

Impact of Housing on Child Health

November 2023

Public Health and Policy Context

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that housing quality and stability affect child development, lifelong physical and behavioral health, and educational and economic outcomes. While there are three major federal housing support programs ([Housing Choice Vouchers](#), [Section 8 Project-Based Rental Assistance](#), and [Public Housing](#)) available to low-income households to address their housing needs, limited funding for these programs has resulted in a shortage of available housing supports. Due to insufficient funding, only one in four eligible households receives [federal rental assistance](#). This means 16 million households in need of housing assistance do not receive it. Notably, the number of households receiving rental assistance stayed approximately steady between 2007 to 2019, while the number of households with [worst case housing needs](#) (i.e., households with very low incomes that either pay more than half their income for rent or live in severely substandard housing) increased by around two million households in the same time period. This document outlines the impacts that poor quality housing and housing instability can have on child development and health.

Safe and Stable Housing: Key to Child Development and Health

Housing Quality

[Housing quality](#) refers to the physical condition of the home (e.g., infrastructure, ventilation, sanitation, maintenance). Poor housing quality can impact a child's development and short- and long-term physical and behavioral health.

- **Physical Health:** Children living in poor-quality housing are more likely to experience physical health conditions triggered by their home environment. Dangerous building materials (e.g., lead paint, asbestos) and poor building maintenance can elevate the risk of long-term [respiratory, nervous and endocrine](#) system issues, especially for toddlers and infants who are particularly vulnerable. For example, lead paint found in older buildings can cause [elevated blood lead levels](#) which are dangerous to children, and exposure to musty smells, pests, and mold can trigger [asthma](#).¹
- **Behavioral Health:** Children living in poor quality housing have shown higher baseline symptoms of [anxiety and depression](#) starting from elementary school through to adulthood (housing quality was assessed based on structural quality, clutter and cleanliness; hazards; indoor climate; and privacy and crowding in the home). Low-quality housing has also been linked to [lower kindergarten readiness](#) scores.

Children of Color Are More Likely to Experience Poor Housing Conditions

Housing policies and disinvestment in communities of color have perpetuated a cycle of housing instability and poor living conditions in communities of color, with as of 2020, [housing insecurity](#) concentrated among [families of color](#). Additionally, many public or [affordable housing units](#), which disproportionately house Black families and children, were built prior to 1970 when lead paint and asbestos were commonly used, thereby disproportionately exposing children of color to these toxic chemicals.

¹ Since 1993, the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) [Office of Lead Hazard Control and Healthy Homes](#) has helped decrease childhood lead exposure by working with state and local governments to identify and mitigate lead-based paint hazards and other exposures (i.e. soil, water pipes, etc.) in low-income housing.

Housing Stability

[Housing stability](#) refers to the assurance of having a stable, affordable and suitable place to live. Housing instability can include many circumstances like eviction, [homelessness](#) and doubling up. Housing instability can contribute to [toxic stress](#) that can impact a child's development and long-term health, even if experienced while in the [womb](#).

- **Prenatal Health:** Pregnant people experiencing homelessness are at two times higher risk of [premature labor](#), 2.3 times higher risk of [severe maternal morbidity](#), and 10 times higher risk of death at the time of labor than pregnant people who are not experiencing homelessness.
- **Infant and Early Childhood Health:** Infants born to families experiencing homelessness are at higher risk of [physical health](#) problems, including low birthweight and asthma. A 2016 [study](#) showed that families with children experiencing housing instability accrued \$8 billion in avoidable health care and education costs which was projected to cost the United States \$111 billion in health and education expenditures over the next decade. Furthermore, housing insecurity is associated with [anxiety and depression](#) symptoms, which can persist into adolescence and adulthood.
- **Adolescent Health:** Teens who experience homelessness face higher risk of self-injury, [suicidal ideation](#) and suicide attempts. Moreover, [unaccompanied youth](#) are more likely to experience anxiety or mood disorders, engage in drug use, and have teenage pregnancies than teens living in homes.

Impact of Neighborhoods With Concentrated Disadvantage on Children's Health and Well-Being

Impact on Rural Communities

Families residing in [rural areas](#) are uniquely affected by housing challenges instigated by a housing shortage and rapid population growth. In 2022, nearly [20% of people](#) in families with children and experiencing homelessness and 40% of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness resided in a largely rural area. Moreover, between 2020 and 2022 homelessness increased by nearly 6% in rural areas, compared to an increase of less than 1% overall.

Families experiencing housing challenges often reside in disinvested, under-resourced areas, which can also, in addition to poor housing quality and housing instability, have long-term impacts on their [health](#) and well-being.

Safe Spaces to Play: Under-resourced areas often lack [safe outdoor play spaces](#), reducing opportunities for children to engage in physical activity and positive social interactions that are vital for their physical and mental well-being.

Educational Opportunities: Such neighborhoods also often [lack high-quality schools](#), hindering children's opportunity for academic progress and future economic mobility.

Access to Healthy Food: The scarcity of grocery stores that sell nutritious food in under-resourced communities further exacerbates health disparities. Limited access to healthy

food can lead to [nutritional deficiencies](#), which impact academic success.

Compounding Effects of Housing on Education, Economic and Health Outcomes for Children

Unstable and low-quality housing resulting from poverty-related disadvantage can [lead to](#) many social challenges (e.g., education, economic, health), which compound upon one another, making the cycle of poverty more difficult to escape. The studies highlighted in this brief underscore that poor housing quality and housing instability are associated with adverse physical and behavioral health outcomes that can follow children into adulthood. Upstream housing interventions can help prevent adverse health for children and their families, while also addressing other social issues that also may, if not addressed, lead to adverse health outcomes for children in the short and long term. In addition, housing programs can promote [resilience for children and families](#) by swiftly responding to housing insecurity when it occurs and ensuring that interventions are responsive to children's varied developmental needs.