



# If Walls Could Talk

Shining a light on the issue of unfit housing



International Report



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*If Walls Could Talk*

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# Foreword

Home schools, home offices, home gyms – Covid-19 has seen our homes become more central to our lives than ever over the course of this year.

In whatever way we are using them, everyone wants their home to be safe, warm and welcoming. We can all agree that if those needs aren't met, and whenever housing is unfit, it is distressing. For any of us, at any time.

As a result of the pandemic, the consequences of unfit housing on those who are living with it are being felt far more deeply. This deserves urgent attention.

Millions of people are living in homes that are too damp, too cold or too small. Our research found that excessive cold, noise and damp are the biggest issues faced across all five of our key markets in Europe. In addition, around a third of people surveyed in France, Spain, Poland and Romania feel they live with significant housing issues with little or no control in fixing them. The same is true for almost a fifth of people in the UK.

We know this, because we asked over 7,000 participants in the markets in which we operate about the most common problems associated with their homes. We have also looked at the wider implications that these problems can have on their physical and mental health. It's abundantly clear that these issues have been made worse throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

We are a home improvement business with a purpose to help make better homes accessible for everyone. One of the four responsible business priorities that we are focusing on is a commitment to helping tackle bad housing and, against a backdrop of Covid-19, this has never been so important.

The following research sets out the breadth and depth of the problem. It aims to broaden the conversation about unfit housing and understand what we can all do to help tackle the issue.

We know it will take a multi-sector, whole-society approach, so we are working with partners in each of the key markets in which we operate. In the UK, we will be supporting Shelter and leading housing charities, Shelter Cymru and Housing Rights, to provide more urgent expert support to people who are struggling with unfit housing, while in France we continue to work with Fondation Abbé-Pierre. In 2020 and into 2021, we are also launching a network of Foundations for our retail banners – to support local charities who provide, maintain, repair, and improve housing and community spaces. These Foundations will be funded by annual donations from Kingfisher and our market banners, as well as fundraising by colleagues and customers in each market. Finally, we will be sharing our findings with governments, to help deepen their understanding along with suggestions about what else can be done to help.

The need to address the problem of unfit housing has never been more urgent, with the pandemic increasing its effects on people's lives. There is much more to do.



**Thierry Garnier, CEO, Kingfisher plc**



# 01 Introduction

## Shining a light on the issue of unfit housing

# Introduction

Unfit housing impacts millions of people across Europe, contributing to health problems and negatively affecting many aspects of their lives. With people spending more time at home because of the pandemic, these problems have been magnified.

## A Europe-wide problem

We surveyed over 7,000 people across the UK, France, Poland, Romania and Spain to understand how poor housing is impacting their day-to-day lives. Their insights and perceptions paint a picture of how the places we live shape our lives for better or worse.

More than a third of people in France, Poland, Romania and Spain, and 18% in the UK, told us that they are living with 'significant housing issues'\*. 30% across all countries said it had a major impact on their overall wellbeing. More often than not, these are long-term problems – almost two thirds (62%) have been living with at least one housing issue for over a year.

\*We defined those living with elements of unfit housing as either having two or more housing issues, or at least one major housing issue from the list found on page 26 in the Methodology section. Those defined as living in good housing don't suffer with these elements of unfit housing. Those with 'significant housing issues' have told us the elements of unfit housing they are living with have a moderate/major impact on aspects of their lives.

## Percentages of people who report living with 'significant housing issues', and of those, percentages who feel they have little or no control to resolve them

	UK	FRANCE	SPAIN	ROMANIA	POLAND
Percentage of people who report living with unfit housing	<b>18%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>41%</b>
Percentage of people living with unfit housing <b>who feel they can't resolve the situation*</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>82%</b>	<b>70%</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>69%</b>

\*Percentage of those living with elements of unfit housing which have a significant impact who feel they have little or no control to resolve the issue.

## Covid-19: making a difficult situation worse

Many have been dealing with elements of unfit housing for years but Covid-19 has only amplified certain issues in 2020. Those with housing issues said the first nationwide lockdown and spending more time at home had magnified their housing problems, leaving them feeling "trapped", "powerless" and "frustrated". This was particularly the case for the most vulnerable in society and those with disabilities; many of whom were required to 'shield' or isolate.

The most common issues made worse by spending more time at home include having a home that is too small, too cold, too noisy, overcrowded, with poor bathroom and toilet facilities and lack of natural light.

**For people living with elements of unfit housing, spending more time at home during lockdown left 52% feeling trapped and 51% feeling powerless and frustrated.**

### **Unfit housing: too cold, too noisy, too damp**

Our research showed that across Europe people living with elements of unfit housing are often experiencing the same issues. Excessive cold, noise and damp are the top three issues experienced in all five markets.

UK	FRANCE	ROMANIA
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Excessive cold (43%)</li> <li>2. Excess noise (42%)</li> <li>3. Damp and mould growth (41%)</li> <li>4. Structural problems or disrepair (38%)</li> <li>5. Home that is too small (37%)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Excessive cold (50%)</li> <li>2. Excess noise (46%)</li> <li>3. Damp and mould growth (43%)</li> <li>4. Poor electrical or heating systems (41%)</li> <li>5. Poor bathroom and toilet facilities (38%)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Excess noise (46%)</li> <li>2. Damp and mould growth (45%)</li> <li>3. Excess cold (44%)</li> <li>4. Pests or rubbish (44%)</li> <li>5. Poor sanitation and drainage (42%)</li> </ol>
POLAND	SPAIN	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Excess noise (48%)</li> <li>2. Excessive cold (47%)</li> <li>3. Damp and mould growth (43%)</li> <li>4. Structural problems or disrepair (42%)</li> <li>5. Poor electrical or heating systems (42%)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Excess noise (57%)</li> <li>2. Damp and mould growth (52%)</li> <li>3. Excessive cold (51%)</li> <li>4. Poor sanitation and drainage (49%)</li> <li>5. Excessive warmth (48%)</li> </ol>	

A full list of the housing issues covered by our research can be found in the Methodology section at the end of this report.

## A new partnership for action

While this research paints a depressing picture of the housing situation experienced by millions of people, it also points to potential solutions and opportunities for action.

We hope to use what we've learnt to spark a conversation about unfit housing with European, national and local governments, as well as NGOs, policymakers, social and private landlords. By working together with a broad range of partners we want to ensure that everyone has access to a home that is fit for purpose and is safe, secure, warm and comfortable.

You can find out how you can help in our fight against unfit housing at the end of this report.

**We need to have a good conversation about the fitness of our housing across the country and what the system is doing to people because of the poor quality of housing.**

Chris Wood, Assistant Director of Research, Policy and Public Affairs, Shelter

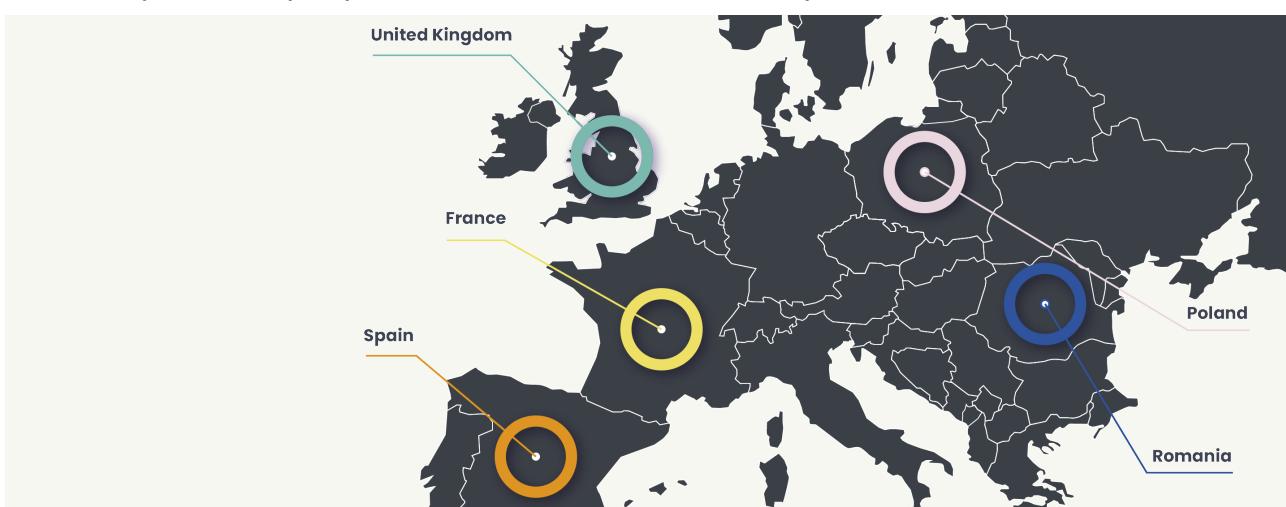


**Unfit housing places a great weight on your life – when you don't have the space to think or the money to act you can end up trapped in an awful, never-ending circle.**

Nick Lakin, Group Director of Corporate Affairs, Kingfisher



We surveyed 7,000 people across five countries in Europe



02



## 02 Unfit housing in the UK

## What's wrong with housing in the UK?

**Nearly a fifth of the UK population live with significant housing issues**

**Some 9.5 million** – or nearly a fifth (18%) – of UK residents report living with ‘significant housing issues’, and of those, **74% feel they have little or no control** of the situation. The most common problems people face in their homes are cold, damp and noise.

**People living in unfit housing are most likely to:** be young, have a disability, be living in urban areas, be on low incomes, work full-time or live with children under 18.

**The most common issues are cold, noise, damp and mould**, as well as structural problems or homes that are too small. **These issues are also taking a serious toll on people’s health and wellbeing.**

**Living through long periods of lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic has compounded these problems**, leaving many respondents feeling “trapped” in unfit homes, and “powerless” to do anything about it.

**Percentages of people living with housing issues who report the following problems:**

Excessive cold  <b>43%</b>	"The windows and doors are in poor shape, meaning gaps that are large enough for drafts to get through, most of which I have had to tape around to try and keep heat in and cold out."
Excessive noise  <b>42%</b>	"The excess noise from neighbours and traffic right outside my window increases my stress levels to an unbearable extent."
Dampness and mould  <b>41%</b>	"It's a constant mess creeping across my bedroom ceiling and taking the paint off the ceiling and paper off the walls in the bathroom."
Structural problems or disrepair  <b>38%</b>	"The roof is damaged and has resulted in water pouring in when it rains. We use three buckets to catch the rain."
Home that is too small  <b>37%</b>	"I have three children and only two bedrooms, myself and my partner share a room with two of our children due to lack of space."
Overcrowding  <b>25%</b>	"My wife and I sleep in the living room. My two sons and one of their girlfriends sleep in one of the bedrooms. There is nowhere for any of us to self isolate if required to do so."

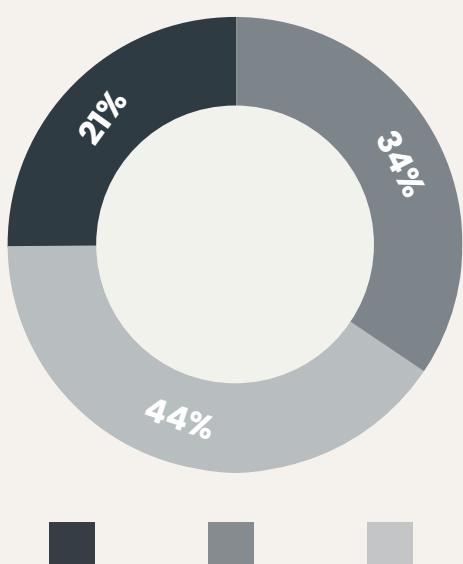
## Who is most affected by unfit housing?

Our research shows that those living with housing issues are more likely than those in good housing to be:

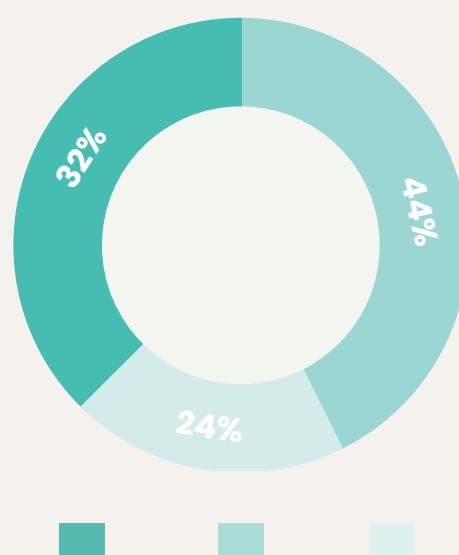
- Living in urban areas
- Working full-time
- On a low income (less than £20,000 pa)
- Living with a disability
- Have young children (at least one under 18)
- In an ethnically diverse group

### Breakdown by age of those living in good vs unfit housing

People living in good housing



People living with housing issues

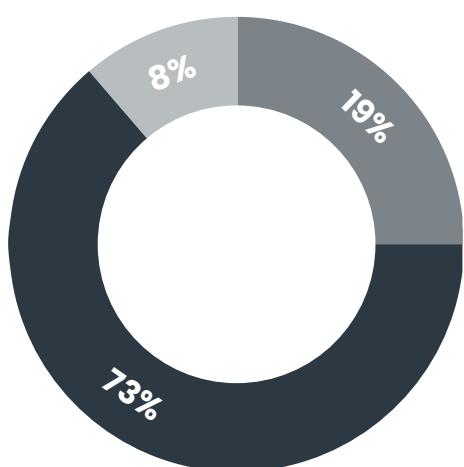


Aged  
18-34      Aged  
35-54      Aged 55  
or older

Aged  
18-34      Aged  
35-54      Aged 55  
or older

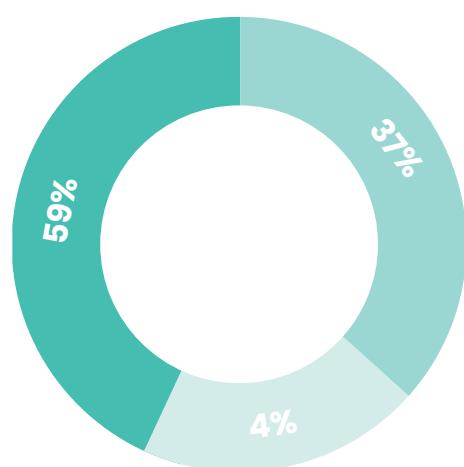
## Breakdown of home owners and renters living in good vs unfit housing

People living in good housing



Own  
 Rent  
 Other

People living with housing issues



Own  
 Rent  
 Other

## Lack of space and dedicated rooms



38% with housing issues don't have access to an outdoor space (versus 17% who live in good housing)



17% with housing issues don't have a living room (versus 6% who live in good housing)

## Taking a toll on health and wellbeing

Unfit housing is affecting all aspects of people's lives. Our research showed it takes a toll both physically and mentally – keeping people awake at night, triggering stress, anxiety and mental health issues, and exacerbating existing illnesses.

### How housing issues affect people's lives:



Say it has affected their own or their family's health



Say it has affected their life in another way, such as their social or love life



Of parents say it has impacted their children



Of workers say that their career has been affected in some way

**There's a perfect storm there where affordability, security, and poor conditions mean that people are in really awful conditions, hugely anxious about security and affordability – where the next payment's going to come from – but also whether their housing accommodation is damaging their children or their health.**

Chris Wood, Assistant Director of Research, Policy and Public Affairs, Shelter



## Feeling the impact of poor housing:



**The boiler itself is quite old and breaks down every now and then... it can be a week or two before it is up and running again, meaning I rely on blankets and electric heaters if it's a cold season.**

Anonymous, female, 49, South West



**As soon as we get bad weather, I worry about the house and panic about mould and damp. It makes me not want to be in the house much.**

Anonymous, female, 39, East Midlands



## A tale of two crises: the impact of Covid-19 on unfit housing

### The damaging effects of unfit housing are being made worse by the pandemic

Unfit housing is an ongoing and widespread problem: 62% of those living with housing issues told us they have suffered with at least one element of unfit housing that has lasted more than a year. However, while the Covid-19 pandemic didn't cause housing issues, it has certainly brought them into sharper focus.

The nationwide lockdown from March-May 2020 meant our homes suddenly became more central than ever to all aspects of our lives. Most people found themselves spending more time inside and having to repurpose their spaces quickly into home schools or offices. As a result, more than half (53%) of our UK respondents stated that the overall state of their current home is more important to them now than it was pre-lockdown.

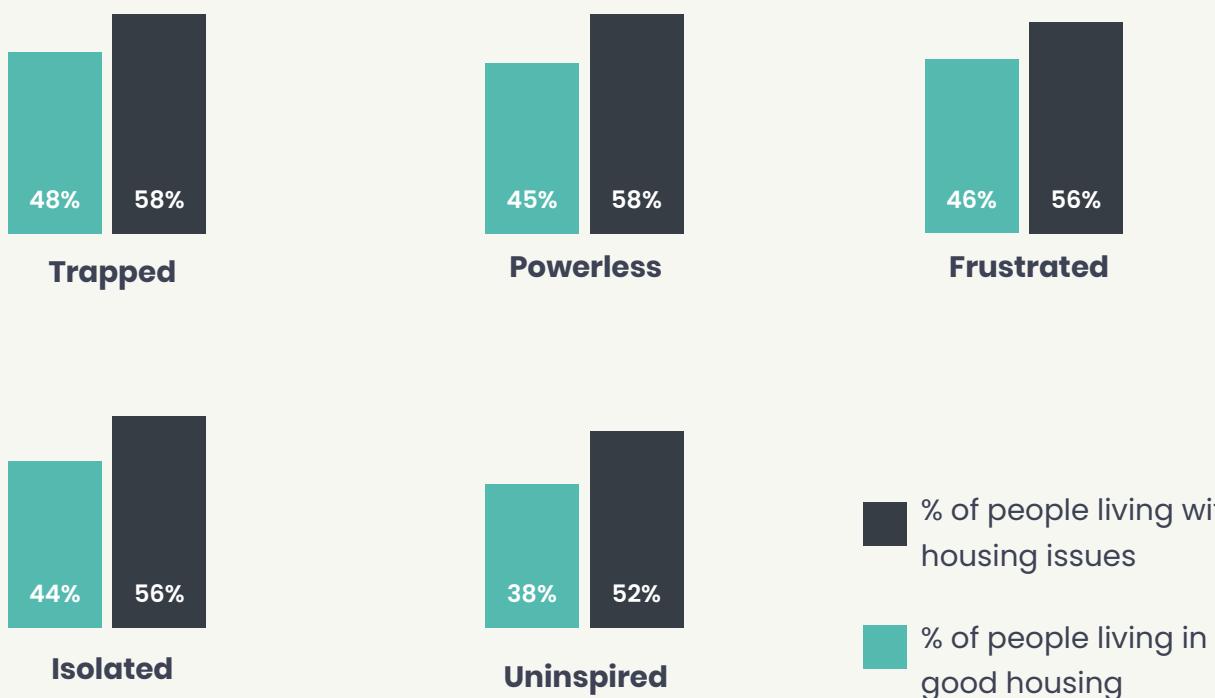
The pandemic and lockdown made certain elements of unfit housing more problematic. Lack of space and excessive noise are rated among the biggest challenges, as more people find themselves living in close quarters with each other.

Long periods of lockdown and restricted movement are also taking a heavy toll on the mental health of those with housing issues, with respondents feeling "trapped" in unfit homes, and "powerless" to do anything about it.

### Top 3 housing issues made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic



## Breakdown of how people feel about spending more time at home during the pandemic



**The situation was difficult during normal circumstances, but during lockdown we really felt the impact of a small, overcrowded home. I became clinically depressed for a while but luckily it subsided. My husband periodically gets depressed about our living conditions.**

Maria, female, 36, South East

“

**Because I am spending more time in the home I cannot escape these problems, I also have to use my facilities more so it is more noticeable when they are inadequate. The more time you spend in the house the more likely the unsafe aspects could harm you.**

Anonymous, female, 23, South East



**When I was shielding, home was the only place we were in 24 hours a day. We tried to improve what we could but, unfortunately, it only highlighted the issues we had. The whole situation made me feel frustrated and even more down.**

Farhan, male, 48, Yorkshire and Humberside



**My children have been spending their days here, as opposed to at their various places of education – and that has been difficult for them – and for me. I felt they were too cramped in the current conditions.**

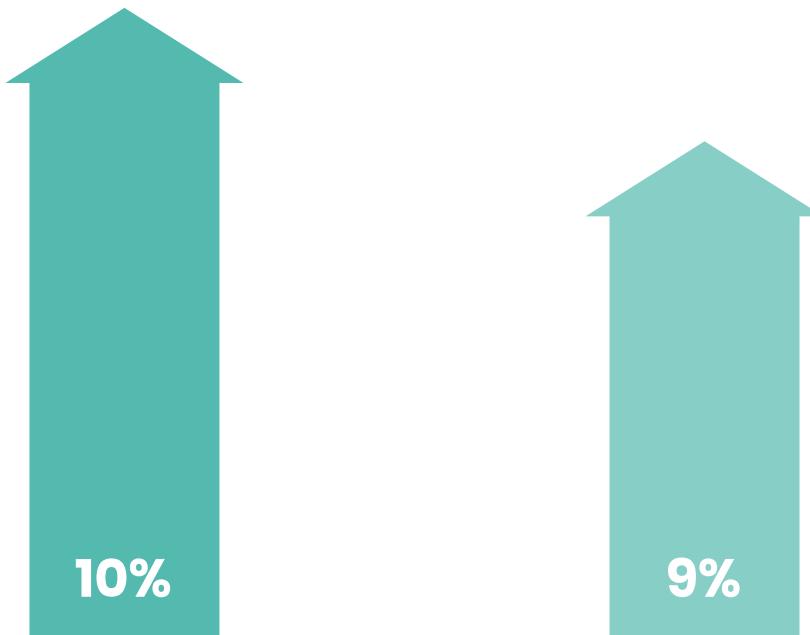
Anonymous, female, 38, North West



## The emotional toll of Covid-19 on people with disabilities living with housing issues

For people living with a disability, lockdown further magnified the negative impacts of unfit housing. They were 10% more likely to report feeling anxious and 9% more likely to feel neglected.

**People with disabilities living with housing issues are more likely to feel the emotional impact of Covid-19:**



**Anxious** – 10% more than the national average

**Neglected** – 9% more than the national average

With England going through a second lockdown at the time of writing this report, just as the country enters the darker, colder months of winter, **it is more important than ever that our homes are safe, secure, warm and comfortable spaces.**

**It [home] has felt like a prison, especially during the main part of lockdown.**

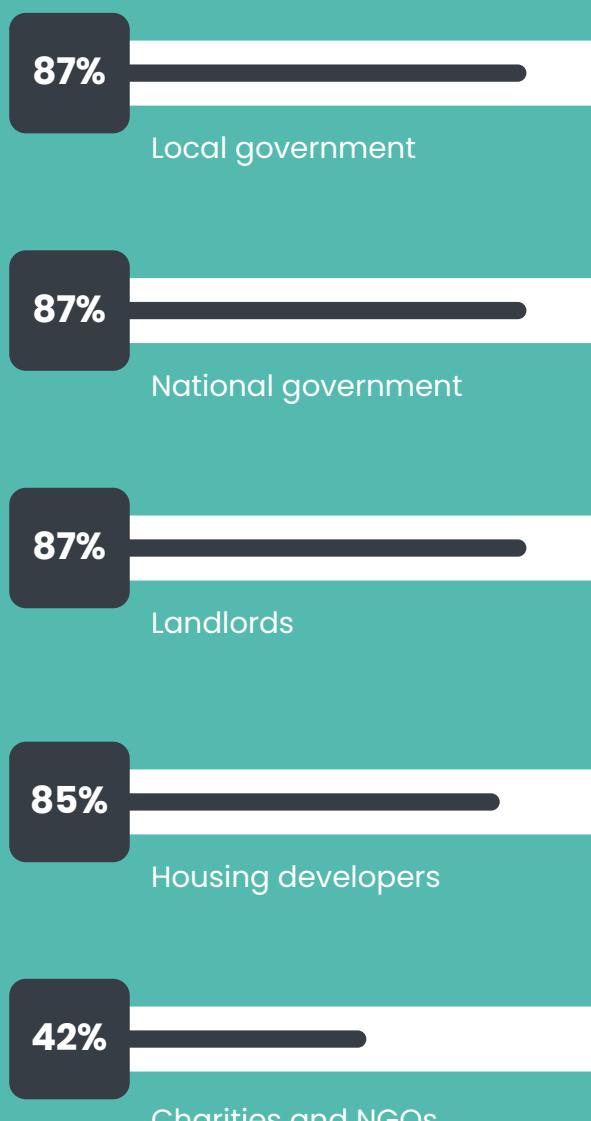
Beverley, female, 46, South East

“

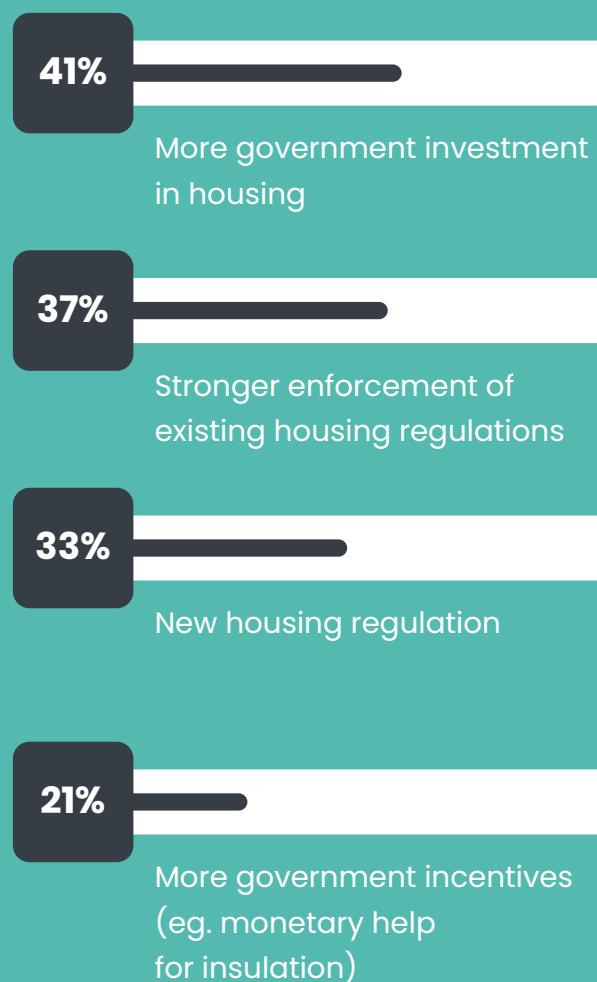
## Who is responsible and how can we change things?

We asked all respondents who they think is responsible for tackling the issues of unfit housing. Responses showed that local and national governments, landlords and housing developers are all viewed as responsible while charities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also have a part to play. Participants also had clear ideas on how best to tackle the problems of unfit housing.

### 'Who is 'very' or 'somewhat' responsible for solving the problem of unfit housing?'



### 'What are the most effective solutions?'





03

## 03 Unfit housing in France

## What's wrong with housing in France?

**More than a third of the French population live with significant housing issues**

**Some 24 million people** – more than a third (36%) – in France report living with ‘significant housing issues’, and of those, **82% feel they have little or no control** of the situation.

**People living in unfit housing are most likely to:** be young, have a disability, be living in urban areas, be on low incomes, work full-time or live with children under 18.

**The most common issues are cold, damp and noise**, as well as poor electrical or heating systems and poor bathroom or toilet facilities – and **it's taking a serious toll on people's health and wellbeing**.

**The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent long periods of lockdown have compounded these problems**, leaving many respondents feeling “anxious” and “pessimistic”.

**Percentages of people living with housing issues who report the following problems:**

Excessive cold  <b>50%</b>	"Poor electric heating, and insulation of the exterior walls is insufficient. In addition, the windows are poorly insulated and I can feel the passing air when I put my hand next to it."
Excessive noise  <b>46%</b>	"You can hear [the people who live above my flat] walking and the children running. Vacuuming as if they were tearing the floor apart. It's as if they are in the same apartment as us."
Dampness and mould  <b>43%</b>	"The wall is crumbling, leaving black stains, and despite several visits from my landlord nothing has been done for years."
Poor electrical or heating systems  <b>41%</b>	"We cannot turn on the heaters, because the heat does not stay inside; they are so old that the electricity bills are exorbitant."
Poor bathroom or toilet facilities  <b>37%</b>	"Due to water leakage in the bathroom and an inability to drain the water regularly, we cannot take a shower and turn on the tap at the same time or even have the washing machine on."

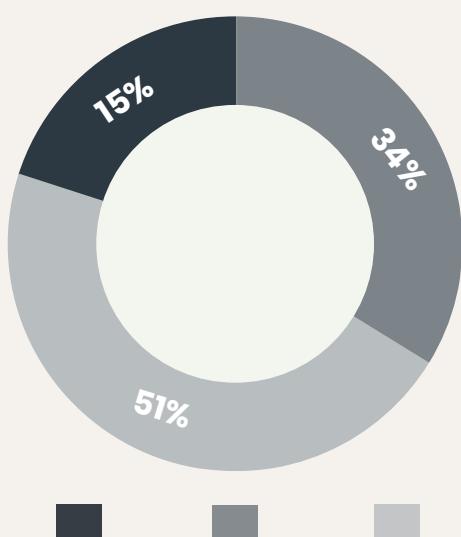
## Who is most affected by unfit housing?

Our research shows that those living with housing issues are more likely than those in good housing to be:

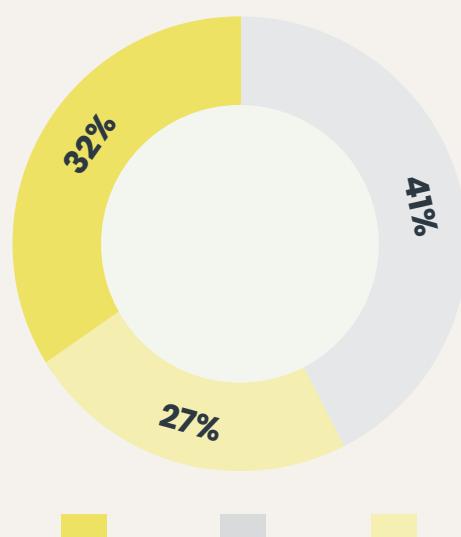
- Living in urban areas
- Working full-time
- On a low income (less than €20,000 pa)
- Living with a disability
- Have young children (at least one under 18)

**Breakdown by age of those living in good vs unfit housing:**

People living in good housing



People living with housing issues

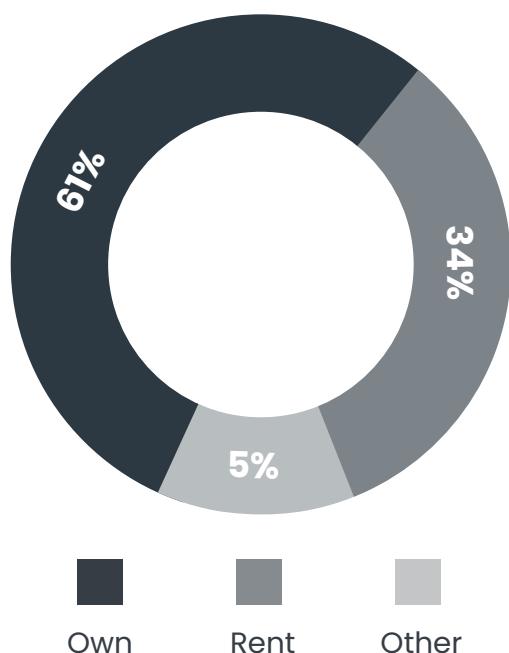


Aged  
18-34      Aged  
35-54      Aged 55  
or older

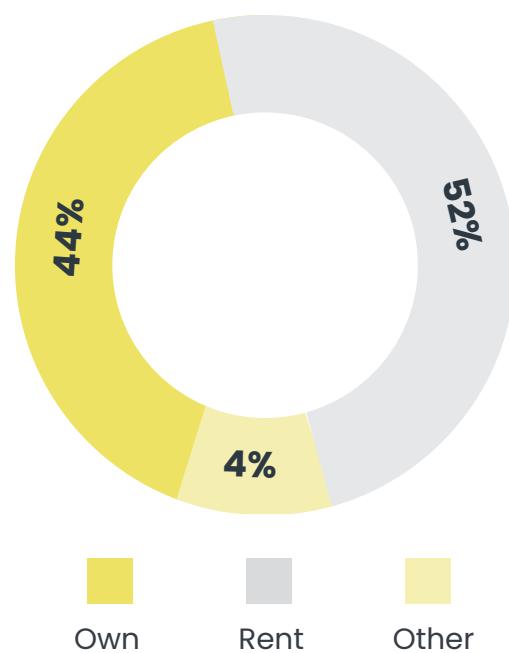
Aged  
18-34      Aged  
35-54      Aged 55  
or older

## Breakdown of home owners and renters living in good vs unfit housing

People living in good housing



People living with housing issues



## Lack of space and dedicated rooms



With housing issues  
don't have access  
to an outdoor space  
(versus 34% who live  
in good housing)



With housing issues  
don't have a living room  
(versus 19% who live in  
good housing)

## Taking a toll on health and wellbeing

For our respondents in France living with elements of unfit housing, the issues are being felt across multiple aspects of their lives. It's taking a toll both physically and mentally – keeping people awake at night, triggering stress, anxiety and mental health issues, and exacerbating existing illnesses.

### How housing issues affect people's lives:



Say it has affected their social interactions or love life



Say it has affected their own or their family's health



Of parents say it has impacted their children



Of workers say that their career has been affected in some way

**We can see now that the house is at the centre of public interest, it is vital that it is in good condition. The contradiction with the lockdown is how can I be safe in my home, if my home is not good for my health.**

Sarah Coupechoux, Assistant Director of Research, Research Manager,  
Fondation Abbe Pierre



## Feeling the impact of poor housing:



**As I have a disability, being cold can have a big impact on my health. I can't invite anyone over because they'd have to bring blankets or coats in the apartment. There are days when there is no hot water and it is impossible to take a shower.**

Anonymous, Female, 67, Île-de-France



**The mould in my home gives me allergies. I can't clean it, no matter how many anti-mould products I use. The humidity is horrible, there is a lot of condensation. In the summer with the heat, the humidity in my apartment can reach up to 88%, with a heat of 50 degrees in my apartment. It's hell.**

Anonymous, Female, 29, Paris



## A tale of two crises: the impact of Covid-19 on unfit housing

### The damaging effects of unfit housing are being made worse by the pandemic

Unfit housing is an ongoing and widespread problem: 62% of those living with housing issues in France have suffered with at least one element of unfit housing lasting more than a year. However, while the Covid-19 pandemic didn't cause housing issues, it has certainly brought them into sharper focus.

A country-wide lockdown at the beginning of the pandemic meant our homes suddenly became more central than ever to all aspects of our lives. More people were spending time inside and having to repurpose their spaces quickly into home schools or offices. As a result, four in ten (43%) French respondents stated that the overall state of their current home is more important to them now, than it was pre-lockdown.

Another 42% told us that the issue of unfit housing has become more important during the pandemic, making certain elements of unfit housing more problematic. Excess noise from neighbours or surroundings, lack of space and inadequate kitchen facilities are rated among the biggest challenges.

The impact of long periods of lockdown and restricted movement are also taking a heavy toll on the mental health of those living with elements of unfit housing, with respondents feeling "pessimistic" about their situation and "frustrated" that they can't do anything about it.

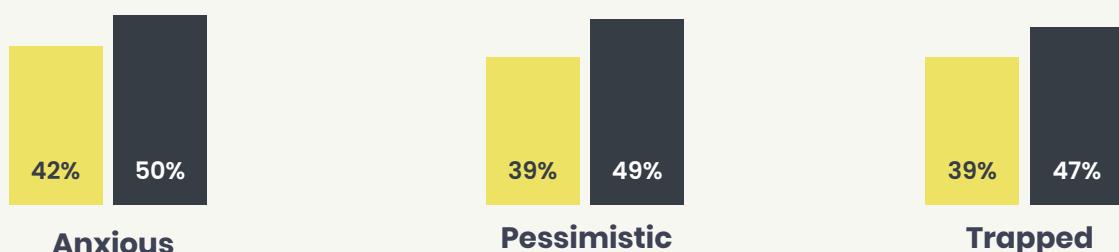
### Top 3 housing issues made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic

1 **52% – Excess noise from neighbours or surroundings**

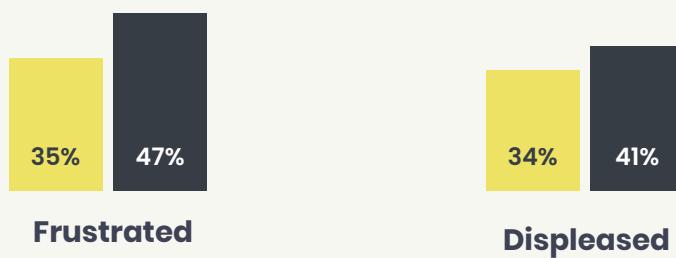
2 **46% – Home that is too small**

3 **43% – Poor or inadequate kitchen facilities**

## How are you feeling about spending more time at home during the pandemic?



% of people living with housing issues  
 % of people living in good housing



**It's difficult to occupy a young child in a limited space without a garden. I finally ran out of ideas for distractions for her. It's less complicated for an adult with the new technologies that can make us forget the small space in which we live, but for a child, outdoor spaces become essential (especially when the weather is nice) and it's difficult to make her understand the lockdown.**

Vincent, Male, 37, Île-de-France



**The confinement in a small space has become more unbearable and the restricted mobility has left very little room for escape.**

Anonymous, Female, 63, Île-de-France



**The kitchen does not have the space to put even a table with a chair – it's impossible to sit in to eat or prepare a meal properly. The wall surfaces are very small and too fragile to put furniture on to optimise storage, so I have to keep everything on the floor and I keep my pots in the sink.**

Anonymous, Female, 56, Hauts-de-France



**Trapped: because I couldn't go out to get some fresh air in the parks and green areas near my accommodation. My courtyard and garden are tiny, and not enough for my daughter to exercise. I became aware of my dependence on these spaces during the lockdown, I wasn't really aware of it before.**

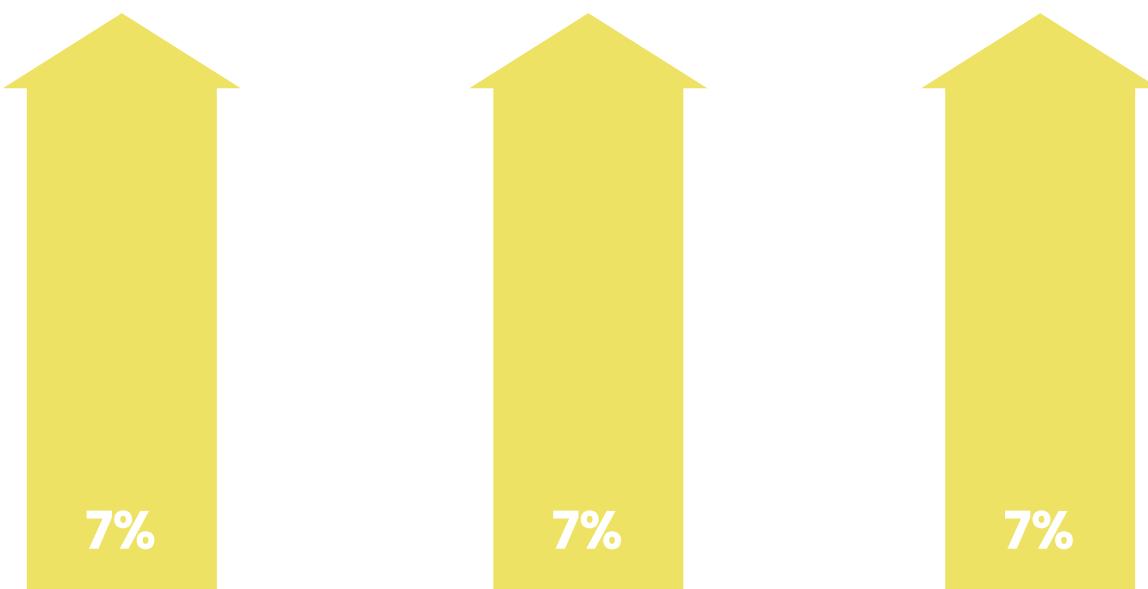
Vincent, Male, 37, Île-de-France



## The emotional toll of Covid-19 on people with disabilities

For those living with a disability, lockdown further magnified the negative impacts of unfit housing. They were 7% more likely to report feeling pessimistic, isolated and trapped.

**People with disabilities living with housing issues are more likely to feel the emotional impact of Covid-19:**



**Pessimistic** – 7%  
more than the  
national average

**Isolated** – 7%  
more than the  
national average

**Trapped** – 7%  
more than the  
national average

After a strict eight week lockdown in spring and a second national lockdown underway at the time of writing this report, **it has never been more important that our homes be safe, secure, warm and comfortable spaces to live in.**

**As the days went by, I no longer saw my accommodation as just housing, but at times like a prison where it was difficult for me to get out as I wanted.**

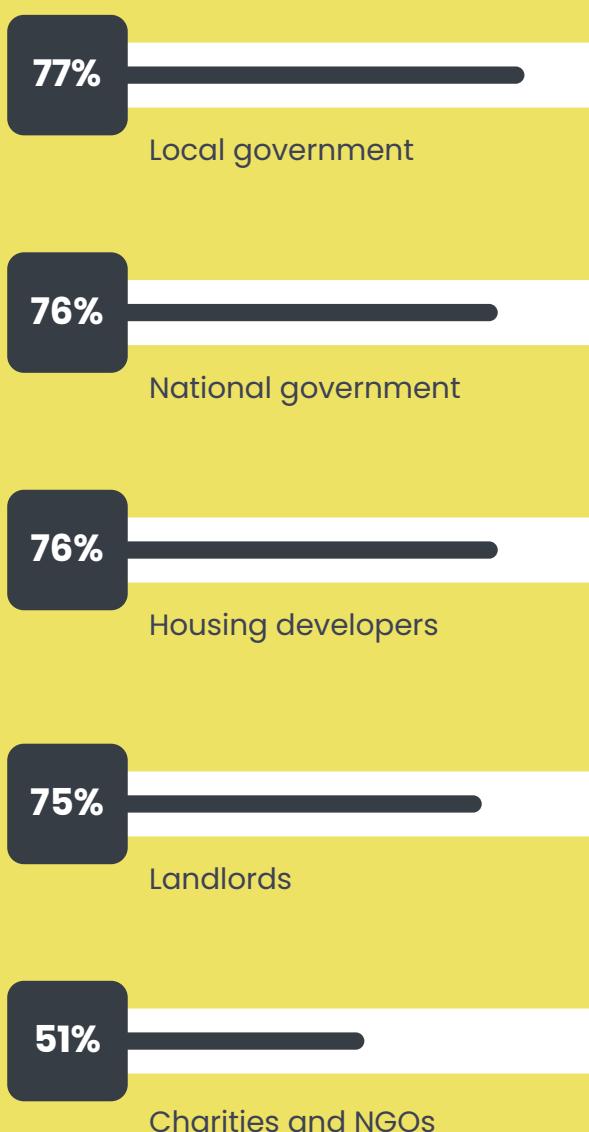
Deborah, Female, 29, Hauts-de-France



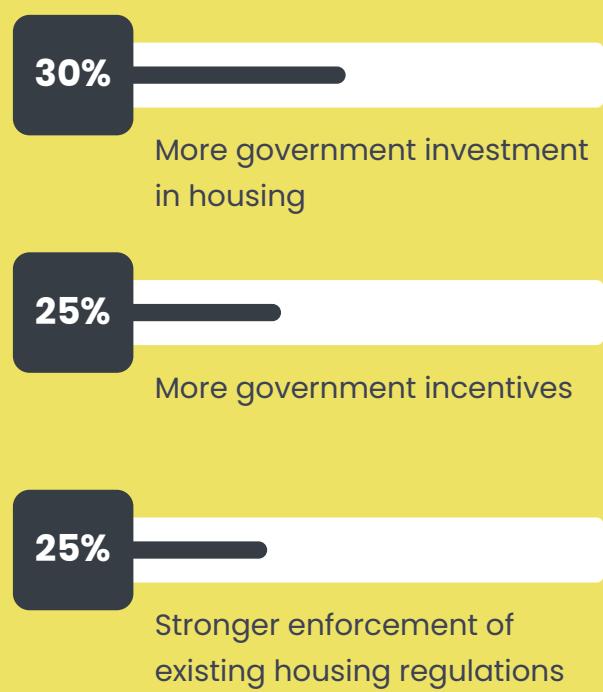
## Who is responsible and how can we change things?

We asked all respondents who they think is responsible for tackling the issues of unfit housing. Responses showed that local government, housing developers and national government are all viewed as at least partly responsible, while landlords, charities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also have a part to play. Participants also had clear ideas on how best to tackle the problems of unfit housing.

### 'Who is 'very' or 'somewhat' responsible for solving the problem of unfit housing?'



### 'What are the most effective solutions?'



04

# 04 Unfit housing in Poland

## What's wrong with housing in Poland?

**Four in ten residents in Poland live with significant housing issues**

**Some 16 million people** – or four in ten (41%) – across Poland report living with ‘significant housing issues’, and of those, **69% feel they have little or no control** over the situation.

**People living in unfit housing are most likely to:** be young, work full-time or live with children under the age of 18.

**The most common issues are cold, damp and noise**, as well as structural problems or inadequate electrical/heating systems. **These issues are taking a serious toll on people’s social inclusivity, health and wellbeing.**

**Living through long periods of lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic has compounded these problems**, leaving many respondents feeling “isolated” and “trapped” in their unfit homes, and “powerless” to do anything about it.

**Percentages of people living with housing issues who report the following problems:**

Excessive noise  <b>48%</b>	“Due to an open-air night disco nearby, we cannot sleep on the weekends.”
Excessive cold  <b>47%</b>	“My house is not insulated and there is only one heater in the room where I am staying, which makes it really cold in winter.”
Dampness and mould  <b>43%</b>	“The house is old and despite renovation, sometimes there is excessive moisture and mould comes out.”
Structural problems or disrepair  <b>42%</b>	“Cracks in the walls, falling plaster from the ceiling, crooked walls hindering renovation – renovation works have become too expensive.”
Poor or inadequate electrical or heating systems  <b>42%</b>	“The installation is old and does not meet current standards, in order to get to the cables you have to hammer the walls, I am scared it will fail all the time because I cannot afford a major renovation.”

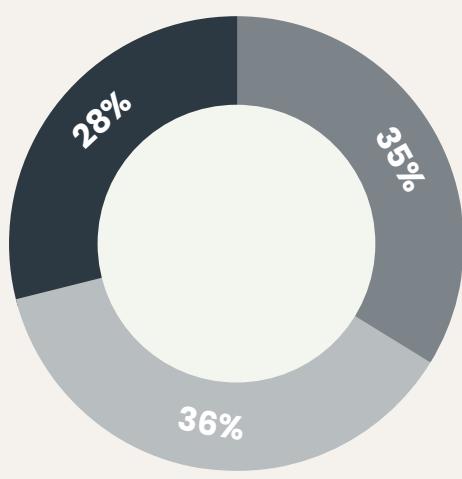
## Who is most affected by unfit housing?

Our research shows that those living with housing issues are more likely than those in good housing to be:

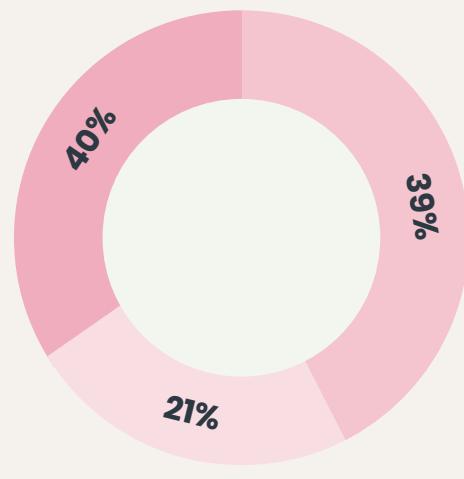
- Living in an urban area
- Working full-time
- Have young children (at least one under 18)

**Breakdown by age of those living in good vs unfit housing:**

People living in good housing



People living with housing issues

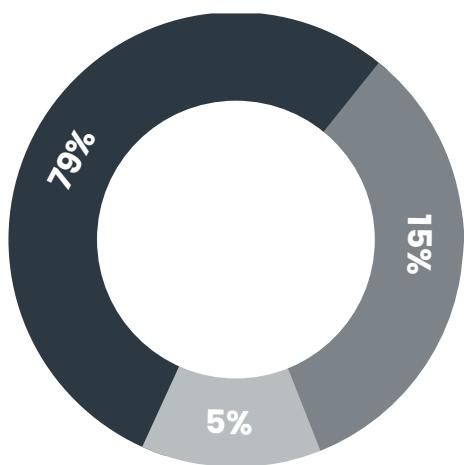


Aged 18-34  
 Aged 35-54  
 Aged 55 or older

Aged 18-34  
 Aged 35-54  
 Aged 55 or older

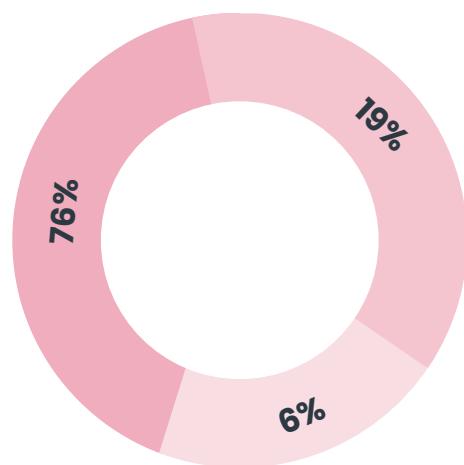
## Breakdown of home owners and renters living in good vs unfit housing

People living in good housing



Own  
 Rent  
 Other

People living with housing issues



Own  
 Rent  
 Other

## Lack of space and dedicated rooms



With housing issues don't have a living room (versus 11% who live in good housing)



With housing issues don't have a bathroom (versus 1% who live in good housing)

## Taking a toll on health and wellbeing

Unfit housing is affecting many aspects of people's lives, and it's taking a toll both physically and mentally - keeping people awake at night, triggering stress, anxiety and mental health issues, and exacerbating existing illnesses.

### How housing issues affect people's lives:



Say it has affected their social interactions or love life



Say it has affected their own or their family's health



Of parents say it has impacted their children



Of workers say that their career has been affected in some way

**Your home is the centre and basic part of your life.  
Everyone has the right to a decent and affordable house.**

Katarzyna Przybylska, Advocacy Manager at Habitat in Poland



## Feeling the impact of poor housing:



**The deteriorating condition of the electrical and heating installations resulted in a lack of heating for our family on cold days, which led to the children catching a cold and me having to take time off at work to look after the children.**

Anonymous, Female, 29, Southern region of Poland



**I have concerns about physical health mostly, as the roof of our house is made of asbestos and people say it is carcinogenic.**

Malwina, Female, 38, Eastern region of Poland



## A tale of two crises: the impact of Covid-19 on unfit housing

### The damaging effects of unfit housing are being made worse by the pandemic

Issues with unfit housing are ongoing and widespread: 56% of people in Poland told us they have suffered with at least one element of unfit housing that has lasted more than a year. While the Covid-19 pandemic didn't cause housing issues, it has brought them into much sharper focus.

The country-wide lockdown at the beginning of the pandemic meant homes suddenly became more central than ever to all aspects of our lives. Most people found themselves spending more time inside and having to repurpose their spaces quickly into home schools or offices. As a result, just under half (45%) of our respondents stated that the overall state of their current home is more important to them now, than it was pre-lockdown.

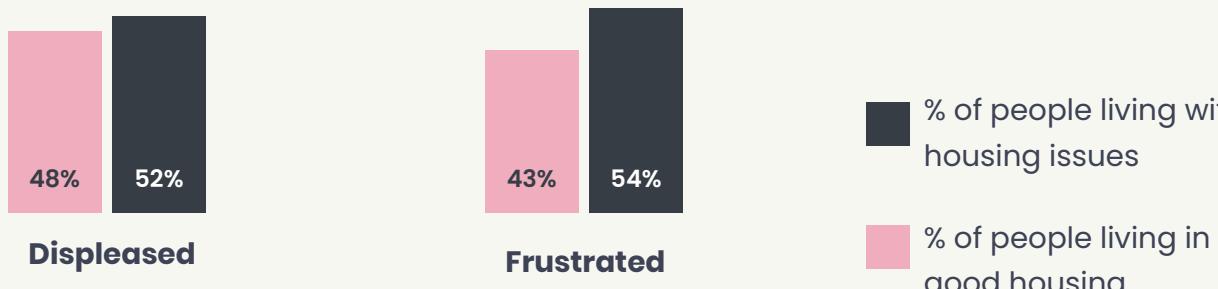
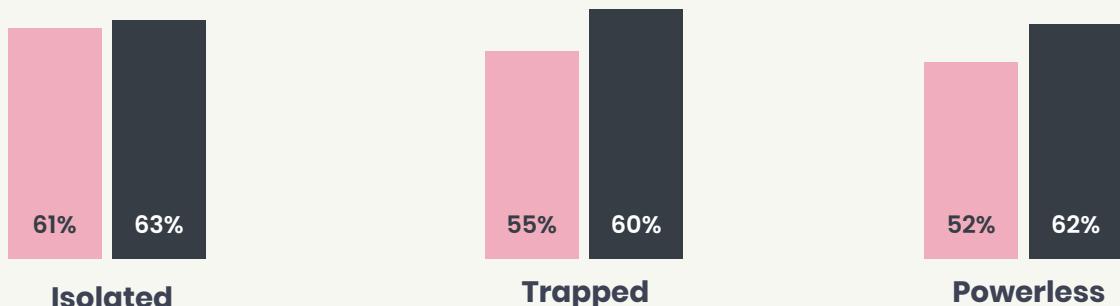
Nearly a third (32%) of Polish respondents we spoke to told us that the issue of unfit housing has become more important during Covid-19, with the pandemic and lockdown making certain elements of unfit housing more problematic. Overcrowding and inadequate access to basic utilities are rated among the biggest challenges.

Restricted movement is also taking a heavy toll on people's mental health, with respondents living with elements of unfit housing feeling "frustrated" with their homes and "powerless" to do anything about it.

### Top 3 housing problems made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic



## How are you feeling about spending more time at home during the pandemic?



**Because I know that I can be threatened with lockdown or quarantine at any time, my apartment must be a place where I will feel comfortable, otherwise this time will be even more difficult.**

Anonymous, Female, 24, Central region of Poland

“

**[Talking about the unfit housing issues suffered during the pandemic] They cause fear, isolation and dissatisfaction.**

Anonymous, Female, 73, Polnocny



**Previously I rented an apartment in Krakow because I am studying. Now, because of the remote mode of studying, I spend most of my time in my family home and I am more overwhelmed by these problems.**

Anonymous, Female, 22, Southern region of Poland



**Because I spend more time at home, now these problems prevent me from functioning normally.**

Anonymous, Female, 27, Southern region of Poland



## The emotional toll of Covid-19 on people with disabilities

Our research shows the pandemic has made a bad situation worse for those living with disabilities, who are by far the most affected when it comes to coping with housing issues. They were 10% more likely to report feeling anxious about it.

**People with disabilities living with housing issues are more likely to feel the emotional impact of Covid-19:**



After a severe lockdown in spring 2020, the country has put new measures and tighter restrictions in place as “the penultimate step before a total national lockdown”, at the time of writing this report. **It has never been more important that our homes are safe, secure, warm and comfortable spaces.**

**We influenced the Polish Ombudsman position at the very beginning in March, stressing the problems of tenants who might suffer from the coronavirus because they will lose their income. They were locked down so couldn't work and if it went on for a longer time they could even lose their homes.**

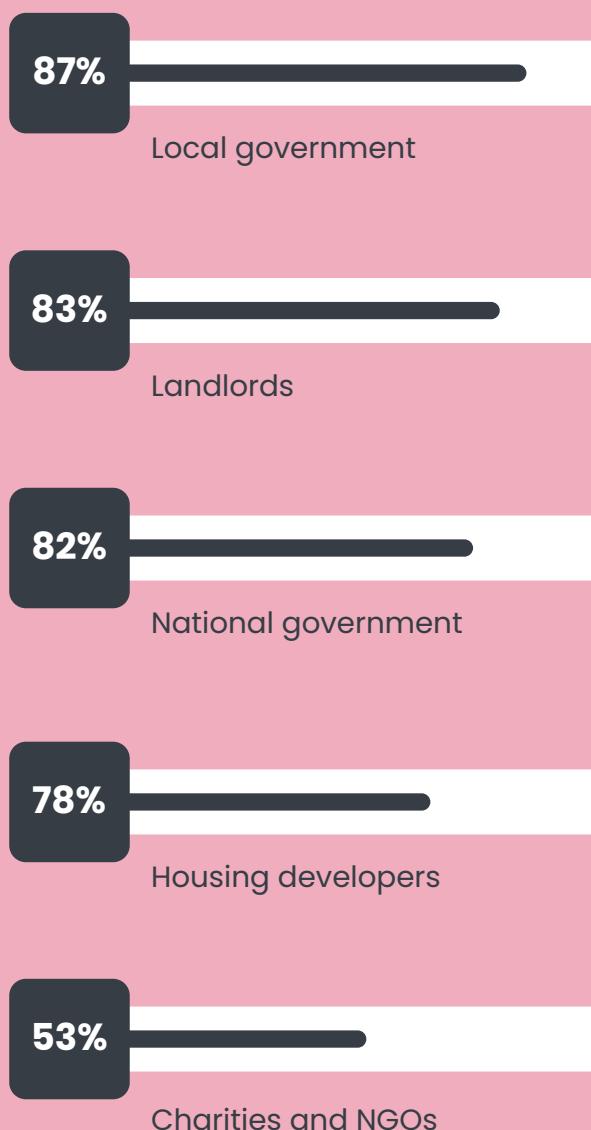
Katarzyna Przybylska, Advocacy Manager at Habitat in Poland



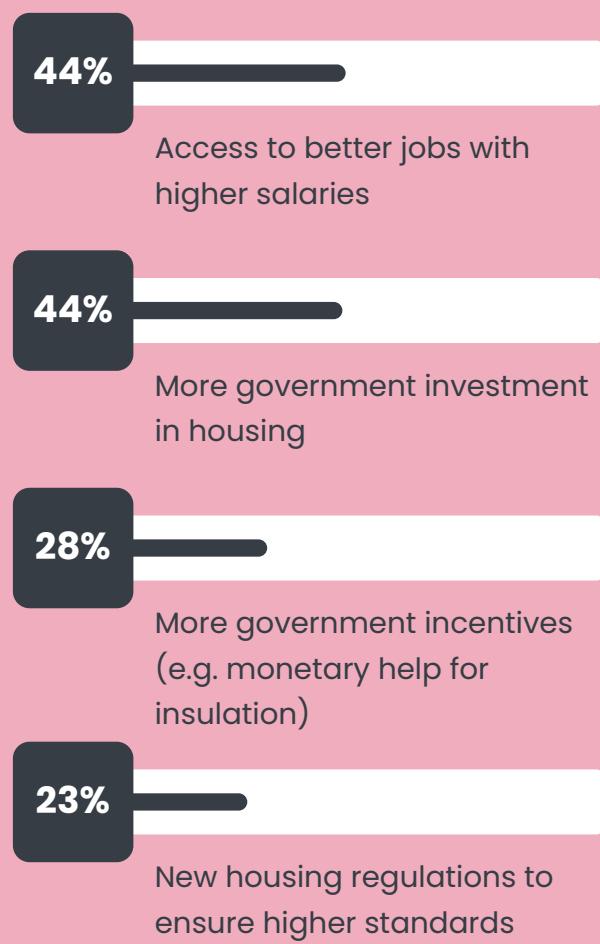
## Who is responsible and how can we change things?

We asked all respondents who they think is responsible for tackling the issues of unfit housing. Responses showed that local, regional and national governments, as well as landlords, are all viewed as responsible, while charities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also have a part to play in helping to solve the issue.

### 'Who is 'very' or 'somewhat' responsible for solving the problem of unfit housing?'



### 'What are the most effective solutions?'





## 05 Unfit housing in Romania

## What's wrong with housing in Romania?

**More than a third of the Romanian population live with significant housing issues**

**Some 7.5 million people** or more than a third (39%) – in Romania report living with ‘significant housing issues’, and of those, **75% feel they have little or no control** over the situation.

**People living in unfit housing are most likely to:** be middle-aged, have a disability, be living in a large city, be on low incomes or live with children under 18.

**The most common issues are cold, noise, damp and mould**, as well as pests or rubbish, and inadequate sanitation and drainage. These issues are also **taking a serious toll on people's social integration and wellbeing**.

**Living through long periods of lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic has compounded these problems**, leaving many respondents feeling “trapped” and “isolated” in their unfit homes.

**Percentages of people living with housing issues who report the following problems:**

<b>Excessive noise</b>  <b>46%</b>	<p>“Excessive noise due to a new hostel nearby, which almost every night organises parties until late.”</p>
<b>Dampness and mould</b>  <b>45%</b>	<p>“In cold periods, the corners of the walls at the bottom are damp, from the floor all the way up about half a metre.”</p>
<b>Excessive cold</b>  <b>44%</b>	<p>“I feel like I am outside on cold days. I can't write, I can't study, I can't</p>
<b>Pests or rubbish</b>  <b>44%</b>	<p>“Cockroaches come out of the pipes in the apartment block.”</p>
<b>Poor or inadequate sanitation and drainage</b>  <b>42%</b>	<p>“The smell of sewage and communal sewage pipes being over 70 years old.”</p>

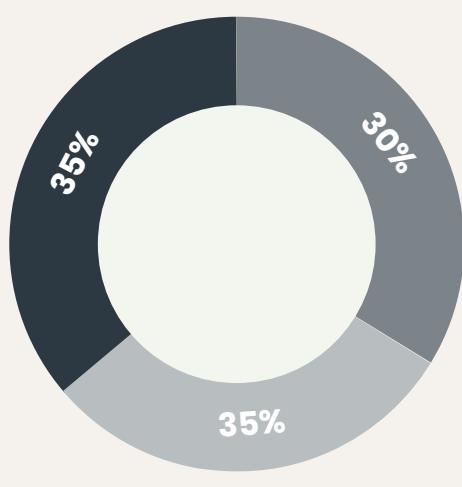
## Who is most affected by unfit housing?

Our research shows that those living with housing issues are more likely than those in good housing to be:

- **Living in a large city**
- **Working full-time**
- **On a low income (less than 3,800 leu pm)**
- **Living with a disability**
- **Have young children (at least one under 18)**

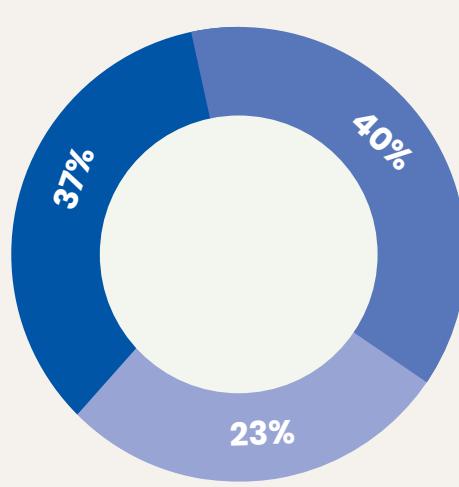
Breakdown by age of those living in good vs unfit housing:

People living in good housing



Aged 18-34  
 Aged 35-54  
 Aged 55 or older

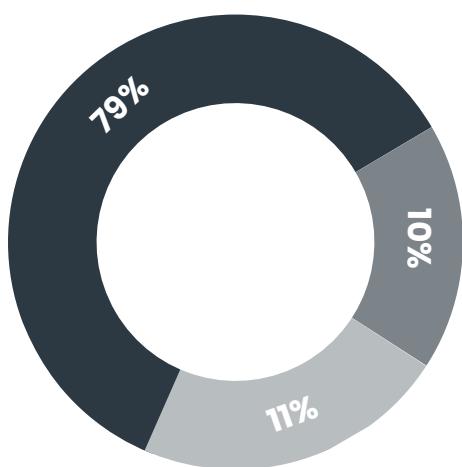
People living with housing issues



Aged 18-34  
 Aged 35-54  
 Aged 55 or older

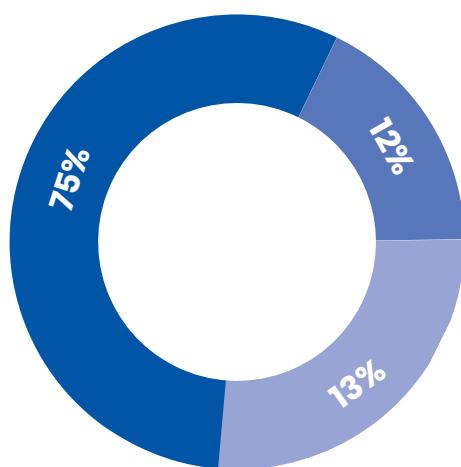
## Breakdown of home owners and renters living in good vs unfit housing

People living in good housing



Own  
 Rent  
 Other

People living with housing issues



Own  
 Rent  
 Other

## Lack of space and dedicated rooms



With housing issues don't have access to an outdoor space (versus 47% in good housing)



With housing issues don't have a living room (versus 38% in good housing)

## Taking a toll on health and wellbeing

Unfit housing is affecting all aspects of people's lives. Our research showed it takes a toll both physically and mentally – keeping people awake at night, triggering stress, anxiety and mental health issues, and exacerbating existing illnesses.

### How housing issues affect people's lives:



Say it has affected their social interactions or love life



Say it has affected their own or their family's health



Of parents say it has impacted their children



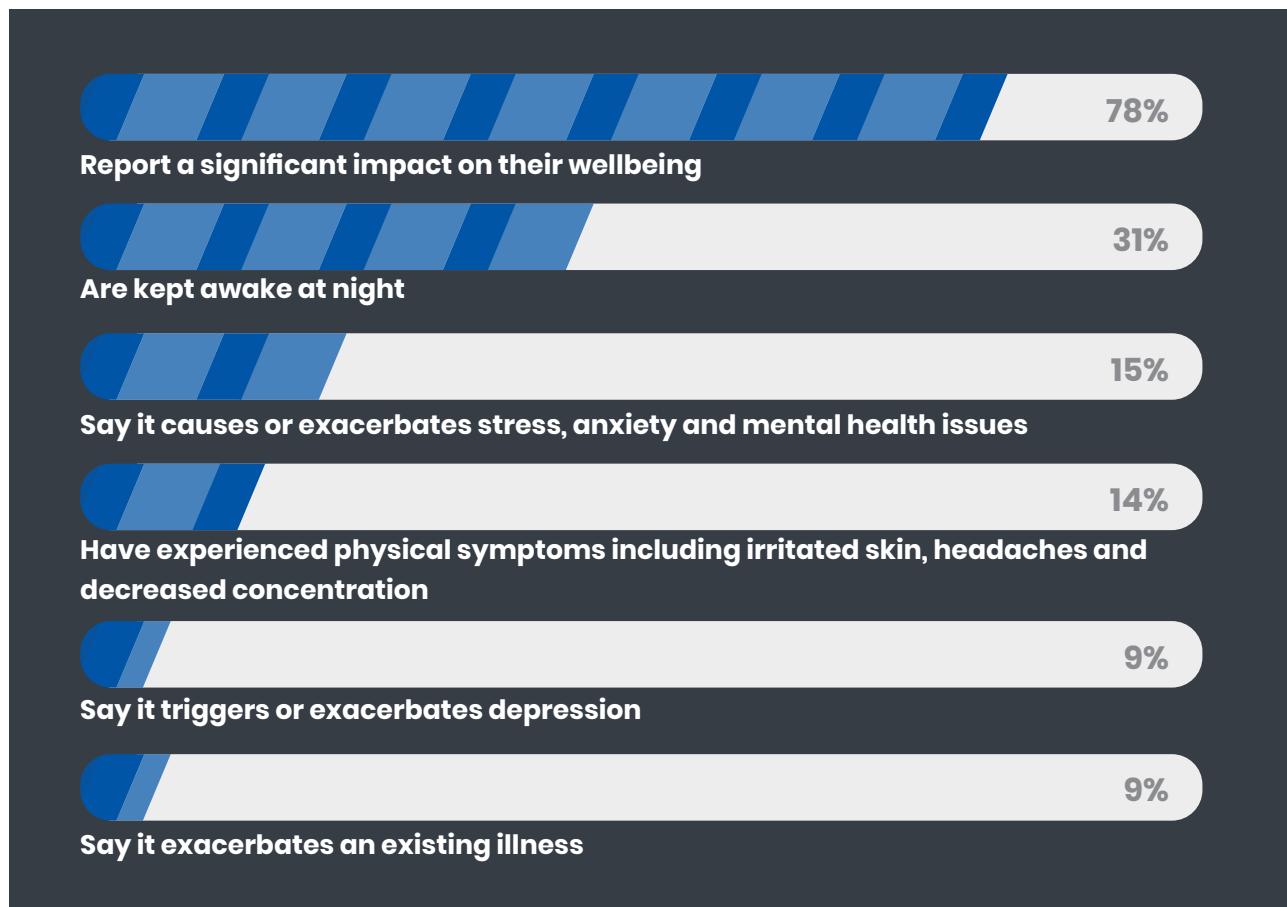
Of workers say that their career has been affected in some way

**If there are many voices speaking about housing, we can form a coalition – a coalition that becomes powerful and can change things for the better. It is amazing how a situation can be changed just through the power of words.**

Roberto Patrascoiu, National Director of Habitat for Humanity



## Feeling the impact of poor housing :



**New apartments are being built in the vicinity of our block. The upstairs neighbour speaks loudly, and in the evening after 11pm their child repeatedly kicks a ball at the wall. They talk loudly until 4am so they wake us up and we can't sleep.**

Anonymous, Female, 35, Nord-Vest



**Even if we had a heating system installed, last winter it has been so cold.**

Anonymous, Female, 56, Sud-Est



## A tale of two crises: the impact of Covid-19 on unfit housing

### The damaging effects of unfit housing are being made worse by the pandemic

Unfit housing is an ongoing and widespread problem: 70% of those living with housing issues told us they have suffered with at least one element of unfit housing that has lasted more than a year. However, while the Covid-19 pandemic didn't cause housing issues it has certainly brought them into sharper focus.

With more people spending time at home during lockdown as a result of the pandemic, the home has taken a more central and important role in our everyday lives. Most people found themselves spending more time inside and having to repurpose their spaces quickly into home schools and offices. As a result, more than half (56%) of our Romanian respondents stated that the overall state of their current home is more important to them now than it was pre-lockdown.

Over a third (34%) of the Romanian respondents we spoke to feel that the issue of unfit housing has become more important during Covid-19, with certain elements of unfit housing becoming more problematic as a result of the lockdown. Excessive noise, warmth and lack of space are rated among the biggest challenges, as families are forced to spend more time living in close quarters with each other.

The lockdown and restricted movements are also taking a heavy toll on the mental health of those in unfit housing, with respondents feeling "isolated" in their homes.

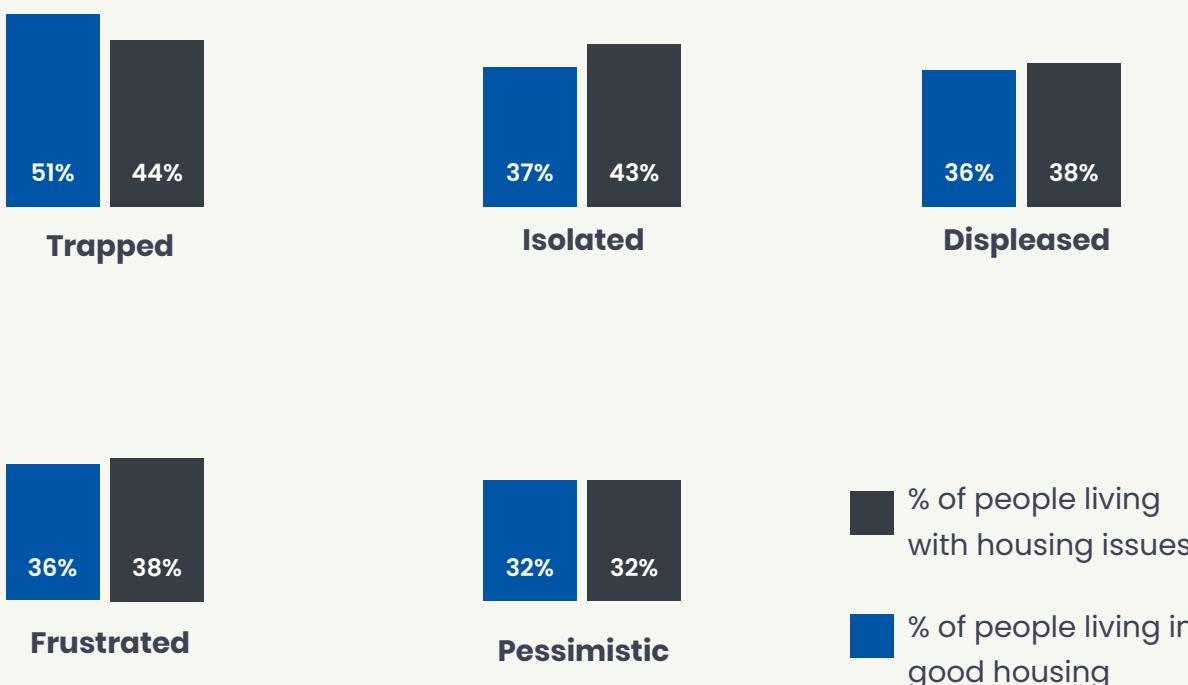
### Top 3 housing problems made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic

1 **60% – Excess noise from neighbours or surroundings**

2 **49% – Excessively warm due to poor insulation or malfunctioning heating**

3 **49% – Home that is too small**

## How are you feeling about spending more time at home during the pandemic?



**On the one hand, the problems have become more annoying because we spend more time at home than before. On the other hand, we face financial difficulties and because of this the probability of solving them is lower.**

Anonymous, Female, 32, Centru

“

**Beetles in the bathroom that come out at night and scare my children when they go to the bathroom, and disgusting cockroaches in the kitchen coming in from the neighbours' flat, and the rubbish from the bins outside in summer smells and attracts rats.**

Anonymous, Male, 42, Nord-Est



**I was constantly confronted with the problems in my home, I could not avoid them due to the fact that I could**

Anonymous, Female, 23, Sud-Est



**I became more stressed due to the lack of decent comfort in the house.**

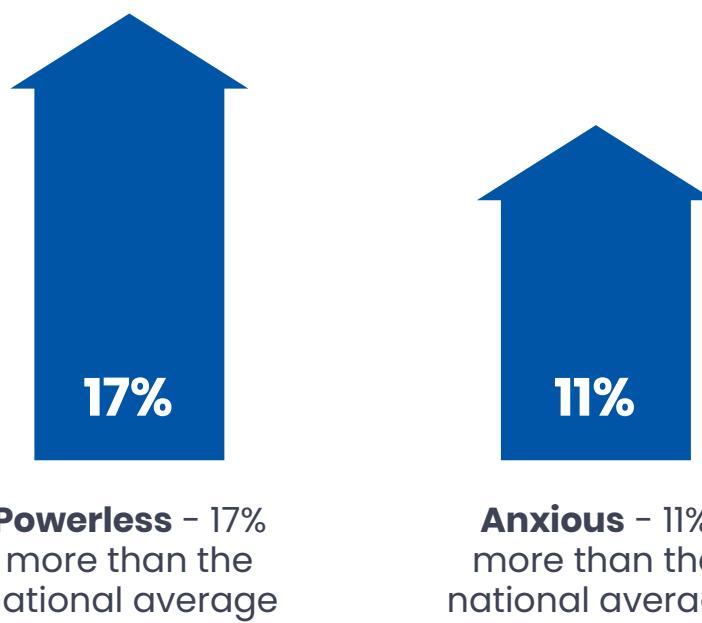
Anonymous, Female, 51, Bucuresti – Ilfov



## The emotional toll of Covid-19 on people with low incomes

Those with a lower income have suffered most during the pandemic in Romania and are far more likely than the national average to have seen their mental health affected by the increased time spent at home.

**People on low incomes living with housing issues are more likely to feel the emotional impact of Covid-19:**



After a severe lockdown in the Spring, Romania is now experiencing a second wave and potential further restrictions at the time of writing this report, highlighting **the importance of our homes being safe, secure, warm and comfortable spaces.**

**Rarely has a home been a matter of life and death. A home has become the first line of defence against the Coronavirus. We're living in a kind of paradox: housing has become the best prescription we need. Everyone tells us to 'stay at home' but while vulnerable families also get access to the prescription, they don't have the medicine, which is a proper home.**

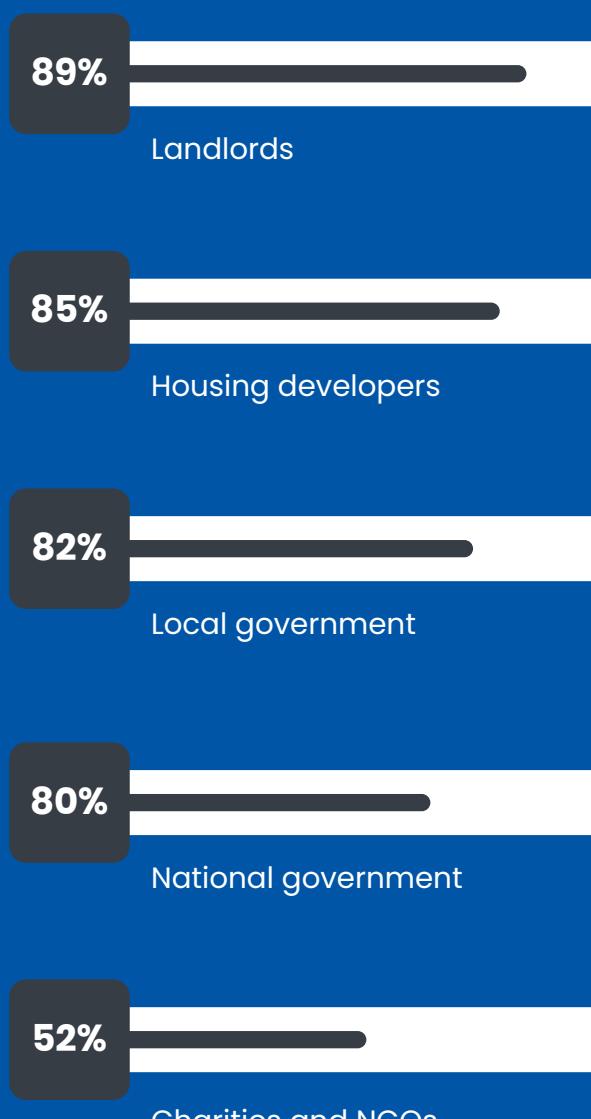
Roberto Patrascoiu, National Director of Habitat for Humanity



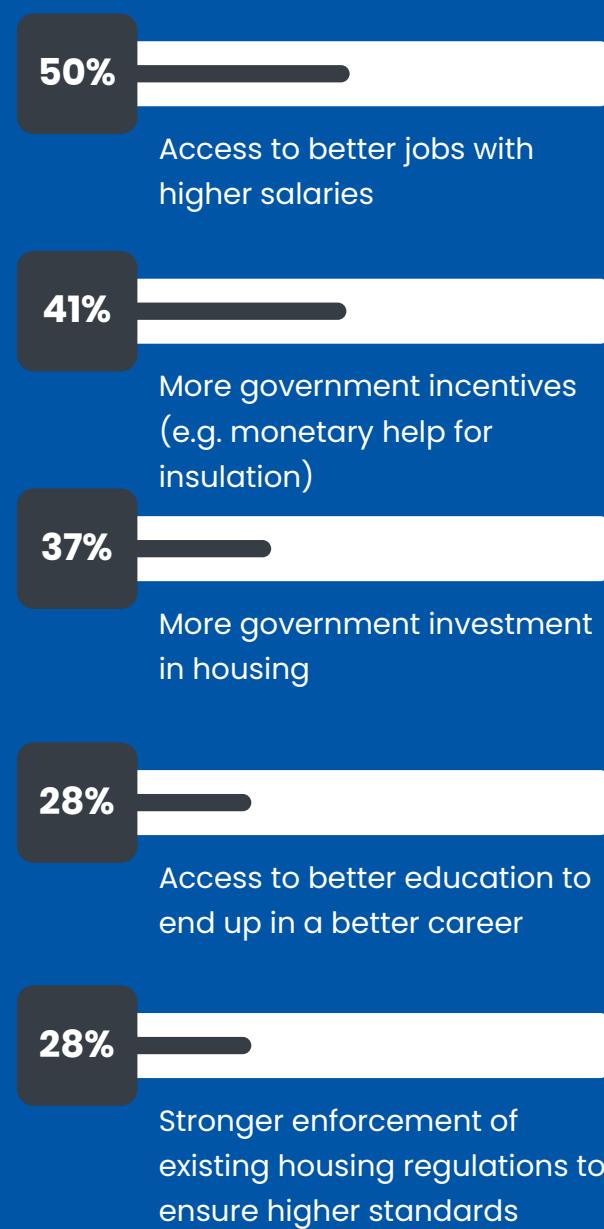
## Who is responsible and how can we change things?

We asked all respondents who they think is responsible for tackling the issues of unfit housing. Responses showed that landlords, housing developers and local governments are all viewed as responsible, and people told us that governments, landlords, housing developers, charities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have a part to play in helping to solve the issue. Participants also had clear ideas on how best to tackle the problems of unfit housing.

### 'Who is 'very' or 'somewhat' responsible for solving the problem of unfit housing?'



### 'What are the most effective solutions?'





# 06 Unfit housing in Spain

## What's wrong with housing in Spain?

**More than a third of the Spanish population live with significant housing issues**

**Some 18 million people** more than a third (39%) – in Spain report living with ‘significant housing issues’, and of those, **70% feel they have little or no control** over the situation.

**People living in unfit housing are most likely to:** be middle-aged, have a disability, be living in urban areas, be on low incomes or living with children under 18.

**The most common issues are cold, noise, damp and mould**, as well as poor sanitation and drainage, or excessive warmth. **These issues are also taking a serious toll on people’s health and wellbeing.**

**After a lengthy and severe first lockdown, the Covid-19 pandemic has compounded these problems**, leaving many respondents feeling “trapped” in their homes and “pessimistic” about being able to do anything about it.

**Percentages of people living with housing issues who report the following problems:**

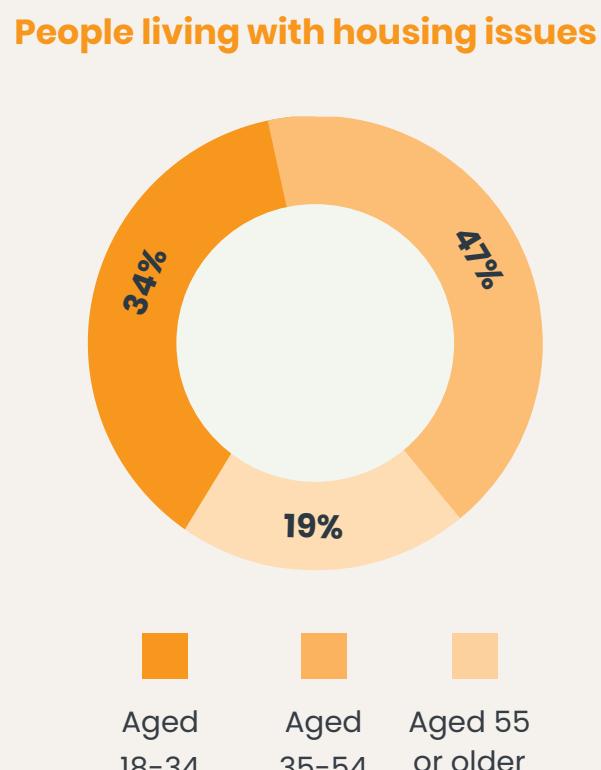
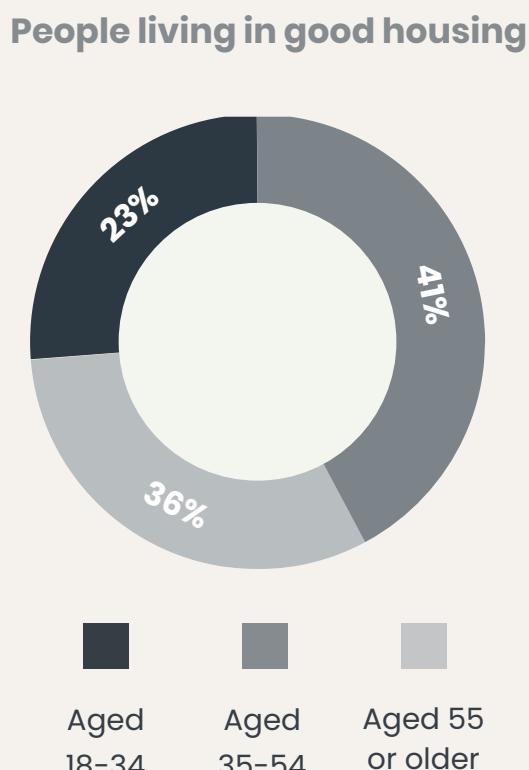
Excessive noise  <b>57%</b>	“Problems of excessive noise outdoors due to poorly soundproofed entertainment venues, customers making noise outside the premises at untimely hours.”
Dampness and mould  <b>52%</b>	“It has created cracks in the ceiling of the living room and every time it rains the water leaks and we have to put buckets for the water.”
Excessive cold  <b>51%</b>	“We do not have central heating, only radiators that do not heat the whole house, we have to wear many layers when we’re at home.”
Poor or inadequate sanitation and drainage  <b>49%</b>	“Poorly made drains that collect dirt and cause clogging and odorous fumes.”
Excessively warm  <b>48%</b>	“The structure does not allow the heat to remain outside, in summer it becomes an oven, it is old and needs a change of insulation.”

## Who is most affected by unfit housing?

Our research shows that those living with housing issues are more likely than those in good housing to be:

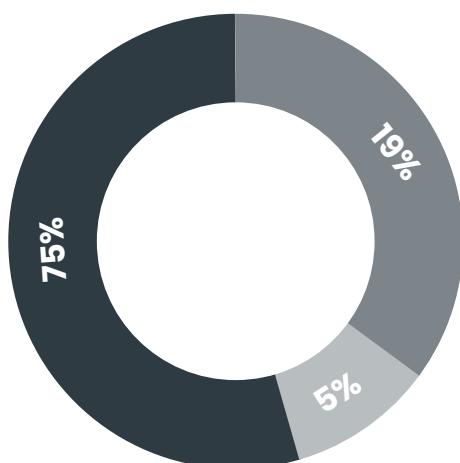
- **Working full-time – 62%**
- **Living with a disability – 23%**
- **Have young children (at least one under 18) – 52%**

**Breakdown by age of those living in good vs unfit housing:**



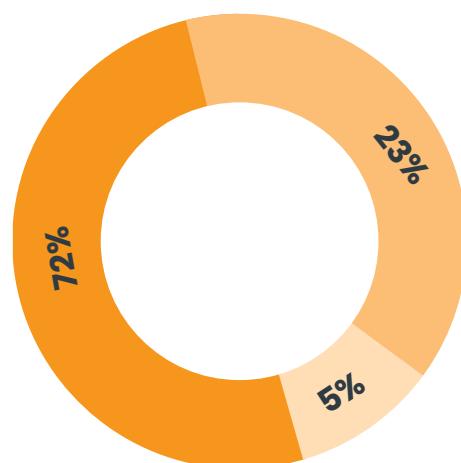
## Breakdown of home owners and renters living in good vs unfit housing

People living in good housing



Own  
 Rent  
 Other

People living with housing issues



Own  
 Rent  
 Other

### Lack of space and dedicated rooms

41%

With housing issues don't have access to an outdoor space (versus 39% who live in good housing)

54%

With housing issues don't have a guest bedroom (versus 46% who live in good housing)

## Taking a toll on health and wellbeing

Unfit housing is affecting multiple aspects of people's lives. Our research showed it takes a toll both physically and mentally – keeping people awake at night, triggering stress, anxiety and mental health issues, and exacerbating existing illnesses.

### How housing issues affect people's lives:



Say it has affected their social interactions or love life



Say it has affected their own or their family's health



Of parents say it has impacted their children



Of workers say that their career has been affected in some way

If there are many voices speaking about housing, we can form a coalition – a coalition that becomes powerful and can change things for the better. It is amazing how a situation can be changed just through the power of words.

Roberto Patrascoiu, National Director of Habitat for Humanity



## Feeling the impact of poor housing:



**We had to call the police on several occasions due to the noise and the music from the parties [our neighbours] were putting on, but in the end it was solved because the community and its secretary, who is a lawyer, got involved. But the year and a half that we spent was horrible, we felt anxious in our own home.**

Anonymous, Male, 45, Centro

“

**I spend more time at home with the children and the safety of the house is very important, it has to be safer.**

Anonymous, Female, 34, Noroeste

“

## A tale of two crises: the impact of Covid-19 on unfit housing

### The damaging effects of unfit housing are being made worse by the pandemic

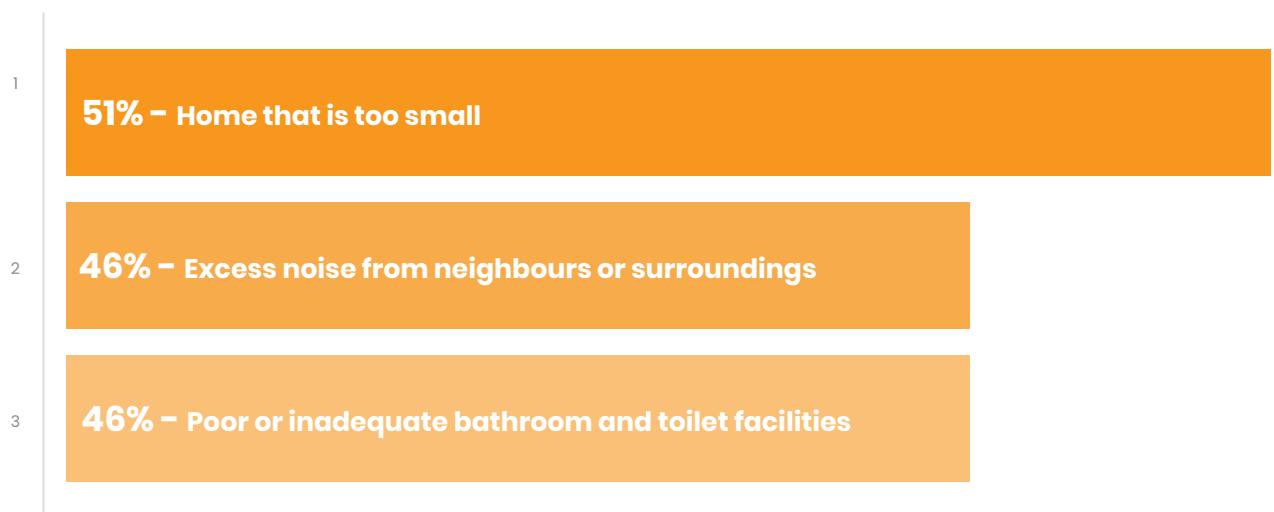
Unfit housing is an ongoing widespread problem: 50% of those living with housing issues in Spain told us they have suffered with at least one element of unfit housing that has lasted more than a year. However, while the Covid-19 pandemic didn't cause housing issues it has certainly brought them into sharper focus.

A lengthy and severe first lockdown meant homes suddenly became more central than ever to all aspects of our lives. Most people in Spain found themselves spending more time inside and had to repurpose their spaces quickly into home schools or offices. As a result, more than half (61%) of our Spanish respondents feel that the overall state of their current home has become more important to them now.

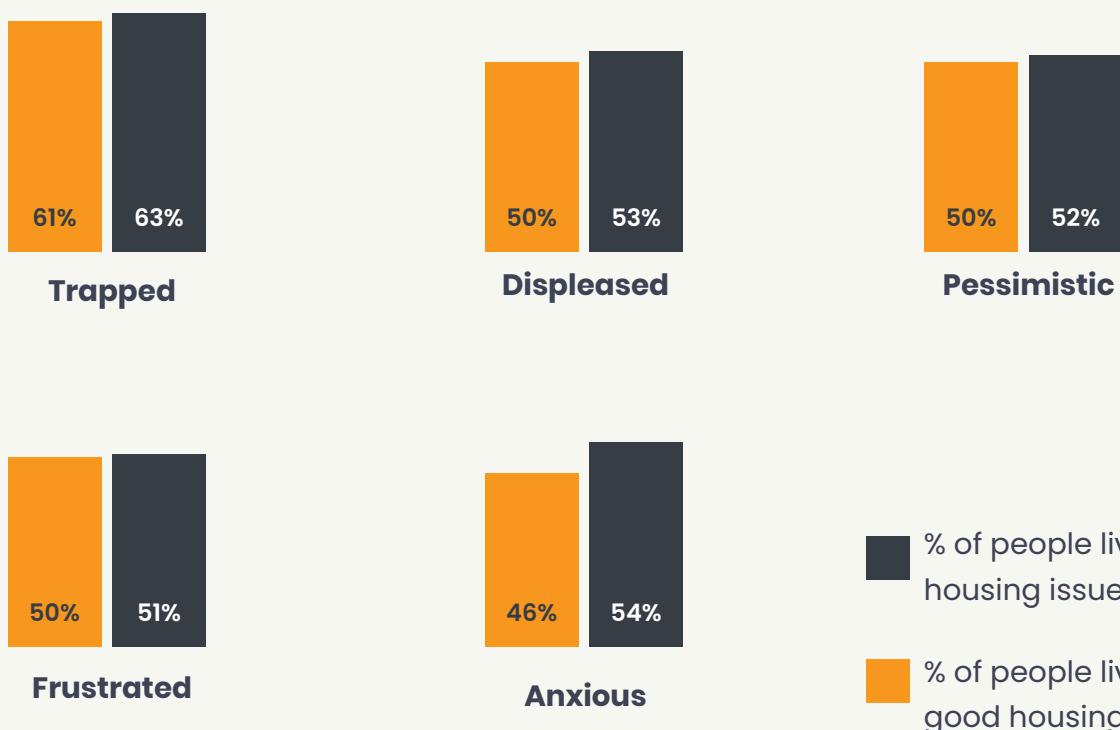
Two thirds (66%) of the Spanish population feel that the issue of unfit housing has become more important during Covid-19, with the pandemic and lockdown making certain elements of unfit housing more problematic. Lack of space, excessive noise and inadequate bathroom and toilet facilities are rated among the biggest challenges.

The impact of long periods of lockdown and restricted movement are also taking a heavy toll on the mental health of those living with elements of unfit housing, with respondents feeling "trapped" or more "anxious" about their situation.

### Top 3 housing problems made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic



## How are you feeling about spending more time at home during the pandemic?



**You are at home more, and you notice more the real deficiencies of the house, when before you had not paid them the attention they deserved.**

Anonymous, Female, 52, Sur

“

**Being locked up in an uninhabitable house is torture and a violation of human rights.**

Anonymous, Male, 25, Levante



**The obligation to stay locked up is intolerable.**

Anonymous, Female, 47, Levante



**Being locked up in the house all day and without light makes you feel sadder than usual.**

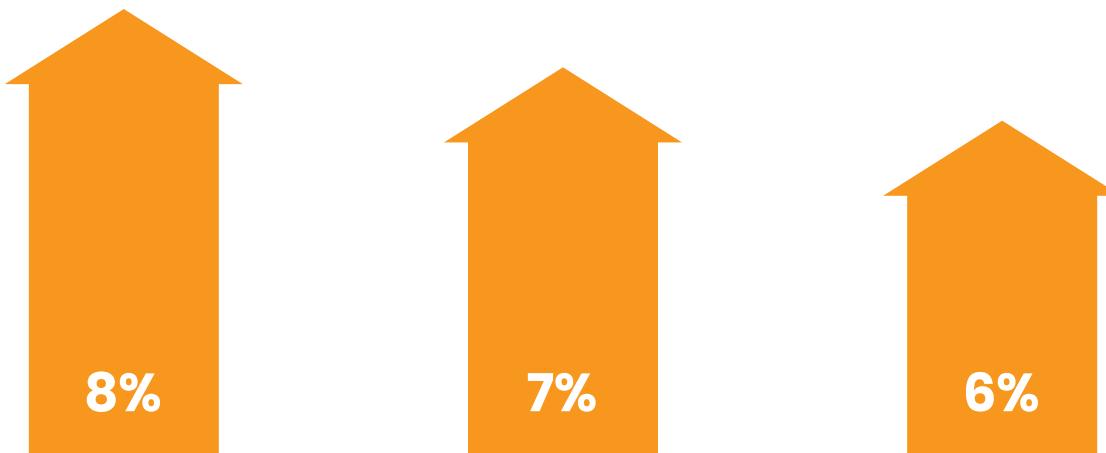
Anonymous, Female, 20, Sur



## The emotional toll of Covid-19 on parents and people with disabilities

Our research shows that parents with young children in particular have suffered during the pandemic, with 65% concerned about the state of their home. The emotional toll of Covid-19 is also heavily felt by those living with disabilities, who are among those most affected and 8% more likely to report feeling ashamed and 7% more likely to feel uninspired.

**People with disabilities living with housing issues are more likely to feel the emotional impact of Covid-19:**



**Ashamed** – 8% more than the national average

**Uninspired** – 7% more than the national average

**Displeased** – 6% more than the national average

After a lengthy and severe lockdown in spring, a second spike has brought on new restrictions at the time of writing this report, meaning **the need for a safe, secure, warm and comfortable home is ever more important**.

**The house is very small and being locked up has been difficult having two children.**

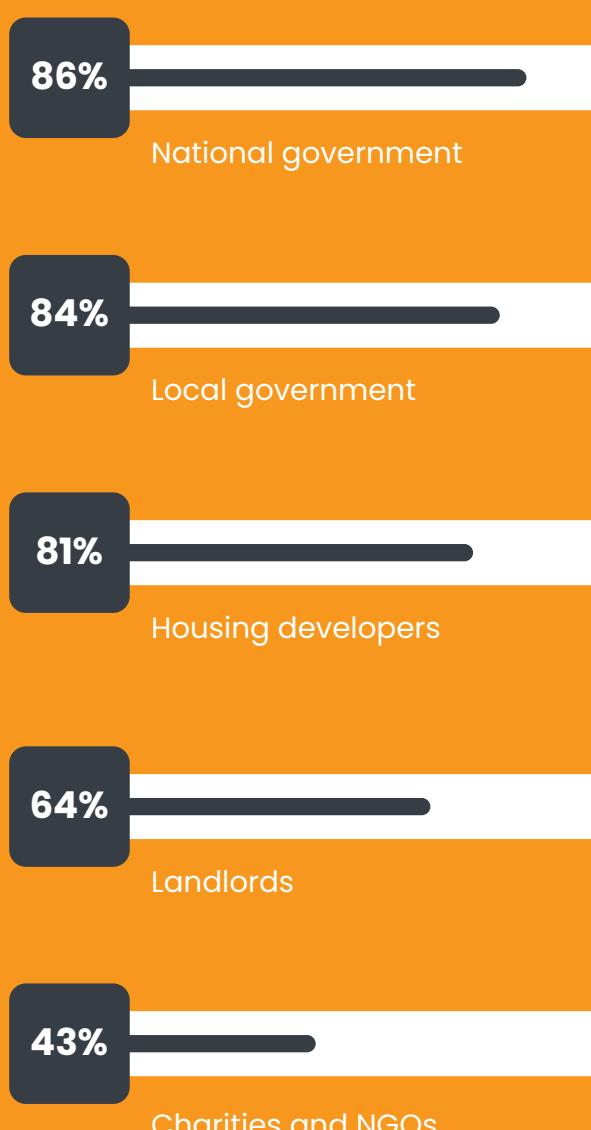
Anonymous, Male, 32, Barcelona

“

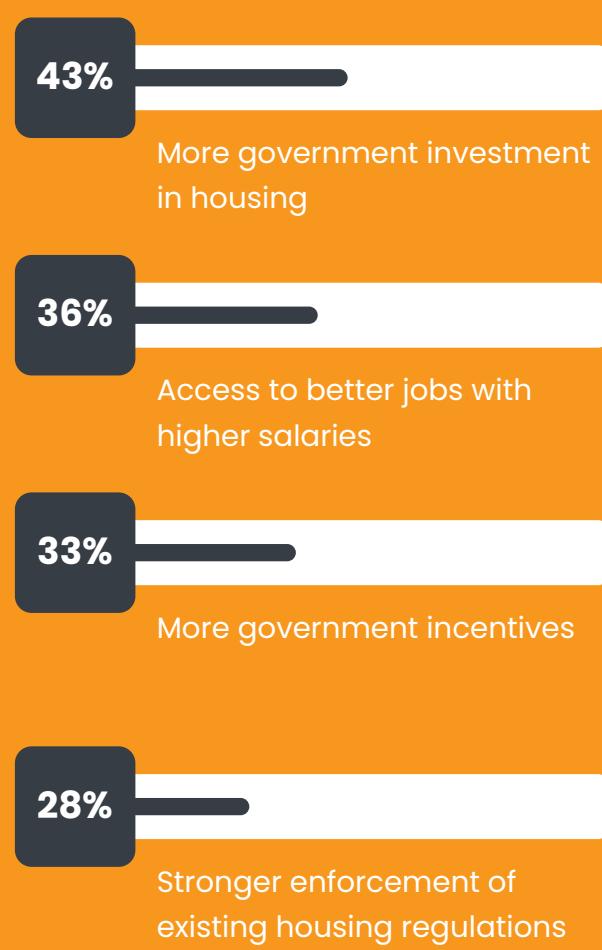
## Who is responsible and how can we change things?

We asked all respondents who they think is responsible for tackling the issues of unfit housing. Responses showed that local/national governments and housing developers are viewed as responsible, while landlords, charities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also have a part to play. Participants also had clear ideas on how to best tackle the problems of unfit housing.

### 'Who is 'very' or 'somewhat' responsible for solving the problem of unfit housing?'



### 'What are the most effective solutions?'



07



## 07 A collective call to action

# A collective call to action

Kingfisher's aim is to help everyone have a better home, but for some people across our communities, this can be just too difficult. As part of our responsible business plan, we have a clear commitment to help address unfit housing with a goal to help more than one million people whose housing needs are greatest by 2025. Against the backdrop of Covid-19, this commitment has never been more important than it is today.

Since 2017, Kingfisher and our retail banners have been working together with leading housing NGOs across our markets, including Shelter here in the UK, to support and develop programmes that address unfit housing. We are also launching charitable foundations that support our local communities to fix, maintain and repair homes and community spaces.

With this report illustrating the scale of unfit housing in five of our core European markets, we want to take the next step. We will be using what we've learnt to help us develop new solutions through our business to support those living in unfit housing. We will reach out to governments with suggestions about policy developments such as 'green' grants and seek to broaden the public conversation so more people understand the steps we can all take to help drive real change. We want to ensure we are doing what we can to help – but by working together we can achieve much more. We will be reaching out to other businesses to share what we learn and see how we can collaborate and unite to achieve real change.

## We ask everyone to join us by:

1. Supporting and donating to our partners and other organisations\* focused on better housing,
2. Joining their campaigns focused on fighting to fix housing issues,
3. Advocate and engage with local community groups, councils and politicians on housing issues and,
4. If you or someone you know is suffering with housing issues, please reach out to [shelter.org.uk](http://shelter.org.uk) in England, [scotland.shelter.org.uk](http://scotland.shelter.org.uk) in Scotland, [sheltercymru.org.uk](http://sheltercymru.org.uk) in Wales or [housingrights.org.uk](http://housingrights.org.uk) in Northern Ireland.

Together we can make a difference to the millions of people who are experiencing housing issues. Because good housing is essential. To dignity. To health and happiness. To building relationships and strengthening communities.

\*





# 08 Methodology

# Methodology

Working with our research partner Opinium, an award-winning, accredited Market Research Society member, our research involved multiple phases. This ensured that the research was credible and robust, whilst offering a platform for individuals to tell their stories about how the issue of unfit housing has affected their lives.

**1. Review** - A thorough literature review to understand how unfit housing has already been discussed and reported on across the non-profit, political and media landscapes and what the current climate feels like.

**2. Listen** - Interviews with senior stakeholders, both within Kingfisher and its housing charity partners across the five markets, to build a picture of the scale of work being undertaken, the most urgent priorities, as well as the barriers faced at a policy level.

**3. Explore** - Nationally representative pilot study amongst 6,000 people split across the five markets: UK, France, Spain, Romania and Poland. Aimed to define how unfit housing manifests itself uniquely within each market and to ensure we do not force our own opinions and biases on the issue onto the Discover phase.

**4. Discover** - The core quantitative study, an online survey with 7,000 people across all five markets (50% living with elements of unfit housing and 50% not living with elements of unfit housing) assessing the prevalence of unfit housing issues, the consequences and resolutions for the issue.

**5. Reveal** - A three-day focus group amongst 40 people suffering with elements of unfit housing in both the UK and France. We used an interactive online platform to immerse ourselves in the stories of the individuals suffering from these issues, to understand how unfit housing affects every facet of their lives. Alongside this, we conducted 45-minute in-depth interviews with nine people suffering with unfit housing in Spain, Romania and Poland. This allowed us to highlight the consequences of unfit housing in the markets with smaller population sizes.

## Details about our discover phase – quantitative study and online survey

This research report, *If Walls Could Talk*, is predominantly based on the Discover phase, surveying over 7,000 participants across the UK, France, Spain, Poland and Romania, on the most prevalent problems associated with unfit housing. This includes wider implications on work opportunities, children's education, social lives, physical and mental health and how they have been escalated throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

Rather than measuring the extent of unfit housing as an objective measure, this research aimed to understand unfit housing as a subjective measure based on what the public in each market considers to be the minimum level necessary for housing to be fit, and the extent to which people consider issues to be a problem for them at the time of the survey. In other words, the research was carried out to understand the types of issues those living with elements of unfit housing are dealing with and the impact it has on their lives.

**Demographics** – Ensuring that half of those interviewed identified as living with housing issues and that we understood each household's differing living situation, in order to segment audiences into key groups.

**Housing evaluation** – Measuring how each household assessed their living situation, in order to quantify the extent of housing issues within each market and the drivers that are influencing that assessment.

**Unfit housing deep-dive** – Deep dive review on the impact housing issues have on the life of the inhabitants, the causes of each factor and the potential requirements to overcome each factor.

**Political and social perceptions** – Understanding respondents' views towards the existence of housing issues in their area and country, its causes, responsibility for fixing unfit housing and solutions.

**Covid-19** – Measuring the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on respondents' attitudes towards housing and their home.

## Defining those living with housing issues

We used the information gathered during stakeholder interviews and the literature review to help us define those living with elements of unfit housing as either having two or more housing issues, or at least one major housing issue.

Our 7,000 respondents were asked to rate a number of housing issues in their current home on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being 'not a problem for me' and 5 being 'a major problem for me'. Those who selected 4 or 5 for one major issue, or two+ issues from the list below were defined, for the purpose of this study, as living with elements of unfit housing.

We focused on the following housing issues. Major issues are highlighted in **bold**:

1. **Inadequate access to hot water**
2. **Excessive cold due to inadequate heating or insulation**
3. **Excessively warm due to poor insulation or malfunctioning heating**
4. **Unsafe electrics**
5. **Toxic or dangerous substances – e.g. lead**
6. **Poor or inadequate sanitation and drainage**
7. **Pests or rubbish**
8. **Structural problems or disrepair – e.g. walls, roofs, windows, doors, chimneys etc.**
9. **Poor or inadequate electrical or heating systems**
10. **Poor or inadequate kitchen facilities**
11. **Poor or inadequate bathroom and toilet facilities**
12. **Overcrowding – too many people living in the property given its size**
13. **Inadequate access to basic utilities (water, gas or electricity)**
14. Unsafe surfaces that risk causing trips or falls
15. Exposed hot surfaces risking burns – e.g. pipes and radiators
16. Surfaces or materials that are flammable or at risk of catching fire
17. Dampness and mould growth
18. Excess noise from neighbours or surroundings that interferes with day-to-day life
19. Lack of domestic hygiene
20. Poor or inadequate security (e.g. inadequate locks, unsafe windows, etc.)
21. Home that is too small
22. Poor natural light



# If Walls Could Talk

Shining a light on the issue of unfit housing

[www.kingfisher.com](http://www.kingfisher.com)



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