

Understanding the Connections Between Children's Mental Health & Housing



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Key takeaways

Recognizing and understanding the connections between mental health and housing for children – especially those with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and Tourette syndrome (TS) – has never been more important. Given rising rates of ADHD, anxiety, depression, and other indicators of poor mental health among young people,^{1,2,3} as well as recent declarations of a national emergency in child and adolescent health by several national health care organizations,⁴ communities and practitioners are looking for practical solutions to improve mental health outcomes for all children.

A growing body of literature demonstrates the relationship between housing and health. Interventions designed to address upstream determinants of health, such as housing, are an important area of focus to improve mental health outcomes in children.⁵ By bringing together the power of people working on or interested in addressing housing, ADHD, TS, and children’s mental health more broadly, we have the opportunity to address many of the challenges that can prevent children from living in safe, stable, and affordable homes. We are also uniquely equipped to leverage policy options with the following objectives:



Improving protections from eviction and foreclosure



Strengthening housing standards and code enforcement practices



Increasing financial assistance for the creation and preservation of affordable housing



Reforming exclusionary land use

This fact sheet provides the following information to support anyone interested in working at the intersection of housing and children’s mental health or in collaborating on these efforts:

- An overview of several pathways through which housing affects children’s mental health
- Housing policy options that can help to address these challenges
- Strategies for getting involved in promoting children’s mental health and well-being through housing

Information in this fact sheet was informed by a review of recent evidence surrounding the links between children’s mental health and housing and the effectiveness of various housing policies. It was also informed by key informant interviews working at the intersection of children’s mental health and housing. Highlights from those interviews are included in boxes titled **Voices from the Field**.

Introduction

What do we mean by *mental health*?

Mental health is a broad label that encompasses a range of mental, emotional, social, and behavioral functioning.⁶ Mental health, like physical health, occurs along a continuum from good to poor and varies over time, in different conditions, and at different ages.⁷ Indicators of mental health include symptoms (e.g., inattention, worries, and behavioral problems) and diagnosed disorders (e.g., depression, ADHD, and TS).⁸

Mental health is an essential component of children’s overall health and well-being. It shapes how children cope with stress, build relationships, and operate at home, in school, and in their communities. While rising rates of mental health challenges predate the COVID-19 pandemic, heightened stress, grief, social isolation, and economic insecurity due to the pandemic have exacerbated these challenges.^{9,10,11} For some children with ADHD, the COVID-19 pandemic’s disruption to daily routines may have been particularly harmful.^{12,13} Research also suggests that the onset of tic symptoms among children increased during the pandemic, especially among teenage girls, and that rates of anxiety and other mental health conditions among children with new tic symptoms has also increased.¹⁴

The severity of mental health challenges also varies across demographic subpopulations.¹⁵ For example, children and adolescents who are socioeconomically disadvantaged may experience additional stressors and health care disparities and are two to three times more likely to develop mental health conditions than their peers with higher socioeconomic status.¹⁶

Mental health is an essential component of children’s overall health and well-being.

What do we mean by *safe, stable & affordable housing*?

Although a standardized definition does not exist in the literature, safe, stable, and affordable housing typically encompasses the ideas that families will live in housing that

- is non-injurious to their health;
- does not present circumstances that compel them to relocate; and
- does not cost more than 30 percent of their household income.^{17,18}

A growing body of evidence suggests that access to safe, stable, and affordable housing may be a particularly powerful predictive factor of children’s mental health and development.^{19,20,21,22,23,24} As pediatrician Megan Sandel has said, “a stable, affordable home can act like a vaccine, providing multiple long-lasting benefits on both the individual level and the community level.”²⁵ Conversely, a lack of access to safe, stable, and affordable housing is harmful to health and associated with infectious and chronic diseases and injuries.²⁶

How does housing affect children's mental health?

Housing can affect children's mental health through three primary pathways:

1. Housing quality: the physical conditions of a person's home^{27,28,29,30,31}
2. Housing stability: the ability to secure and maintain adequate housing^{32,33}
3. Neighborhood environment: the physical and social conditions in which housing is located^{34,35}

The following sub-sections explore how families with children experience housing challenges through these three pathways and detail specific links to children's mental health associated with each.

How housing challenges overlap & reinforce one another

Families frequently face interconnected challenges related to housing quality, housing stability, and neighborhood environment, as difficulties in one area can contribute to difficulties in another. For example, while a lack of affordable housing opportunities³⁶ may not directly affect children's mental health outcomes, it may force families to increasingly dedicate more of their income to paying rent; consolidate into overcrowded living conditions with other people;³⁷ accept living in dangerous or unhealthy conditions;³⁸ move multiple times;³⁹ move to less safe neighborhoods;⁴⁰ move away from their social networks;^{41,42,43,44,45,46,47,48} or lose their housing entirely.

These challenges can create feedback loops, as shown in the following graphics. The feedback loops reinforce and exacerbate one another, particularly for people with the lowest incomes.^{49,50}

- Lack of quality affordable housing → falling behind on rent and/or living in substandard housing → experiencing housing instability
- Experiencing housing instability → increased difficulty in securing quality affordable housing → living in substandard housing



Poor physical housing quality

Poor physical housing quality can affect children's mental health and development through both physiological and psychological pathways. One notable example is lead exposure, which studies have shown to cause irreversible damage to children's brains. Even low exposure levels are associated with higher rates of ADHD and other behavioral and developmental problems.^{51,52} Despite the potential health consequences, an estimated 3.3 million homes with children under the age of six have one or more lead-based paint hazards.⁵³ An analysis by the National Center for Healthy Housing suggests that over 45 million homes in the United States have one or more defects contributing to poor housing quality.⁵⁴ For more information on specific links between housing quality and children's mental health, see [Table 1](#).

Lead exposure



Lead is a neurotoxin that children may be exposed to through several sources.⁵⁵ At home, children are primarily exposed to lead by breathing in dust or ingesting chips from lead-based paint that may settle in areas inside and around the building, such as windowsills, floors, and soil,^{56,57} although additional exposures may also exist, such as from household or service-line plumbing and water fixtures containing lead.⁵⁸ No level of exposure to lead is safe and even lower blood lead levels (less than 10 µg/dL) have been shown to increase attention-related behavioral problems.^{59,60} Lead exposure rates vary substantially across communities; however children who access public insurance or reside in predominantly Black or Latinx neighborhoods remain at a greater risk for exposure compared to children with private insurance or living in predominantly white neighborhoods.⁶¹

Generally poor physical housing

In addition to lead, common physical hazards and inadequacies found in homes include exposure to other toxic chemicals, such as radon, carbon monoxide, or nitrogen dioxide; unsafe structures; leaking roofs; broken windows or appliances; poor ventilation or climate control; pests; and lack of adequate heat, hot water, or light.^{62,63,64,65,66} Such substandard housing conditions may affect mental health through several mechanisms, either directly or indirectly. Exposure to environmental toxins may cause direct neurological damage.⁶⁷ Alternatively, hazards inside the home may limit children's ability to move about freely and may also expose children to increased levels of caregiver stress.⁶⁸ Recent research finding an association between poor housing quality and ADHD also suggests that poor air quality, acoustic quality, lighting quality, and thermal regulation within a home may exacerbate ADHD symptoms.⁶⁹ Risks related to generally poor housing quality are especially acute for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) and people in communities with low income, as these groups have been disproportionately exposed to substandard housing conditions due to discriminatory policies and practices.⁷⁰

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Table 1. Housing quality & children's mental health & development

Housing challenge	Documented associations or impacts
 Lead exposure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Altered mood and behavior, including ADHD^{71,72,73} ■ Aggression,⁷⁴ antisocial behavior,⁷⁵ delinquency,⁷⁶ and other behavioral problems^{77,78} ■ Adrenocortical responses to stress⁷⁹
 General poor physical housing quality (e.g., indoor air pollution, leaks, pests, lack of heat, water, or inadequate light)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Compromised emotional health (such as anxiety, depression, withdrawal, somatic symptoms)^{80,81} ■ Behavioral issues,⁸² including delinquency⁸³ and ADHD⁸⁴

Housing instability

Housing instability comprises a range of housing challenges, such as untenably high housing costs, eviction, frequent moves, overcrowding, and homelessness.⁸⁵ Although housing instability can be hard to quantify,⁸⁶ one informative metric is the percentage of families that are behind on their rent or mortgage. As of July 2022, approximately one in five renter families with children reported being behind on rent. For families that own their homes, approximately one in twelve reported being behind on their mortgage.⁸⁷ Households struggling with housing payments may be forced to make tradeoffs among essential household expenses, including rent, utilities, food, and health care.⁸⁸ They may also face eviction, foreclosure, and homelessness.^{89,90}

VOICES FROM THE FIELD: THE CYCLE OF HOUSING INSTABILITY

Relocation due to eviction, foreclosure, or homelessness can disrupt families' access to benefits and contribute to housing instability.

“Losing these vital benefits can then increase a family’s risk of eviction because they’re not getting food stamps coming in to help with grocery bills, which makes it harder to pay rent.”

Children experiencing housing instability are at increased risk of several adverse mental health outcomes, such as depression, hyperactivity, and inattention.^{91,92,93} Research also suggests that housing instability experienced during pregnancy may lead to adverse perinatal outcomes, including low birth weight, which may put children at a higher risk for attention-related, anxiety-related, and social problems; other psychological difficulties;⁹⁴ and TS.⁹⁵ For more information on the links between housing instability challenges and children’s mental health, see [Table 2](#).

Eviction

Evictions, or forced moves, may involve a formal legal process or result from landlord threats or illegal actions, such as changing the locks or cutting off essential services.⁹⁶ Evictions may cause children to miss instructional time or switch schools and may lead to caregivers’ losing property, employment, or social networks.⁹⁷ Additionally, eviction court records can surface during

renter screening, disqualifying caregivers from future housing opportunities and leading households to live in poorer-quality housing and neighborhoods with higher levels of crime and poverty.⁹⁸ Children who go through an eviction are also at an increased risk of lead poisoning.⁹⁹ One 2018 study estimates that 14 percent of children born between 1998 and 2000 experienced an eviction by the time they turned fifteen.¹⁰⁰



Overcrowding

Overcrowding is defined as more than two people living in the same bedroom, more than one person per room, or multiple families sharing the same residence.^{101,102} Families may be forced to “double up” or select homes with inadequate living space due to economic hardship or housing loss.^{103,104} Living in an overcrowded home may disturb children’s sleep, negatively affect their ability to complete schoolwork, limit their privacy, and increase their exposure to infectious diseases.¹⁰⁵ Yet, in 2021, approximately 14 percent of children lived in crowded housing.¹⁰⁶

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Frequent moves

Frequent moves are often defined as two or more moves in the previous year.^{107,108} Moving frequently may limit preventative health care visits¹⁰⁹ and disrupt schooling, family processes,¹¹⁰ and social connections.¹¹¹







Homelessness

Homelessness refers to the lack of a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.^{112,113,114} In addition to causing disruptions to daily life, homelessness may expose children to additional stress related to living in a shelter and more frequent adverse childhood experiences.¹¹⁵ During the 2020–21 school year, public schools identified about 1.1 million students who experienced homelessness.¹¹⁶

HOUSING CHALLENGES CONTRIBUTE TO HEALTH DISPARITIES

Due to overt and systemic forms of discrimination, BIPOC communities;¹¹⁷ immigrants;¹¹⁸ people with a criminal record;¹¹⁹ LGBTQ+ people;¹²⁰ people with a negative credit rating¹²¹ or previous rental evictions;¹²² families with children;^{123,124} and individuals with mental and developmental conditions¹²⁵ are more likely to have trouble securing and maintaining stable housing. This may also make these groups less likely to secure necessary housing repairs and more likely to move to neighborhoods with significant physical and social challenges.

Table 2. Housing stability & children’s mental health & development

Housing challenge	Documented associations or impacts
 Eviction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Preterm birth, low birthweight, developmental delays, and poor general health^{126,127,128}
 Overcrowding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Internal and external behavior problems¹²⁹
 Frequent moves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Developmental delays¹³⁰ ■ Withdrawal/depression¹³¹
 Homelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Preterm birth and low birthweight¹³² ■ Developmental delays¹³³ ■ Emotional and peer relationship problems and conduct, hyperactivity, and inattention problems¹³⁴ ■ Behavior problems¹³⁵

Neighborhood environment

A child’s mental health and well-being may also be affected by the location of their home and the physical and social characteristics of the surrounding neighborhood.

Children who are experiencing housing instability or who are part of low-income families forced to move due to substandard housing conditions may also be more likely to experience the challenges associated with neighborhood environment. For example, studies show that families unable to find affordable housing are more likely to relocate to neighborhoods with higher crime rates and greater risk of exposure to allergens, toxins, and other unsafe elements.^{136,137} Households struggling to secure affordable housing may also relocate to neighborhoods with more blight, which is associated with higher rates of infectious disease, cancer, and diabetes.¹³⁸

When people are forced to move in response to rising rents, social cohesion can decline.¹³⁹ Even in economically distressed neighborhoods, a tight-knit community can help to cushion people from some of the harsh consequences of scant resources. However, as neighborhoods evolve and long-term residents move out, social networks may dissolve. People feel less connected and less supported when there is neighborhood turnover, and they may find themselves excluded from the new populations that move into the neighborhood.¹⁴⁰ Lack of social cohesion is often associated with poorer physical and mental health outcomes.¹⁴¹

Physical characteristics

Features of the built environment surrounding a home that may negatively affect mental health outcomes include lack of access to green spaces,¹⁴² limited access to transportation,¹⁴³ physical decay of buildings and neighborhood amenities like trees and sidewalks,¹⁴⁴ environmental pollution,¹⁴⁵ and exposure to climate change and natural disaster.^{146,147} Children facing these challenges may experience negative mental health impacts associated with reduced rates of physical activity^{148,149} and exposure to stressful and unhealthy environments – including ADHD symptoms.^{150,151,152} For more information on the links between physical environment challenges and children’s mental health, see [Table 3](#).



Limited access to play & green space

Play and green space includes nature (e.g., tree canopies, greenery, and green spaces), public open space (e.g., parks, greenways, or other areas that may be used for recreation purposes), and outdoor play spaces containing natural elements. Neighborhoods with low levels of green space, whether due to the mixture or intensity of land uses within an area or a lack of green space amenities, may affect children's mental health and development through several pathways – for example, by limiting opportunities for physical activity and contact with nature.^{153,154,155,156} While aspects of access to green space extend beyond access to parks, a recent analysis conducted by the Trust for Public Land found that 100 million people – including 28 million children – do not have a park within a 10-minute walk of their home.¹⁵⁷

Neighborhoods with low levels of green space may affect children's mental health and development.



Limited access to transportation

Access to transportation can affect children's mental health and well-being if it limits access to behavioral and mental health treatment.^{158,159,160,161,162,163,164,165} For example, approximately 9 percent of children of low-income families miss essential medical appointments due to transportation barriers¹⁶⁶ and unmet transportation needs (e.g., lack of personal car or access to public transit).¹⁶⁷ These barriers affect children's access to care across the health spectrum, including issues with obtaining medications, accessing mental health services, and receiving emergency care¹⁶⁸ – all of which are more prevalent among traditionally underserved populations^{169,170,171,172} and can exacerbate mental health and well-being challenges that would benefit from earlier intervention and more consistent care.¹⁷³



Environmental pollution

Environmental challenges at the neighborhood level include poor air quality, high rates of noise, contaminated drinking water, and soil contamination. Children living in neighborhoods with high levels of air pollution may spend less time outdoors and engage in less physical activity.¹⁷⁴ Growing evidence also suggests that noise pollution is associated with attention difficulties, hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, and physiological stress.^{175,176,177} Drinking water contaminated with toxins such as lead, arsenic, and nitrate have been associated with depressive symptoms.¹⁷⁸ Lead-contaminated soil can also have a range of effects on children's mental health and well-being.¹⁷⁹







Risk of exposure to climate change & natural disasters

There are a variety of building and community-level characteristics that determine how vulnerable a home is to climate-related environmental changes and natural disasters. For example, urban heat islands¹⁸⁰ – areas where surfaces such as roadways and rooftops absorb and emit heat to a greater extent than most natural surfaces – contribute to higher daytime temperatures, reduced

nighttime cooling, and higher air pollution levels.¹⁸¹ While climate change is putting an increasing number of homes and people at risk of experiencing natural disaster,^{182,183} not all neighborhoods will be affected equally. Emerging research suggests that poorly resourced neighborhoods and neighborhoods negatively affected by historical housing policies, such as redlining, may be disproportionately exposed to extreme heat.¹⁸⁴ Extreme weather and natural disasters may be particularly harmful to children,¹⁸⁵ who may experience heightened levels of mental, emotional, and bodily stress,^{186,187} and survivors of disasters are known to experience a range of mental health issues.^{188,189}

Table 3. Neighborhood physical characteristics & children’s mental health & development

Housing challenge	Documented associations or impacts
 Limited access to play and green space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Heightened levels of measurable and perceived stress and disturbances to daily mood^{190,191,192} ■ ADHD symptoms and inhibited ability to concentrate and focus^{193,194,195} ■ Reduced feelings of social connectedness with community and social capital¹⁹⁶ ■ Misconduct and hyperactivity^{197,198}
 Limited access to transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Barriers to obtaining medications and accessing physical and mental health services, including emergency care^{199,200,201,202}
 Environmental pollution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Depression²⁰³ ■ Behavioral problems and delinquent behavior (e.g., lying, cheating, and stealing)^{204,205} ■ Development of major depressive disorder by age 18²⁰⁶ ■ Psychotic experiences from ages 12 to 18²⁰⁷ ■ Negative impacts on subjective well-being, such as life satisfaction²⁰⁸
 Risk of exposure to climate change and natural disasters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Mental, emotional, and bodily stress^{209,210} ■ Post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and somatoform disorders (i.e., conditions or disorders that impair functioning of the nervous system, pain experience, or brain-body connection, with no known medical or structural disease process)²¹¹

Social characteristics

Non-physical neighborhood characteristics can affect the mental health of children and adolescents.^{212,213,214,215} Specific aspects of the social environment of a neighborhood that have been linked to children's mental health outcomes include neighborhood social cohesion,^{216,217,218,219,220,221,222} exposure to neighborhood violence^{223,224,225} and peer bullying,^{226,227} and perception of neighborhood safety.^{228,229,230,231,232,233,234,235,236,237,238,239} For more information on the links between social environment challenges and children's mental health, see [Table 4](#).



Neighborhood social cohesion

The overall sense of belonging and voluntary social participation of the members of a neighborhood constitute neighborhood social cohesion.^{240,241,242,243,244} Low social cohesion may affect children's mental health through several mechanisms, including limiting their involvement in community organizations and their use of community resources.²⁴⁵



Experiences of violence

Experiences of violence may include personally experiencing physical, sexual, emotional, or property violence, or witnessing such violence.²⁴⁶ Research suggests that exposure to violence may negatively affect children's mental health and development by increasing their levels of chronic stress.²⁴⁷ Exposure to multiple types of violence may be particularly detrimental to a child's mental health by negatively affecting future resiliency.²⁴⁸ Individuals exposed to violence, and multiple forms of it, are more likely to live in structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods.²⁴⁹



Perception that neighborhood is unsafe & fear of being the victim of crime

Existing literature has established a correlation between fear of crime and mental health.²⁵⁰ This extends to adolescents as well, with fear of being a victim of crime and perception that a neighborhood is unsafe positively associated with higher scores in hyperactivity and inattention, more peer relationship problems, and more emotional and behavioral difficulties²⁵¹ and experiences of depression, anxiety, oppositional defiant disorder, and conduct disorder.^{252,253,254,255} This may be particularly acute in low socioeconomic status neighborhoods, where youth perceive increased ambient hazards such as crime, violence, drug use, and graffiti.²⁵⁶







Concentrated economic disadvantage

Concentrated economic disadvantage may be measured by poverty rates, rates of employment, and levels of educational attainment. Studies also often look at combined measures of neighborhood deprivation that may include related metrics such as levels of crime and other social conditions. Research suggests that neighborhood economic disadvantage may affect children's mental health by increasing their levels of chronic stress and those of their caregivers.²⁵⁷

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Table 4. Neighborhood social characteristics & children's mental health & development

Housing challenge	Documented associations or impacts
 Low neighborhood social cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Depression, anxiety, and somatic problems^{258,259} ■ Peer relationship problems²⁶⁰ ■ Bullying behavior, including being a bully-victim²⁶¹
 Experiences of violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Poorer mental health^{262,263,264} ■ Developmental disorders²⁶⁵ ■ Peer bullying^{266,267} ■ Detriments to future resiliency²⁶⁸
 Negative perception of neighborhood safety and fear of being the victim of crime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Hyperactivity and inattention²⁶⁹ ■ Peer relationship problems²⁷⁰ ■ Bullying behavior, including being a bully-victim²⁷¹ ■ Emotional and behavioral difficulties²⁷² ■ Depression, anxiety, oppositional defiant disorder, and conduct disorder^{273,274,275,276,277}
 Concentrated economic disadvantage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Mental health problems among children, as reported by parents²⁷⁸ ■ Antisocial and aggressive behavior among adolescents²⁷⁹ ■ Depression, anxiety, and somatic problems²⁸⁰ ■ Peer relationships problems²⁸¹



What policy options are available?

Government policies at local, state, and federal levels – such as exclusionary zoning laws^{282,283} and discriminatory lending and mortgage insurance practices^{284,285} – can contribute to the housing challenges affecting children’s mental health and disproportionately burdening communities of color.^{286,287,288}

Decision makers, children’s mental health and housing experts, and community members can work together to undo these harms and increase children’s access to safe, stable, and affordable housing. A few potential policy options are highlighted below. Examples of policy options for each housing challenge discussed in this fact sheet are included in the Appendix.



POLICY OPTION 1: Eviction & foreclosure protections

Federal, state, and local laws dictate when tenants and homeowners may be legally removed from their homes. Adding legal protections for residents to this body of law may help improve housing stability and quality by protecting children from the harms of involuntary moves and empowering renter families to request that landlords repair health hazards. In turn, a reduction in housing instability may also improve neighborhood social cohesion.^{289,290} For example, just cause (also called “good cause”) eviction laws limit the grounds on which a landlord may legally evict a tenant.²⁹¹ Currently, many jurisdictions permit landlords to evict tenants at the end of the lease term for any reason.²⁹² Just cause eviction laws support housing stability by restricting the grounds for legal eviction^{293,294,295,296,297} to significant lease violations, such as failure to pay rent.²⁹⁸ Just cause eviction laws may also support housing quality by limiting landlords’ ability to file retaliatory evictions against tenants who speak up about needed repairs or discrimination.²⁹⁹

Establishing a right to counsel for tenants facing eviction is another form of legal protection that may help keep children and their families stably housed.³⁰⁰ Providing tenants with a right to counsel in eviction cases has been shown to reduce the number of eviction cases filed and increase the number of tenants who are able to remain in their homes.³⁰¹ It may also help improve the quality of rental housing by preventing the retaliatory eviction of tenants who request necessary repairs from their landlords.³⁰²

VOICES FROM THE FIELD: HOW HOUSING STABILIZATION POLICIES CAN HELP

A right to counsel is one promising housing stabilization policy that could support positive children’s mental health outcomes. A researcher examining health outcomes among tenants in New York City who received counsel during eviction proceedings explained:

“Nine times out of ten, the landlord shows up to rent court with a lawyer, and the tenant does not. The deck is stacked against tenants, who have rights, but they often aren’t able to effectively assert them. New York City was the first city to guarantee right to counsel to tenants facing eviction below a certain income level and they’ve seen really good outcomes in terms of eviction prevention. People that received counsel have much lower rates of eviction.”



POLICY OPTION 2: Housing standards & code enforcement

State and local governments can establish minimum property standards to reduce the number of homes with health hazards.³⁰³ Strengthening these standards and establishing procedures for enforcing them may help improve housing quality by increasing the number of homes that are free of health hazards. One way to do this is by establishing proactive rental inspection programs, which periodically inspect all or a subset of the rental properties within a given jurisdiction.^{304,305,306}

Policies like proactive rental inspection programs also offer a promising method to promote housing stability. Renters often do not report housing code violations due to fear of retaliation,³⁰⁷ but proactive inspections can help government officials identify health hazards and work with landlords to make repairs before they harm tenants or cause long-lasting damage.^{308,309,310} Additionally, this may bolster the quality of a neighborhood's built and social environments by keeping homes and buildings in good shape and reducing the risk of building condemnation.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD: HOW DOES THIS WORK IN PRACTICE?

A researcher focused on how housing and policy influence health equity provided an example of this in practice, stating,

"We passed some of the first mold legislation in the country that required licensed mold inspectors and licensed mold assessors and remediators. This legislation forces landlords to get a licensed assessor who will come in and determine if there's mold, help identify potential root causes of the mold, and requires the landlord to remediate mold that is found."

Building on that success, they are looking for other ways to support housing quality.

"We are working on passing lead legislation... to force landlords to proactively inspect for lead every time they have to renew their business licenses."



POLICY OPTION 3: Financial assistance for renters

Governments can further address housing instability by funding programs that provide financial assistance to renters in need. Policies to support these goals are numerous and diverse; however, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's rental assistance programs are likely the most well-studied.³¹¹ Multiple studies have confirmed that federal rental assistance reduces housing instability.³¹² Emerging research evaluating the impact of these types of programs on children's mental health also suggests that they may improve the mental health of children in low-income renter households.³¹³ Due to lack of funding, however, only about one in four eligible low-income renter households receive any form of federal rental assistance.^{314,315}

At the local level, several cities and counties have established housing trust funds.³¹⁶ Housing trust funds offer flexible funding that can be used to support new affordable housing, improvements to existing housing, and other housing-related activities.³¹⁷

VOICES FROM THE FIELD: HOW DOES THIS WORK IN PRACTICE?

A respondent from an organization providing legal services to children and families provided the following example of how flexible funding has been applied to improve housing quality:

“National Housing Trust got funding from J.P. Morgan to project manage remediating 750 units, and we’re working with them on applying for some of the federal funding. We’re trying to bring together the Green Funding [federal funding]..., Healthy Housing Funding, and then support from Children’s [Hospital], who is actually going to do some evaluation work to show we’re actually making people healthier.”



POLICY OPTION 4: Land use reforms

Another potential policy avenue is the regulation of land use within a state or locality. Changes to land use planning strategies and zoning laws can help improve housing stability by making it easier to build affordable housing.³¹⁸ Reforms in these areas can also improve a neighborhood’s physical and social characteristics.³¹⁹ For example, localities can consider undertaking a comprehensive review of their zoning code to remove exclusionary zoning policies, such as single-family zoning and other residential density restrictions; encourage mixed-use and affordable housing development; prioritize equitable access to health care, healthy food, and green space; and support safe and diverse modes of transportation.^{320,321}

How can I get involved in addressing housing challenges in order to promote children’s mental health?

For those who are not already in a position to adopt or implement housing policies that promote children’s mental health, figuring out where to start or how to get involved can feel overwhelming. To help overcome this hurdle, some initial strategies and examples from the field are included below. As you review these strategies, consider which steps you can take as an individual, in partnership with the organization you are affiliated with, and through your broader networks.



STRATEGY 1: Join or establish cross-sector coalitions

Coalitions could include local organizations, government agencies, and communities. Coalitions can aim to support the implementation of policies, services, or other interventions to address housing challenges that affect children’s mental health. Participation might look different depending on your training or experience. For example, those with mental health expertise could contribute to these coalitions by training partners on children’s mental health needs, analyzing the potential mental health impact of policy proposals, and educating decision makers on the impact of housing policies on children’s mental health. Below are some examples of what this strategy looks like in practice:

- The Health and Wellness Alliance for Children (“the Alliance”), founded by North Texas pediatric health care system, Children’s Health, is a partnership of more than sixty community organizations in Dallas County. The Alliance includes residents and representatives from health, education, government, nonprofit, and faith communities.³²² With the support of housing experts from organizations including the National Center for Healthy Housing, the Alliance worked with city staff and the Dallas City Council to strengthen the city’s healthy housing standards and expand the city’s proactive rental inspection program.³²³
- Opportunity Starts at Home is a national, multi-sector campaign led by the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) working to generate support for federal policies that ensure quality housing for people with the lowest incomes.³²⁴ The steering committee is chaired by NLIHC and includes the National Alliance to End Homelessness, Children’s HealthWatch, National Alliance on Mental Illness, the National Association of Community Health Centers, the National Association of Social Workers, and other organizations from the housing and medical fields.³²⁵ The coalition’s policy priorities include expanding rental assistance for low-income households, expanding the stock of housing affordable to households with low incomes, and providing emergency rental assistance to prevent housing instability.³²⁶



STRATEGY 2: Coordinate & align services & resources to increase access to stable housing for vulnerable children & families

Coalitions and collaboratives can work to coordinate and align services and resources to increase housing stability. For example, One Roof is a collaborative of partners in child welfare and housing systems at the federal, state, and local levels that are working to integrate services and improve family stability. One Roof's Keeping Families Together initiative connects child welfare-involved families with supportive housing that provides wraparound services for the whole family, including caretakers and adults, to help families become unified or reunified. This approach helps to improve family stability and overall well-being of children and their parents and can prevent mental health impacts of unstable home environments. One Roof is an initiative of the Corporation for Supportive Housing, which is dedicated to bringing sectors and systems together – including housing, health care, and child welfare – to improve outcomes for vulnerable households.

Supportive housing that provides wraparound services helps to improve family stability and overall well-being of children and their parents.



STRATEGY 3: Establish medical-legal partnerships

Medical-legal partnerships (MLPs) integrate legal services into health care settings.³²⁷ Community mental health and health care organizations can establish these types of partnerships to build referral pathways that connect patients experiencing housing challenges with legal services. Through MLPs, lawyers can help patients address housing challenges that may be contributing to health conditions. They can also help care teams identify and advance policy solutions.³²⁸

One example of a successful MLP is Healthy Together, which is based in Washington, D.C., and was established by Children's National Hospital and Children's Law Center in 2002.³²⁹ Through Healthy Together, Children's Law Center attorneys work with pediatricians, nurses, and social workers to identify and resolve the root causes of health problems experienced by their patients.³³⁰ In addition to providing direct legal services, Children's Law Center provides training on MLPs and the social determinants of health to Children's National Hospital staff and patient families.³³¹ Children's Law Center and Children's National Hospital also work together – and with other partners including DC Health, Unity Healthcare, Mary's Center, managed care organizations, and parents – to gather data about environmental challenges affecting children in Washington, D.C., and the impact of legal interventions.^{332,333} Healthy Together is also working to advance upstream policy solutions that help address health-harming housing conditions and minimize the long-term impacts of adverse childhood experiences.^{334,335}

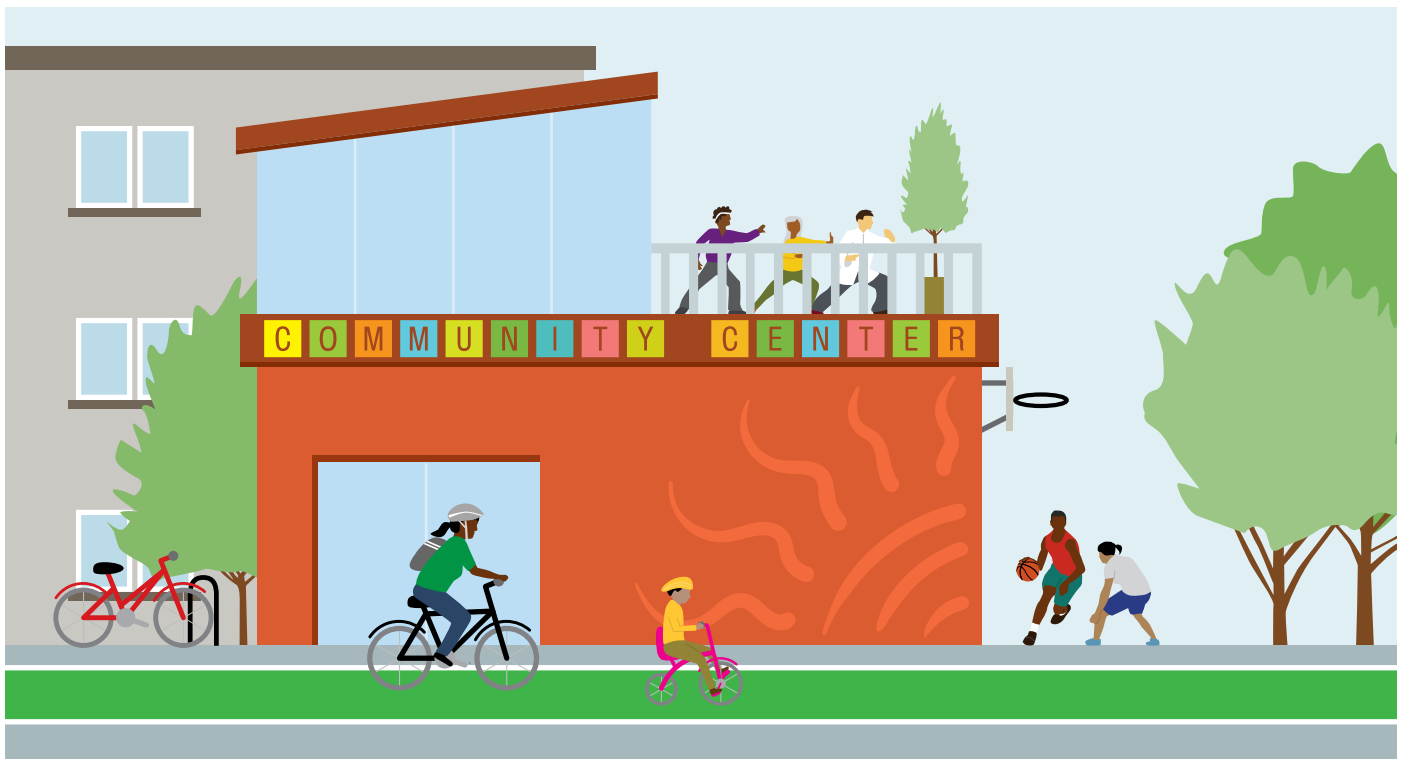


STRATEGY 4: Expand the evidence base for the impact of housing policies on children with ADHD or TS or on children's mental health overall

The literature evaluating the impacts of housing policies that seek to address one or more housing challenges is limited. This is likely due to several factors:











- Many policies have only been implemented in a small number of jurisdictions or for a short period of time.
- There may be significant variance between jurisdictions in terms of what the policy requires and the local context in which the policy operates.
- Data on many housing-related outcomes are limited or inaccessible.
- Programs may have limited or no funding for rigorous evaluation.³³⁶
- It is difficult, and possibly unethical, to design a randomized clinical trial of housing effects on mental health.






Individuals with expertise in research and analysis can work with government officials, housing experts, and community members to build this evidence base by implementing robust and equitable policy evaluation plans.^{337,338} Improving our understanding of how housing policies are established and what their outcomes are can help support and sustain progress. For example, the Lead Safe Cleveland Coalition is working together with community members, health care institutions, research universities, and local government officials to evaluate a new lead safe certification requirement.^{339,340} The coalition's research and evaluation committee, chaired by Case Western Reserve University, is currently tracking the city's implementation of the program and publishing their data through a publicly accessible online dashboard.^{341,342}



Appendix: Housing challenges & policy options

The following table provides examples of policies that may help to address the housing challenges that contribute to negative mental health outcomes in children. Policies are listed by the challenge they may help address. Those that address multiple challenges are listed to the right of each of these challenges. Within each pathway's sub-group, the policies are generally listed in order of how directly they may address the challenge. For example, in the "Poor physical housing quality" section, improving code enforcement practices (more direct) is listed before increasing the supply of affordable housing (less direct). It should be noted, however, that a policy that aims to address a housing challenge directly may not necessarily be more effective than an indirect policy that addresses the structural drivers of that challenge. More information about these policies and potential design considerations are included in the cited policy briefs and articles.

Housing challenge	Potential policy options
Poor physical housing quality	
 Lead exposure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Housing standards and code enforcement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Strengthen legal requirements related to lead hazards and healthy housing³⁴³ ○ Create a proactive rental inspection program^{344,345}
 General poor physical housing quality (e.g., indoor air pollution, leaks, pests, lack of heat, water, or inadequate light)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Funding to improve housing quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide financial incentives to reduce the cost of repairs and weatherization^{346,347,348,349,350,351,352,353} ○ Create a housing trust fund^{354,355}
Housing instability	
 Eviction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Eviction and foreclosure protections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Adopt a just cause eviction law³⁵⁶
 Overcrowding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide a right to counsel to tenants facing eviction³⁵⁷ ○ Adopt rent regulations³⁵⁸
 Frequent moves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide emergency rental assistance³⁵⁹ ○ Require foreclosure mediation³⁶⁰
 Homelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Funding to improve housing quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide financial incentives to reduce the cost of repairs and weatherization^{361,362,363,364,365,366,367,368} ○ Create a housing trust fund^{369,370} ■ Funding to improve housing affordability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide additional funding for housing vouchers³⁷¹ or public housing^{372,373} ○ Provide additional funding for Housing First permanent supportive housing³⁷⁴ ○ Increase income supports^{375,376,377} ■ Planning and zoning reforms that reduce density restrictions and encourage the development of multifamily housing³⁷⁸
Neighborhood environment	
 Limited access to play and green space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Planning and zoning reforms that help increase access to green spaces^{379,380}
 Limited access to transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Planning and zoning reforms that help increase access to safe and diverse modes of transportation^{381,382}
 Environmental pollution (and/or unhealthy land use and patterns of development)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Planning and zoning reforms that limit environmental pollution and inequitable exposure, reduce traffic volume, and increase opportunities for physical activity^{383,384}
 Risk of exposure to climate change and natural disasters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Funding to improve housing quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide financial incentives to reduce the cost of repairs and weatherization^{385,386,387,388,389,390,391,392} ○ Create a housing trust fund^{393,394}

Housing challenge	Potential policy options
 Deterioration of neighborhood's physical characteristics/ environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Housing standards and code enforcement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Strengthen legal requirements related to lead hazards and healthy housing³⁹⁵ ○ Create a proactive rental inspection program^{396,397} ■ Funding to improve housing quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide financial incentives to reduce the cost of repairs, hazard abatement, and structural improvements^{398,399,400,401,402,403,404} ○ Create a housing trust fund^{405,406} ■ Land banks,⁴⁰⁷ vacant property greening,⁴⁰⁸ and community land trusts^{409,410} ■ Systems to make homeowners of renters in the same home (e.g., "rent-to-buy")^{411,412}
 Low neighborhood social cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Eviction and foreclosure protections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Adopt a just cause eviction law⁴¹³ ○ Establish a right to counsel for tenants facing eviction^{414,415} ○ Adopt rent regulations⁴¹⁶ ○ Require foreclosure mediation⁴¹⁷ ■ Planning and zoning reforms that help increase access to green spaces^{418,419,420}
 Experiences of violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Funding to improve housing quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide financial incentives to reduce the cost of repairs and weatherization^{421,422,423,424,425,426,427,428,429} ○ Create a housing trust fund^{430,431} ■ Land banks and vacant property greening⁴³² ■ Planning and zoning reforms that help increase access to green spaces^{433,434}
 Negative perception of neighborhood safety and fear of being the victim of crime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Adoption of a law prohibiting discrimination based on source of income⁴³⁵ ■ Funding to improve housing affordability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide additional funding for housing vouchers⁴³⁶ or public housing^{437,438} ○ Provide additional funding for Housing First permanent supportive housing⁴³⁹ ○ Increase income supports^{440,441,442}
 Concentrated economic disadvantage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Adoption of a law prohibiting discrimination based on source of income⁴³⁵ ■ Funding to improve housing affordability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide additional funding for housing vouchers⁴³⁶ or public housing^{437,438} ○ Provide additional funding for Housing First permanent supportive housing⁴³⁹ ○ Increase income supports^{440,441,442}

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