

## Low-income families' housing problems in Hong Kong: Why they matter to children's well-being

*Children's physical growth and development in the first five years are critical for their lifelong health and attainments. Early childhood growth and development are vastly influenced by the housing environment because children in the early ages spend most of their time at home. Low-income families tend to experience a range of housing problems, such as inadequate housing conditions, housing cost burden, and tenure insecurity. Such housing challenges are likely to compound child health problems faced by underprivileged households. Understanding the relationships between housing and child development is crucial for designing interventions to mitigate the adverse effects of inadequate housing on low-income children's well-being.*

### Background

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- Hong Kong is well-known for being the world's least affordable housing market and for its significantly small living spaces.
- About 25,900 households are living in substandard, subdivided units with children aged below 15 (HKSAR Government, 2023).
- These inadequately housed families suffer overcrowding, poor housing quality, housing cost burden, and tenure insecurity (Caritas Community Development Service, 2017; C&SD, 2018).
- Poverty is highly associated with children's poor physical and mental health and parental stresses in Hong Kong (Duangthip et al., 2020; Kim, 2021), but the role of low-income families' housing conditions in this linkage is little known.

### What the research says

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- 4.7% and 9.7% of the children have wasting (acute malnutrition) and stunting (chronic malnutrition), respectively. These figures are much higher than those among the average Hong Kong children (1.6% and 2.8%, Woo et al., 2012).

- Children's diet diversity marginally meets the minimum requirements suggested by WHO and UNICEF.
- 29% have overcrowding problems (per capita space below 7 sq.m.), 58% experience infestation, 51% have mould on the walls and ceilings, and 50% cannot cool their homes in hot weather. All these problems are more prevalent among children living in subdivided units compared to other types of housing.
- Babies and toddlers in overcrowded housing and preschool children in poor housing quality are more likely to have poorer developmental outcomes.
- Overcrowding, poor housing quality, rent burden, and tenure insecurity are all negatively associated with mothers' mental health, which is likely to influence child health.
- Preschool children spending long hours in crowded homes had poorer developmental outcomes.
- Children living in a neighbourhood with convenient amenities and a high level of social cohesion show better developmental outcomes and more diet diversity.

## Implications for policy

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- The quality of residential buildings that accommodate low-income families (particularly old tenement buildings and deteriorated public rental housing) should be adequately maintained by building and management regulations.
- Effective rental subsidies and tenancy regulations can promote the growth and development of low-income children in private rental housing.
- Regulating the minimum per capita space (at least 7 square metres) for all types of low-income housing and re-allocating public rental housing tenants with young children to more suitable flats (e.g., independent bedrooms/bed spaces secured for children of different sexes) can relieve low-income mothers' concern about the housing risk factors for their child development.
- Encouraging co-residence with grandparents in public rental housing units may hamper early childhood growth and development due to overcrowding and family conflicts.
- Low-income families living in private rental housing other than subdivided units are usually neglected in policy discourses.
- Housing repair services can help vulnerable families with children manage crowded and defective home environments.

## Implications for practice

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- Promoting outside activities for children can mitigate the adverse effects of inadequate housing on child outcomes.

- Engaging young mothers in social activities and educational programs can relieve their stress and enhance their parenting self-efficacy.
- More affordable playgroups and educational programs are needed for low-income toddlers and pre-schoolers.
- More affordable babysitting services are needed.
- Guidelines to keep a house dry and clean can empower vulnerable families to improve the housing environments for their children.

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## Source of this brief

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