social housing sector, together with a policy of compulsory sales. This has meant that the private sector, either as owner-occupied or private-rented, is the dominant force in how housing is distributed in the UK. These housing specific factors have been exacerbated by broader economic factors such as welfare reform and long-term shifts in the labour-market which has led to an increase in precarious employment.

It is with the growth of private rented sector (PRS) within the UK that is a key focus of this paper. The implications of the growth in PRS housing and, arguably, under-provision of 'affordable' housing or housing in the social sector for children and families are significant and include exposure to: unaffordable house prices, high rents, and unregulated and poor quality privately rented housing

and precarious tenancies. As Bimpson and Goulding (2020) describe, 'With chronic social housing shortages, private landlords increasingly operate as an arm of the welfare state. People who are not considered to be in priority need, or who are found to be 'intentionally homeless' by local authorities for reasons such as criminal convictions or rent arrears, are limited to hostels, privately owned hotels, bed and breakfast accommodation, and short-term private rented accommodation' (p.26).

The dominance of the PRS presents particular challenges for households. These include rent affordability in relation to low-paid, part-time and zero-hour labour markets (Rugg and Rhodes, 2018); the negative impact of housing benefit caps and Universal Credit reforms on ensuring rent payments are met in time (Joyce, Mitchell and Keiller, 2017); imbalances of power in landlord-tenant relations and a general fear of evictions (MHCLG, 2018); and emerging inequalities in urban neighbourhoods between buy-to-let markets and 'lower-end' PRS properties (Paccoud, 2017). Critically, as a tenure, the private rented sector (PRS) has the highest rates of low-quality housing, followed by owner-occupation. Whilst there are shortcomings in the social housing sector, as a whole in comparison it is of a higher quality, with the vast majority meeting the Decent Homes Standard (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006). Whilst housing surveys tend to show good levels of resident satisfaction with housing in general, there are a significant number of households who routinely deal with substandard conditions. For example, the latest English Housing Survey Headline Report revealed that in 2019 12% of dwellings in the social rented sector failed to meet the Standard, compared with 25% of PRS housing and 17% of owner-occupied homes (MHCLG, 2020). In the PRS, 14% of homes had a Category 1 hazard under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System, compared with 11% of owner-occupied stock and 5% of social housing. Moreover, only 33% of PRS dwellings and 29% of owner-occupied dwellings have adequate levels of energy efficiency (Stephens et al., 2020). These impacts are geographically varied with some areas, generally those in areas of high deprivation, exhibiting higher levels on non-decency than the average. Non-decency has been particularly exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic with households in the North of England experiencing dire situations (Brown et al, 2020). The condition of housing is of fundamental importance as poor housing can lead to safeguarding concerns and increased interventions by social workers due to the perceived increase in risk, resultant stress within the family, mental ill-health and relationship breakdowns.

The growth in the number and proportion of households containing dependent children has been one of the key features of the expanding PRS (Rugg and Rhodes, 2018). A major contributory factor for the increase in families in the PRS however were changes brought in by the Localism Act 2011 which allowed local authorities to discharge their homelessness duties by drawing on available housing stock in the PRS to offer households an Assured Shorthold Tenancy. This significantly moved households into the PRS and reduced the pressure on social housing. The Localism Act 2011 also gave local authorities greater discretion in how they managed their social housing waiting lists (Bevan, 2014; Watt, 2018). However, the use of the PRS can be attributed in part to a shortage of affordable social housing. Since the introduction of Right to Buy in 1979, the proportion of people living in social housing has halved (Adam *et al.*, 2015). The Right to Buy policy has transferred an estimated 2 million dwellings into the owner-occupied sector since 1980 and it is estimated that around 40% of these are now part of the private-rented housing stock (Whitehead, 2018). It is unlikely that social housing will return as a dominant tenure, as it was in the 1960s, in the near future due to a continuing focus on housing in the private sectors. In all tenures, demand for housing that is good-quality, affordable and stable greatly outweighs supply; in 2018, one million households across the country were waiting for a social home (Shelter, 2018b). To meet this

demand, Crisis estimates that 380,000 homes need to be built a year for the next 15 years, of which over 100,000 need to be socially rented (Bramley, 2018).

Falling earnings and changes to the amount of welfare support available to families are largely responsible for diverging housing costs and income. The canvas upon which housing need is based is one of extreme economic challenges. In recent times, average earnings have been falling, particularly for those between 30-39 years of age (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2019) with welfare reforms having particular impacts on families with dependent children (Beatty and Fothergill, 2016). In turn, places with above average numbers of large families were seen to be amongst the worst hit. Thus, recent reforms to welfare have had disproportionate individual and place based impacts creating both vulnerabilities within families and within the areas in which families live. Fifty- five per cent of statutorily homeless families in England are in employment (Shelter, 2018c). In 2011 Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates, which are used to calculate how much universal credit or housing benefit a household is eligible for if renting from a private landlord, were capped and, then subsequently, frozen in 2016. This welfare 'reform' meant that LHA was no longer fit for purpose – as the amount of housing benefit available ceased to reflect housing market changes. Analysis by Shelter found that in '97% of areas in England, the LHA rate does not cover rents for a two-bedroom home at the 30th percentile' and 'in one in three areas the LHA rate does not even cover rent for a two-bedroom home at the bottom 10% of the local market' (Kleynhans and Weekes, 2019, 5). This reform in LHA is exacerbated by the so-called 'bedroom tax', the cap on welfare benefits and the greater use of sanctions, further reducing benefit levels. As the Children's Commissioner wrote, 'Most incidents of family homelessness in England are not the result of personal circumstances like mental health problems – primarily it is a result of structural issues, including the lack of affordable housing and welfare reform. There is very little these families can do to escape the cycle of homelessness without outside help' (2019, 2).

Housing disadvantage is heightened in groups of people who already experience some form of inequality. In the 2019/20 financial year, of all families owed a housing relief duty by local authorities in England, two thirds were led by female single parents (MHCLG, 2021). One study by Emerson and Hatton (2007) found that disabled children were worse off on 13 measures of housing condition and more likely to be in temporary accommodation. More Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) families experience housing deprivation than their White British counterparts (de Noronha, 2015). In November 2020, of families in temporary accommodation in Greater Manchester, approximately half were from ethnic minorities – most shockingly 29% were of Black/African/Caribbean/Black British background compared to an estimated 4% of the population (Shared Health Foundation, 2021).

Although much media attention focusses on rough sleeping, how children and families experience homelessness does not fit this narrative because local authorities in England have a duty to accommodate families that present as homeless in temporary accommodation. The Children's Commissioner's Office (2019), using official government data, reported that at the end of 2018 there were over 60,000 families with more than 120,000 children living in temporary accommodation because of homelessness in England. This was an increase of 80% since 2010. Shelter, also analysing official data, found that the overall rate of increase in the UK between 2014 and 2019 was 51% but it varied widely between regions. The increase was as much as 385% and 242% in the North West and West Midlands respectively (Shelter, 2019). Similarly, the proportion of households in temporary

accommodation (TA) varies between regions with the majority of households and children in TA being in Inner or Outer London (ADCS, 2018).

What does temporary accommodation involve? A study by the Children's Commissioner (2019) found that families were placed in a range of accommodation, including office block conversions, shipping containers and Bed and Breakfast (B&B) accommodation, at an estimated cost of £1 billion to English local authorities. B&Bs are often used by councils as emergency accommodation, with the intent of rehousing families within the 6-week legal limit (The Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) Order, 2003). The Children's Commissioner (2019) reported that 2,420 families were living in B&Bs – a third of these had been there for more than 6 weeks.

Official UK statistics on TA reflect only a small fraction of the total numbers of children that could be considered homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless. Certain families do not have a right to accommodation from local authority housing departments, and, as a result, fall through the gaps in homelessness statistics. First, families with children that have no recourse to public funds (due to immigration status) are not rehoused by housing departments with children's social care services becoming responsible under the Children Act 1989. Secondly, families assessed as 'intentionally homeless' under the Housing Act (1996), are also not considered eligible for rehousing by housing departments but may be provided accommodation by children's services. Statutory bodies are not required to record families housed in this way, therefore there is no data to shine a light on these additional homeless families. Thirdly, another study found that mothers who choose to live apart from their children, often to protect them at times of crisis, were labelled as 'single' by housing departments, and thus ineligible for family housing (Bimpson et al., 2020). These women tend not to be given priority need for housing and therefore are also not represented in statutory homelessness statistics. Fourthly, it is very difficult to quantify the numbers of children who have not presented as homeless to local authorities but do not have a permanent home, staying with friends, relatives or in cars. The Children's Commissioner (2019) estimated that in 2016-17 there were 92,000 children 'sofa-surfing'.

In addition to these families who might be considered effectively homeless, are a larger group for whom their current accommodation is barely affordable for the reasons described above. Households finding it difficult to meet their housing costs were estimated to include 375,000 children on the edge of homelessness (Children's Commissioner, 2019). In the UK, housing costs have increased at a faster rate than income, with lower-income households with children hit the hardest (Cribb et al., 2018). In consequence, after housing costs, a third of children in the UK are in poverty (ibid).

The complex interplay between structural factors, including a shift of families into the private rental sector, rising rental costs in private and social sectors, a lack of social housing, stagnant earnings and changes to welfare benefits, is responsible to a large extent for children's housing deprivation.

The Impact of Poor Housing and Homelessness on Children's Development

Shelter is, of course, one of the foundational human needs identified by Maslow (1943). The homes in which children live and grow are a key dimension for their well-being and development (Dunn, 2020). Like poverty, housing has pervasive effects on the lived experience of children and on their family and external relationships. It is not just a matter of physical shelter. Housing not only acts *directly* on children's physical health (influencing the likelihood of accidents, infections and respiratory conditions) but also on their cognitive and emotional health and development. Housing

conditions are also an *indirect* factor in children's experiences and relationships through the stress experienced by adults responsible for their care. Evidence for this has been made starkly apparent in the recent COVID-19 lockdown in which access to comfort and physical space inside and outside the home has been seen as a key component of families' health and well-being (Brown et al., 2020; Rosenthal et al., 2020), as well as influencing children's chances of maintaining their education, through access to working space and exercise (Douglas et al, 2020).

In Europe, accidental injury in the home is the leading cause of death in children under five (Sengoelge, et al., 2010), several times the level resulting from non-accidental injury. Analysis of 26 European countries by Sengoelge et al. (2014) showed that child mortality is significantly correlated with 'country-level housing strain' and that the relationship between income inequality and child deaths could be mediated by alleviating housing pressure. At the neighbourhood and individual level poor-quality housing has been related to increased risk of childhood injury (Dal Santo et al., 2004). Higher paediatric injury rates among older buildings, rental properties and apartment blocks have been evidenced (Lyons et al., 2006). Additionally, living in a cold home reduces dexterity, and thus increases risk of injury (Geddes et al., 2011)

Damp conditions are the ideal environment for the growth of bacteria and viruses, and there is some evidence linking damp and mouldy housing to children's respiratory infection (Polyzois et al., 2020) and incidences of wheezing and coughing (Barnes et al., 2008). Certain housing conditions, including lack of insulation, are related to damp and subsequent respiratory problems – this relationship is strongest for children under seven (Keall et al., 2012). Similarly, asthma has been shown to correlate with damp in current and previous homes (Polyzois, et al., 2020). Overcrowding is associated with increased risk of numerous infectious diseases and children are both disproportionately affected by overcrowding and consequent infectious disease (Baker et al., 2013). In April 2020, New Policy Institute found that UK areas with high levels of overcrowding also had the most confirmed COVID-19 cases (Kenway and Holden, 2020). Moreover, residential mobility is known to decrease the rate of vaccinations, thus the impact of moves on vaccine uptake in homeless families is in need of investigation (Pearce et al., 2008).

Both housing and mental health are described as phenomena in crisis, but the extent to which they are interrelated is largely unexplored, particularly in children. The notion of resilience has become a key area of study in terms of understanding what supports children's ability to thrive and key researchers such as Hart and Blincow (2007) have designated 'good enough housing' as a basic pillar of their Resilience Framework. Similarly, leaders in child psychiatric treatment identify 'good housing' as a protective factor, and 'homelessness' as a risk factor, in relation to mental health problems in childhood (CAMHS, 2008). Living in cold housing has been related to increased risk of multiple mental health issues in adolescence (Geddes et al., 2011); warmth interventions have shown promise in improving adult mental health outcomes, but are yet to be explored in children (Thomson et al., 2013).

Lived Experience

Some research examines families' experiences of homelessness (Reeve, 2018; Harris et al., 2019, 2020; Bimpson et al., 2020a, 2020b; Cockman & Cockman, 2020) and charitable or policy organisations (Mitchell, 2004; Pennington and Banks, 2015; Pennington and Garvie, 2016; Shelter, 2017; CRAE, 2018; The Childhood Trust, 2019; Reynolds and Dzalto, 2019; Children's Commissioner,

2019, 2020; Shared Health Foundation, 2019, 2020; The Children's Society, 2020). Notably, research tends to focus only on experiences in temporary accommodation, children's voices are largely absent in academic literature and no studies look at intersections between race and gender.

Families frequently described being displaced from their local area, away from support networks, education and employment. Limited space in accommodation was stressed repeatedly, including the sharing of beds. Parents and children reported that overcrowding led to extreme strain on family relationships. In emergency accommodation, families felt that the facilities needed to live a normal life, including cooking and clothes-washing facilities, were not present. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this leaving families totally reliant on minimal humanitarian support (Shared Health Foundation, 2020). Families found it difficult to 'make a home' in accommodation they lived in for years, owing to a lack of freedom over fixtures and fittings, which diminished people's sense of self (Harris *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, families often had no clear idea of when they might move to somewhere more permanent with the consequent uncertainty increasing their stress.

Lack of safety and personal security in hostels, B&Bs and temporary accommodation neighbourhoods have been reported consistently across studies. Families were living in close proximity to drug dealers and vulnerable adults with substance misuse problems (see, Children's Commissioner, 2019). Families described receiving death threats from other residents, finding used needles in bathrooms, child sexual harassment, racism and children witnessing domestic abuse. Clinicians working with families in emergency accommodation have reported several safeguarding concerns, including grooming and physical violence (Cockman & Cockman, 2020). One ten-year old boy described life in a B&B as 'worse than being in a real-life horror film' (Reynolds and Dzalto, 2019, 3). These conditions left children unable to play, or even go to the toilet on their own.

Families' accounts of their experiences of statutory homelessness also reveal how accommodation impacts on the mental and physical health, and education of children. For young people homelessness was a source of shame and stigma; one child stated that they were 'bullied for what they are' (Commissioner, 2019, 13). Some families described developmental regression including wetting the bed, speech impairment, and inability to progress from crawling to walking. Additionally, reports of sleep dysfunction were widespread. Families described difficulties with children's schoolwork caused by cramped conditions and proximity to school – this was hugely exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The fracturing of support systems meant that public service providers were not identified or informed of homelessness, with little if any continuity of care for families.

Although family homelessness disproportionately affects single mothers, as previously evidenced, very few studies look at how women's homelessness is influenced by gender inequality. Women's homelessness is often caused by their role as the primary carers of their children and lack of financial independence and the common experiences of women, such as sexual abuse, domestic violence and maternal trauma (e.g., miscarriage), are often part of the 'trajectory that led to homelessness' (Reeve, 2018). Parents felt their capacities to be mothers were severely constrained by legal, ideological and policy frameworks which led to an inability to cope, often characterised by excessive alcohol use and mental health deterioration (Bimpson *et al.*, 2020a; 2020b). Mothers felt judged by professionals and made to feel accountable for actions of others, usually abusive male partners (*ibid*). Bimpson *et al.*, (2020a; 2020b) is a starting point for necessary research on experiences of homelessness from the perspective of mothers.

Studies looking at the housing experiences of families with disabled children revealed that the majority of homes did not meet their needs (Beresford and Rhodes, 2008). Families reported that

children with both physical and non-physical disabilities suffered losses to their wellbeing and development as result of their housing. Similar housing anxieties, including around short-term leases, were present, and added an extra dimension to an already challenging housing situation (Satsangi et al., 2018). Furthermore, the experiences of multiple homeless disabled parents and children show the unsuitability of temporary accommodation for their needs, including people resorting to using bed pans in their rooms because of access issues to toilets (Shelter, 2017).

Family experiences also highlight how ethnicity can increase the complexity of housing deprivation. The factors which limited Black and Minority Ethnic families' housing choice included 'no-go' areas where racial harassment was rife and the need to be near appropriate schools and places of worship (Garvie, 2004). Moreover, some homeless families have reported that temporary accommodation neighbourhoods had high incidence of racism (DCLG, 2008). Parents from ethnic minorities described how housing deprivation made parenting more difficult, particularly for lone parents (Barn et al., 2006). Furthermore, Black and minority ethnic families with disabled children are extremely likely to be living in unfit homes (Beresford and Rhodes, 2007). Multiple studies have identified that barriers to accessing information and support services (notably language) hinder Black and minority ethnic families from receiving housing support for their disabled children (Russell, 2003; Fazil et al., 2002).

Housing, Homelessness and Child Maltreatment

The relationship between poverty, housing or homelessness and maltreatment needs further exploration. Housing insecurity, unaffordability, residential mobility, overcrowding, and homelessness have been correlated to an increased risk or occurrence of child maltreatment. However, studies are either dated and limited in scope (Burton et al., 1998) or draw on US (Farrell et al., 2017; Warren and Font, 2015; Dong *et al.*, 2005; Marcal, 2018) or Australian data (Cant *et al.*, 2019). While the relationship between poverty, poor parenting and child maltreatment has been explored (Bywaters, 2020), the relation of housing to maltreatment is largely unresearched in the UK.

Two explanations are advanced for the relationship between housing deprivation and child maltreatment. First, poor quality housing is an environment with inherent child maltreatment risks and, second, substandard housing inhibits good parenting (Warren and Font, 2015). On some definitions, being homeless or living in insanitary condition is considered evidence of child maltreatment and termed environmental neglect (Mennen *et al.*, 2010; NSPCC, undated). As discussed further below, being homeless and, for example, staying in insecure accommodation, in vehicles or in statutory accommodation, in close proximity to vulnerable adults, pose fundamental child maltreatment risks.

In the US, Warren and Font (2015) found a statistically significant relationship between housing instability and risk of child abuse and neglect, suggesting this was driven in part by maternal stress. Homelessness has also been related to changes in parenting behaviours (Perlman *et al.*, 2012). Further research shows that housing instability is coupled with increased prevalence of depression and general anxiety disorder among mothers, even when controlling for domestic violence and poverty (Suglia et al., 2011).

Social Care Responses to Homelessness and Housing Deprivation

There have been no substantial research projects in the UK identifying the housing circumstances of families in contact with CSC and no surveys which do so. Amongst longitudinal studies, only ALSPAC provides any relevant data and the numbers of families identified as being in contact with CSC are limited (Sidebotham *et al.*, 2002). This lack of basic data means that, to date, evidence is mainly anecdotal and circumstantial.

The small number of studies over the past forty years examining the backgrounds of children in care and on child protection registers *have* found correlates to overcrowding and housing tenure (Bebbington and Miles, 1989; Sidebotham *et al.*, 2002; Teyhan *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, child welfare service providers and users, when interviewed, identified housing problems, including affordability, overcrowding, and availability of social housing, as driving forces for increased social support need (Hood *et al.*, 2020). US research has highlighted homelessness as a predictor of child welfare service involvement, (Park *et al.*, 2004; Cowal *et al.*, 2002; Font and Warren, 2013). In addition, Broadhurst and Mason (2020) found that mothers' vulnerability to homelessness increased as a result of children being taken into care. The loss of a home could create a vicious circle in which children could not return home in the absence of appropriate space, while the entitlement to space depended on the children's return home. This, in turn, compounded parents' grief and sense of worthlessness creating further 'collateral' damage.

In most local authorities there is a split between children's and adults' services which may be an obstacle to possibilities for whole family responses to housing need and joining up understandings of risks and vulnerabilities across the life course. This can contribute to responses that are actively problematic. For example, an 2017 FOI request to English local authorities found that 56% do not have a safeguarding policy when transferring children to temporary accommodation or B&Bs, and 64% do not seek advice from their safeguarding service when they place families in B&Bs and/or temporary accommodation (CRAE, 2018).

In the absence of robust up-to-date data, the following accounts compiled by one of the authors of this paper, working for a charity concerned to tackle health inequalities in the North West, highlight some of the issues that need attention:

In October 2019, a homeless family with two young children aged four and seven were staying at a XXX B&B. The children befriended two older children from another family and the four of them were playing together in the communal area. The parents were seated close by. A single male, aged mid to late twenties was tormenting the children. Touching them and pinching them. The children told the man to leave them alone but he continued to trouble them. Then without warning he became angry, picked up the seven year old boy and threw him against a mirrored pillar in the room. The boy sustained injuries to his back and his hand. The man ran out of the hotel, but was later arrested when police were called and viewed the CCTV footage of the incident. The boy suffered with pain in his hand and back for several weeks and became nervous and anxious about what had happened. Following the incident, other parents then came forward and stated that the man had also been acting inappropriately towards their children.

Young extremely vulnerable single mother with a history of significant domestic violence and mental health problems. She is a care leaver who had been in care since the age of two. Suffering with chronic developmental trauma, complex PTSD and personality disorder. The mother has two children, one with significant behavioural difficulties and has no family support. The mother was isolated so was talking to single males in the B&B. Her children

were unsupervised and running into the men's rooms at this time. The Hotel did not action this with safeguarding, they only threatened to evict the mother. This mother appeared to be on verge of mental health crisis and unable to fully prioritise all her and her children's needs in an environment that was prime for exploitation.

These accounts highlight the inter-relationships between parents' childhood adversities, trauma, poverty and housing issues but they also signal the urgency of recognising that housing status in itself can actively contribute to the risks faced by vulnerable parents (often women) and children.

Going forward, there are some indications that housing and homelessness issues are coming onto the CSC agenda. The ADCS (2018: 21), reporting factors creating demand pressures, cited poverty and housing as critical issues. 'Shortage of affordable housing stock, overcrowding and houses of multiple occupancy, high private rental costs, inward migration, an increase in evictions and homeless applications all mean that more families are in need of support and are presenting to children's services.' These pressures have been exacerbated by changes which mean more families have no recourse to public funds or are not legally eligible for housing by local authority housing authorities. One example is the Immigration Act (2016) which penalises landlords and lettings agents who administer tenancies to families without leave to remain in the UK. ADCS say this has led to more children and families who are Appeal Rights Exhausted presenting as homeless to children's services, adding to existing critical budget pressures for children's social care.

From a research perspective, the Child Welfare Inequalities Project (CWIP) a research programme covering the UK has contributed to a growing evidence base on the importance of engaging with the socio-economic circumstances and has challenged the dominant child protection discourse which has been individualised in focus and has framed parental behaviours largely in psychological terms. While CWIP was concerned with the relationships between area level deprivation and child welfare inequalities some of its findings raise questions in relation to housing that would benefit from further exploration. It found a graded association between families' socioeconomic circumstances and CSC interactions as, across the UK, a child living in a deprived neighbourhood is much more likely to be 'looked after' away from parents, relatives and friends. However, this relationship appeared stronger in England, Scotland and Wales than Northern Ireland (NI) (Bywaters et al., 2018). NI is the most deprived UK country but has the lowest proportion of children in care (Mason et al., 2020). Interestingly, NI has less poor-quality housing and fuel poverty than its counterparts. This raises an important hypothesis for further exploration: could housing in NI be buffering the effects of deprivation on social care service use?

Conclusion

Having a secure, safe and affordable home is an essential element of a 'good enough' childhood. This is not available to a large and growing number of children and parents in the UK because of a structural housing crisis. There is a clear body of evidence which demonstrates the negative effects of poor housing and homelessness on children's health and development and a smaller body of work that implicates housing policies and conditions in child abuse and neglect. However, there has been little or no UK-based research into the housing issues as causes or consequences of families' involvement with CSC.

In addition to continuing to build the wider evidence about different dimensions of housing concerns and children's lives and life chances, there is a need for research that specifically focuses on the connections with children's social care. The agenda suggested by this review will include:

- establishing the housing conditions of parents and children who come into contact with children's services
- exploring the complex ways in which housing related issues impact on parents and children to create service demand
- identifying how aspects of parents' and children's identities (age, marital status, ethnicity, disability, gender) interact with housing conditions to create CSC demand
- examining how interconnected policies, for example, covering social security, housing, education, health and local government, may mitigate or reinforce housing difficulties and child welfare concerns
- testing the outcomes of current and newly developed service responses.

The primary focus of this article is to highlight the need for such research with the overall aim is of opening up much needed policy and practice conversations about the significance of housing and homelessness as a critical issue for children's social care in the UK and internationally.

To conclude, during the COVID-19 pandemic the Government made funding available to get rough sleepers off the streets but has not provided similar support to homeless families. For families occupying a single B&B room and sharing facilities with other residents social distancing and self-isolation were often impossible and children's opportunities for learning and play restricted. Children already barely visible to the state support system before COVID-19 were no longer receiving visits from community services and were not in school to access early help support systems. As has been evident more generally, COVID-19 has exposed the fault-lines in our current economic, political and social settlement with housing issues proving a particularly stark example. It is to be hoped that this article will support much needed policy and practice changes as well as promoting further research into this neglected area.

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