

One million Australians living in "unhealthy" housing

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New research led by the University of Adelaide has highlighted the link between poor living conditions and health, and estimates that more than one million Australians are living in sub-standard housing.

The findings are published in the *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, with the authors warning that poor housing conditions are more prevalent in Australia than we think.

"Housing slums used to be common in the inner parts of major Australian cities, as well as in many country towns. Thankfully, government intervention, economic prosperity, and tenancy laws all improved housing conditions across Australia, and within a century the majority of our population benefited from good housing and high rates of home ownership," says lead author Associate Professor Emma Baker, from the University of Adelaide's School of Architecture & Built Environment.

Study co-author Professor Andrew Beer, from the University of South Australia's Business School, says: "Australia saw off the last of its slums in the late 1940s, but the same conditions that gave rise to substandard housing in the 19th century are returning in the 21st century, with a likely similar outcome.

"The confronting reality is that we have a sizeable 'hidden fraction' of Australians living in poor housing, and many of our most vulnerable have the double disadvantage of also having housing conditions that we

might deem as falling below an acceptable standard," Professor Beer says.

Using national data from the Household Income and Labour Dynamics (HILDA) survey, the study found compelling evidence of a substantial stock of poor quality housing in Australia.

"The scale of our findings was surprising: we found that one million Australians are living in poor or very poor quality housing. Within this total, more than 100,000 Australians are residing in dwellings regarded as very poor or derelict. These simple findings are important, showing the existence of a significant – and currently little known – population of individuals living in extremely poor conditions," Associate Professor Baker says.

Associate Professor Baker says the key issue with poor quality housing is its impact on people's health and wellbeing: "There is a strong body of research linking poor quality housing to measurable impacts on mental, physical and general health. We know that damp, cold or mould in homes can cause or exacerbate respiratory illnesses like asthma, and overcrowding can promote communicable disease, but just living in poor quality housing has been linked to anxiety, depression, and a range of other mental health conditions.

"Poor housing makes the already disadvantaged even worse off. Younger people, people with disabilities and ill health, those with low incomes, the unemployed or those in part-time employment, Indigenous people, and renters are much more likely to be found in the emerging slums of 21st century Australia," she says.

"Many of these groups are likely to have a pressing need for housing that improves or supports their health and wellbeing. People with an existing illness or disability, for example, were almost twice as likely to live in

very poor condition dwellings as people without a disability or illness.

"Conversely, research has also shown that improving the quality of housing can lead to direct improvements for people's [health](#) and wellbeing. We believe governments need to take steps to ensure the supply of affordable and reasonable quality housing, otherwise we are destined to become a nation scarred once again by slums, reduced life chances and shortened lives."

More information: Emma Baker et al. Poor housing quality: Prevalence and health effects, *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/10852352.2016.1197714](https://doi.org/10.1080/10852352.2016.1197714)

Provided by University of Adelaide

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