**Wilkinson, E and Ortega‐Alcázar, I (forthcoming) Stranger danger? The intersectional impacts of shared housing on young people’s health & wellbeing. *Health & Place***

The world is said to be undergoing an unprecedented housing crisis. Many across the globe are experiencing profound housing insecurity, with 1.6 billion people deemed as ‘inadequately housed’ (Kothari, [2015:](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19491247.2019.1611121?scroll=top&needAccess=true&instName=University+of+Southampton) 2). This housing crisis is multifaceted: including issues such as forced eviction, displacement, a lack of affordable housing, rising homelessness, and people living in sub-standard housing conditions. Housing is widely recognized as an important determinant of health and wellbeing; with poor-quality housing, insecure tenancies and over-crowding, all having a potentially negative impact on a person’s health (Barnes et al., 2013; Dunn, 2000; Gibson et al., 2011). With global housing precarity forecast to grow, it is vital to assess what impact this is having on health and wellbeing.

In this paper we examine how the retrenchment of the welfare state can result in intensified housing insecurity. Our research took place in the aftermath of the 2008 ‘economic crisis’, a period in which Britain, like many other countries, undertook a programme of fiscal austerity (Karamessini & Rubery, 2013). Cuts to state welfare formed an integral part of this new austere economic programme, with housing welfare being subject to a number of reforms as part of the Welfare Reform Act of 2012. These cuts have had a deleterious impact on the lives of some of the most marginalized people in Britain, as this housing welfare had been providing a vital safety net in an era of increasingly precarious employment, rising poverty, and unaffordable rents. State withdrawal hence placed marginalized populations in a position of heightened precarity.

However, it is important to note that housing precarity in Britain pre-dates these relatively recent austerity measures. Since the 1970s successive British governments have been pursuing increasingly neoliberal housing policies, which have opened up social housing to the laws of the market (Hodkinson et al, 2013). This has resulted in a significant decline in the social housing stock, with more and more housing welfare claimants now housed in an insecure private rental sector. Compared with some national housing markets, the British private rental housing market can provide particularly precarious forms of accommodation, and, it is characterised by high rents, poor quality housing, insecure contracts, and limited rights as tenants.[[1]](#endnote-1) Hence the 2012 cuts to housing welfare served to exacerbate the housing insecurity that many people in Britain were already experiencing. For many, the economic crisis was then experienced not as a shock, but as a steady deterioration into a life less liveable (see Bhattacharyya, 2015).

Our research examines some of the everyday impacts of living under conditions of heightened precarity. In particular, our work explores how a secure sense of home is uprooted and destabilised in a period of economic uncertainty (see Jupp et al, 2019). We focus specifically on the impact that housing welfare reform has had on younger welfare claimants, examining how economic insecurity constrains their ability to live independently in safe and secure housing. In this paper we highlight the ways in which housing welfare reform has meant that many younger welfare claimants having no choice but to move into privately rented shared accommodation with strangers. We outline how this involuntary sharing has resulted in a dual process of both enforced mobility and enforced *im*mobility, with young people being displaced into cheaper shared housing from which they are then unable to escape. The housing precarity faced by these young people has resulted in both a material and temporal rupture, a sense of being suspended and unable to construct a stable place to call home. Here, home is not just understood as a physical dwelling: home is imagined as a place of attachment and ontological security, a sense of home emerges over time and is created through everyday practice (Brickell, 2012; Easthope, 2004; Mallett, 2004).

Central to this paper is the question of how welfare reform results in a process of what Baxter and Brickell (2014: 134) term ‘home *un*making’, ‘by which material and/or imaginary components of home are unintentionally or deliberately, temporarily or permanently, divested, damaged or even destroyed’ (see also Nowicki, 2008). In our research we argue that although the material structure of housing may be in place, the psychosocial elements of what makes a house a home are lacking (see Clapham, 2010; Kearns et al, 2000). We outline how shared living with strangers can create an environment that is often detrimental to the wellbeing of tenants, arguing that living with strangers often results in emotional turmoil and psychological stress. Hence a person can be classified as officially ‘housed’, but nonetheless still do not feel as if they have a place to call home (Bennett, 2011; McCarthy, 2018). Through original in-depth qualitative research we examine how these experiences of housing precarity and home unmaking impact the health and wellbeing of young people in housing need.

The paper contributes to an emergent body of scholarship that is examining how austerity measures have widened existing health inequalities (Bambra et al., 2015; Barr et al., 2015; Reeves et al., 2013; Reeves et al., 2016). Our research is particularly significant in the way it takes an intersectional approach to understanding the impact that housing welfare reform has had on health and wellbeing. We are thus interested in what Gorman-Murray et al (2014: 239) term the ‘specific vulnerabilities’ that marginal groups might face as a result of processes of displacement and home *un*making. Intersectionality highlights how people’s experiences of marginalization are not just a result of a singular force, but the outcome of multiple intersecting oppressions (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Crenshaw 1991; Nash, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2011). This work on intersectionality brings to the fore complex questions about the multiple processes and structures that shape health and wellbeing (see Springer et al., 2012; Hankivsky, 2012; Schulz & Mullings, 2006; Viruell-Fuentes et al, 2012). Existing research has outlined how austerity measures have had a disproportionate impact on minoritized people, such as women, people of colour, and disabled people (Power & Gaetens, 2018; Mattheys, 2015; Sandhu & Stephenson, 2015; WBG & Runnymede Trust, 2017). Marginalized groups have also been disproportionately affected in terms of housing precarity, as Carr et al (2018: 11) note:

Precarisation, both in general, and specifically in relation to the home, is an agent of inequality, a phenomenon that affects only certain groups in society. The increasing insecurity of the home impacts differentially: women, migrants, the poor, ethnic minorities and others who are socially excluded suffer disproportionately from increasing domestic insecurity.

Our work hence seeks to make a timely contribution to understanding the impacts that housing welfare reform has had on of protected equalities groups. The paper begins with a brief introduction to the policy context and methods. We then turn to our findings, where we focus on two key themes: physical safety and violence, followed by mental health and isolation.

**Unfair shares?**

The focus of our research is on the Shared Accommodation Rate of Local Housing Allowance.[[2]](#endnote-2) The Shared Accommodation Rate was previously known as the Shared Room Rate, and was introduced in 1996 by the then Conservative government (Kemp & Rugg, 2001). This rate meant that single people, without dependents, aged between 18-24, could only claim housing welfare based at the rate of a single room in a shared property. In 2012, the Conservative-led coallition government announced that the upper age-limit for the Shared Accommodation Rate would be increased from 25 to 35, hence shifting the definition of who counts as a ‘young individual’ in housing policy (Cole et al., 2016). During this period, the government also reduced the overall rate of Local Housing Allowance, with maximum rent being set at the 30th percentile of local rents, rather than the 50th percentile. These policy changes resulted in significant reductions to housing welfare, with the government estimating that the switch from the one-bedroom rate to the shared accommodation rate would result in a loss of £41 per week per claimant (DWP, 2011: 24). However, the impacts of this policy were geographically uneven (Beatty & Fothergill, 2014), and in certain areas of the country the changed age-threshold meant much larger reductions: for example, in many London boroughs this policy resulted in losses of over £100 a week (DWP, 2011: 24). As a result of these changes, safe and secure accommodation in the private rental sector is increasingly difficult for young welfare claimants to access.

The government justified these reforms by claiming that the amount spent on housing welfare was too high, and that the welfare bill was spiraling out of control. Young welfare claimants were positioned as irresponsibly living beyond their means by claiming self-contained properties that would be out of reach for many. Welfare reform was thus shrouded in the language of ‘fairness’, as a way to create a level playing field between those in receipt of welfare and those who are not (Hoggett et al., 2013). It was proposed that sharing is now an increasingly common part of many young people’s housing trajectories, and therefore it is only fair for younger welfare recipients to also share their accommodation (Green & McCarthy, 2015; Wilkinson and Ortega‐Alcázar, 2017). Yet these narrow conceptualizations of shared living failed to consider the ways in which sharing as students, or as young professionals, is a starkly different experience to that of sharing with strangers in sub-standard accommodation (Kemp, 2011). For as Heath (2017: 202) notes, those living at ‘the bottom end of the shared housing market’ are often ‘people living in shared housing against their will, or very much as a ‘least worst’ option’.

Wider international debates around ‘generation rent’ and ‘generation share’ have shaped popular understandings of what now constitutes a suitable home for young adults (Maalsen, 2019). Changes to the age-threshold for the Shared Accommodation Rate were justified by drawing upon these normative understandings of what kind of housing is appropriate for people at particular life stages. Policy discourse hence serves to normalize the precarity of shared living (see Harris & Nowicki, 2018 for a broader discussion around the normalization of precarity). Young adults become positioned as a group whose lifestyles make them particularly suited to sharing, being seen as resilient and flexible. Younger people are believed to have the capacity to share housing without it having a detrimental impact on their wellbeing. Yet as a result of this generational thinking, the government failed to take into consideration the differences between people within this age group, and how factors other than age might shape a person’s housing needs (such as gender, race or disability). In this paper, we examine whether shared accommodation with strangers might be particularly detrimental to certain protected equalities groups. We are interested, then, in the difference that difference makes, noting the ways in which a house that may be habitable and healthy for one person may be inhabitable, or even dangerous, for another.

**The methodological challenge of intersectionality**

In order to comply with their public sector equality duty, the government conducted an Equalities Impact Assessment on the changed age-threshold for the shared accommodation rate (DWP, 2011). The government looked at each equalities group in turn, and presented statistical data on the predicted number of people who would be impacted by the increased age-threshold. Yet this quantitative analysis was limited, with Housing Benefit data currently only being available by gender.[[3]](#endnote-3) Furthermore, demographic characteristics were presented as independent variables, and there was no attempt to consider the ways in which people are part of multiple protected equalities groups. The government noted the need for subsequent qualitative research to assess the impact of this policy.

Accordingly, in this paper, we present findings from a qualitative study into young people’s experiences of housing welfare reform. The research consisted of forty biographical interviews with people from across England and Wales who were currently in receipt of, or had previously been in receipt of, the Shared Accommodation Rate. Interviews took place between 2016-2018. Participants were recruited through posters and flyers in community spaces and advice centres, and through various gate-keepers who provide support to particular equalities groups. Biographical interviews were used in order to create a more open interview format, which would give participants space to narrate their own housing biographies (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Many of the interviews took place in participants’ homes, whereas others were conducted in public spaces at the request of the interviewee. Alongside this, we also conducted ten interviews with those who provide front-line services for protected groups. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, all transcripts were anonymized, and the data coded thematically.

Participants were selected for the project using a purposive sampling technique, ensuring we spoke with a specific quota of people from different protected equalities groups (women, BME people, LGBT people, and disabled people), with most of those interviewed cutting across multiple protected groups. However, attempting to explore intersectionality via in-depth qualitative research is a difficult task, both in terms of accessing often hard to reach individuals, but also in finding a sample of people whose experiences might enable us to reflect upon how intersecting inequalities play out in everyday life. Intersectionality therefore presents methodological challenges as to how we conduct qualitative research into inequality and exclusion (McCall, 2005; Christensen & Jensen, 2012). An intersectional framework attempts to take into consideration the ways in which people are multiply marginalized by different, but interlinked, social structures: such as class, racism, sexism, homophobia, and abelism. It is important to note that our methodological framework was not designed to uncover neat causality, or discern which equalities group had been impacted most by this policy. Rather, our study seeks to open up important discussions about how different subject positions may be differentially impacted by welfare reform, and to examine the specific injustices and vulnerabilities that minoritized groups might face.

**Findings**

In the sections that follow we present two key findings from our study, highlighting the ways in which shared accommodation with strangers has impacted the wellbeing of young sharers. We focus on a select number of interview participants in order to draw out some of the broader trends that emerged in this research. In our analysis we outline some of the ways in which shared housing amongst strangers can be particularly unsuitable for protected equalities groups.

***Physical safety and harassment***

A key theme that came through in our research was the ways in which shared accommodation posed a potential risk to physical safety. The Shared Accommodation Rate is set at such a low rate that there is a severe shortage of affordable rooms to rent, meaning that people often have little choice about the property in which they live. Most renters are on short-term insecure contracts that they make directly with the landlord, meaning that existing tenants have no say over potential new housemates. A number of recurrent issues came up regarding personal safety: people had personal belongings stolen by other tenants, disruptive housemates who were often dealing with substance abuse, and issues of verbal and even physical harassment.

Of interest to this paper is the ways in which marginalized groups often encountered specific forms of everyday violence. For example, a number of interviewees recounted stories of having to endure homophobia, racism and unwelcome sexual advances within their shared properties. Take for example the story of Claire, a mixed-race heterosexual woman in her late 20s, who moved into shared accommodation after fleeing from domestic violence. Before moving into shared accommodation Claire had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress as a result of being subject to domestic abuse for a number of years. Claire speaks of how initially she could not see a way out of this relationship, as she was financially dependent on her partner for their housing costs. Claire reveals that when she eventually left the relationship, the only place she could afford was a large house with six other people in a town just outside London, however, the property was damp, moldy and unclean, so she quickly looked for somewhere else to live. She reveals how she came across an online advert for a room in a ‘far nicer house’ in the same town, where she would be living with the landlord and just one other tenant. She recalls that in the beginning this experience was positive, as the property was in good condition and she felt ‘lucky’ to have secured such a property within her limited budget. Yet after living there for only a month she tells us that the owner-landlord tried to ‘make a move’ on her. Claire refuses his unwanted sexual advances, but after this the dynamics in the house change, and she is subjected to psychological and verbal abuse from the landlord, as she recounts:

…at first it was so awkward. I tried to be polite and tell him no, in like a friendly way... but he was really furious with me…the whole place changed then… he would insult me when he saw me, calling me all sorts of things… that I think I’m too good for him, and that I’m just like all those other women who lead men on. It was like he thought I owed him something, that I should be grateful that he was interested…. he wouldn’t let us put locks on our doors, so he would often burst into my room, there was no escape from him really. If he was in a mood he’d just come and hurl abuse at me. It was really upsetting, quite disturbing really…

For Claire, the shared house was a place that provided little private space or security, boundaries were permeable and there was nowhere that offered retreat or sanctuary. Claire speaks of how she was left ‘trapped’ in the house, as she could not find anywhere affordable to move. During this period she reveals that she even considered moving back in with her abusive ex-partner. Claire had moved from being trapped in a violent relationship with her partner, to being harassed by her landlord and feeling stuck in a shared property, as she notes:

…this thing with my landlord, it was just another thing on top of all that, like I didn’t need it at all… it wasn’t helping me recover from what I’d been through, you know? I needed somewhere… somewhere safe, to rebuild and get myself back on track. But this house, yeah, well it was nothing like that… none of those things.

Claire’s description of her shared domestic space echoes existing feminist geographic work on domestic violence, which notes the ways in which domestic space can be experienced as a space of fear and entrapment (Bowstead, 2011; Pain, 2014; Warrington, 2002). The fact that Claire had been previously subject to domestic abuse did not make her exempt from the Shared Accommodation Rate. Living with strangers can hence put already at risk people into dangerous living situations (Ortega‐Alcázar and Wilkinson, 2019). With limited financial capital, those in receipt of the Shared Accommodation Rate have little choice about where and with whom they live, and can often find themselves trapped in living conditions that are detrimental to their safety and wellbeing.

Other interviewees recounted stories of racist and homophobic abuse from the strangers with whom they shared a house. Often this was verbal abuse, but at times this erupted into physical violence. Jay, a queer British-Indian man in his early thirties had been living alone in a small studio flat in a vibrant multicultural area of London, but cuts to his housing welfare had resulted in a move to a large shared property in a commuter town just outside London. Jay speaks of how he was the target of harassment in this house, a property which he shared with five heterosexual men. Jay tells us how he was the only person of colour in this household, and that his gender is ‘quite feminine’; Jay feels that it was these differences that were what targeted him out for harassment from some of his fellow housemates, noting that his ‘face just didn’t fit’. He tells us how when he first moved in to the house he tried to ‘treat it just like a normal house’, as he had previously lived in share houses before: however, this was his first experience of a ‘stranger share’. Jay recalls that his attitude to the share house quickly changed. He recounts a story about an encounter in the kitchen that took place in the first few weeks of living in the property:

I used to use the kitchen when I first moved in… but not for long. I was cooking and one of my housemates came in drunk that night… like aggressive, a big man... He starts commenting on what I’m making, asking questions.... and I tell him… and then he’s like, “it fucking stinks mate… the whole house fucking stinks of curry… it’s disgusting”, and he’s saying it like in a really aggressive way… I felt really intimidated.

After this experience Jay avoids using the communal kitchen whenever possible, and instead begins to live off cold food that he eats in his room. Later that week Jay recalls how he was woken in the middle of the night by someone aggressively banging on his door while drunk, shouting racist and homophobic abuse. Shortly after this experience Jay puts additional locks on his door as he no longer felt safe in the house. He tells us how his room began to feel like a ‘prison’, with the locks on the door not just serving to keep others out, but locking him inside:

...when I was living there I began to feel… trapped in my room. I wouldn’t ever use the kitchen… it basically got so bad that I’d listen out to see if the house was empty, and if no one was in I’d dash out as quick as I could, cos the idea of bumping into someone in the hall was too much… That’s not how you’re meant to feel is it? In the place you live…

Jay’s enforced displacement into shared accommodation has resulted in enforced immobility at a variety of spatial scales— trapped not just in an unfamiliar house and neighborhood, but also feeling imprisoned within the house itself, unable to move from his room without fear. The story Jay presents is one where the shared house is a site of apprehension and dread, thus linking to wider work on the geographies of home that has highlighted how domestic space might not be experienced as refuge or retreat, but a site of insecurity & fear (Blunt & Varley, 2004). Jay’s story is not uncommon, with existing studies into shared living reporting instances of robbery, conflict and verbal abuse amongst tenants (Rugg et al., 2011). Yet, marginalized groups face additional obstacles when house-sharing with strangers: the violence of racism, sexism and homophobia experienced by those whose faces ‘don’t fit’. Furthermore, for protected equalities groups, the ability to construct a home ‘as haven’ may be even more fundamental to their sense of wellbeing, as the public sphere can still so often be a site of injustice, prejudice and discrimination (Kentlyn, 2008). Shared living can hence pose significant risks to personal safety and make already marginalized people potentially vulnerable to further harm.

***Mental health and isolation***

Existing research has examined how shared housing with strangers can have a detrimental impact on mental health (Barratt et al, 2012). Many participants in our study reported pre-existing mental health issues, and prior research has revealed that those with mental health conditions are more likely to be living in insecure poor-quality accommodation (Evans et al., 2003; Kyle & Dunn, 2008). In our study, many reported that their mental health had deteriorated whilst living within shared accommodation with strangers, highlighting the ways in which compositional and contextual factors combine to exacerbate existing health conditions (see Smith & Easterlow, 2005). In the consultation around the proposed changed age-threshold for the Shared Accommodation Rate a number of organizations argued that shared living was not suitable for those with existing mental health conditions (Wilson, 2012). Despite this, only those with the highest rates of disability allowance were made exempt from the Shared Accommodation Rate, meaning that many people with mental health conditions were left with no choice but to move into shared properties, often at the detriment to their wellbeing.

Participants in our study spoke of a number of factors that had led to a decline in their mental health, such as fears around insecure tenancies, and anxieties around further potential cuts to housing welfare (see Garthwaite, 2013; Watt, 2018; Wilkinson and Ortega‐Alcázar, 2018). Yet while the shocks and hardship faced by welfare reform clearly creates anxiety for all, for those who had mental health conditions these additional pressures often became too much to bear. Take for example, the story of Chloe, a mixed-race woman in her late 20s who suffered from depression and who described herself as having an invisible disability in the form of chronic physical pain. Chloe’s housing biography consisted of frequent moves, as a child she had spent time spent living in foster care, and as a young adult she had spent numerous short periods on insecure rental properties, and significant time spent sofa-surfing with friends as she was unable to secure a rental property while working on a zero hours contract. Chloe speaks of the stress and anxiety caused as a result of her housing insecurity. She tells us that when you’re living in shared accommodation ‘you just don’t feel like you’re even at home any more’:

I mean it is like feeling unsafe because you really don’t know the people that you’re actually living with… You don’t really feel like it’s your own home and you don’t really feel comfortable being there… It’s very horrible, like stressful. It’s extra stress, unnecessary…. the feeling of not knowing where I’m going to be, you know, in the next few months, not having a stable home. It did definitely affect me. You just don’t really feel stable.

Many of the participants in this study had similar insecure and chaotic housing pathways; often these young people were stuck in a pattern of perpetual movement, of what Jackson has termed being ‘fixed in mobility’ (2012: 740). Yet for those with mental health problems, a secure and stable place to call home can be even more important to wellbeing (Diggle et al., 2017), as the stress of housing insecurity can serve to exacerbate existing health conditions (Hardy & Gillespie, 2016; Thompson et al., 2017). A secure home can be a vital place of recovery or a place in which to stop poor mental health deteriorating further. Chloe goes on to tell us how she is now living in a self-contained property, and positively reports: “my mood and everything’s been a lot better… since I got my own place it’s just amazing, it really is”.

Alongside these experiences of housing insecurity, one of the most significant factors that people reported as having a detrimental impact on their mental health was the day-to-day experience of having to share a property with strangers. As already noted, shared housing can often be experienced as a fraught and unhomely space, a place of violence and conflict. These physical confrontations often resulted in people reporting feelings of isolation: despite living in close proximity to others, many participants felt that they had no one to turn to in times of need. Sharers in our study often spoke of how they felt disconnected from the people they lived with. Participants explained how no one in shared accommodation actually wanted to be living there, that it is simply a transitional place from which everyone hopes to quickly move on. This issue was exacerbated by the high turnaround of tenants, meaning that it was hard to forge bonds, often people were nothing more than proximate strangers. This is exemplified through the story of Jo, a white lesbian woman in her early 30s who lived in a city in the north of England. Jo had been moved onto the Shared Accommodation Rate and had also seen a reduction in her disability allowance. As a result of these cuts to her welfare, Jo was left with no choice but to move into a shared property with strangers. The property she moves to is shared with four men, one of whom is openly hostile to her because of her non-gender-conforming appearance. Jo tells us how this experience of living in a share house had a significantly negative impact on her mental health:

…living with strangers was just horrific. It really messed with my mental health…. Everything felt so bleak. I felt so alone in that place…. there have been points over the last few years when I have felt so low… like I can’t see how to get out... I felt really isolated in that shared house too, with no support really.

Jo reveals to us that during her time in the share house she started self-harming again, which she had not done for a significant number of years. Jo’s story about her deteriorating mental health is not uncommon; others revealed how they had severe mental breakdowns while living in shared houses, at times resulting in periods of hospitalization. Jo had since moved out of the share-house and now lives alone in a studio apartment in a cheaper area of town. Her new flat is in significantly worse physical condition than the share property in which she previously lived, but she explains that living alone is what she feels she needs to improve her mental health, even though she is now financially struggling with the shortfall between her housing welfare and rent. A number of participants in this research had either moved to, or aspired to move to, self-contained properties, hence highlighting the ways in which solo-living may at times be fundamental to a person’s wellbeing.

These feelings of isolation in shared accommodation were further exacerbated by the way in which shared accommodation is seen as a space in which it is difficult, at times impossible, to maintain close personal relationships with family and friends (Barratt et al, 2012; Ortega‐Alcázar & Wilkinson, 2019). Many tenants were prohibited from having overnight guests by their landlord. In most instances the shared property lacked any physical space in which to host friends, children or other family members, as most tenants lived in small single-bedrooms. As Chloe notes, ‘you can’t really say to someone ‘oh do you want to come over and sit in my bedroom?... You don’t really want to be living like that, it’s just not right’. Moreover, even if shared accommodation did have useable communal spaces, such as a living room, it was still often felt to be an unsuitable place for friends or family to visit, as it was seen as an ‘unhomely’ space that lacked privacy. Shared accommodation was often described as a ‘shameful’ place, both in terms of the poor conditions of the housing, but also the embarrassment of their guests having to encounter the strangers with whom they live (Chase & Walker, 2012).

Others spoke not just of the domestic space of the house as a barrier to maintaining healthy personal relationships, but also revealed they had been displaced to new more affordable neighborhoods or towns, resulting in a decline in social networks and community infrastructure. The amount of housing welfare a person can claim varies depending on the area in which they live. Some areas are financially out of reach for those in receipt of the Shared Accommodation Rate. Housing welfare reform has thus resulted in the displacement of welfare claimants to cheaper, less desirable areas (Fenton, 2011). Many of our participants had moved from cities in which average rents are high, to more affordable towns, or to cheaper rental areas close to the towns in which they once lived. Displacement here results in feelings of disconnection, a process of what Atkinson terms ‘un-homing’ (2015: 377). For marginalized groups this often meant moving into unfamiliar and at times unsafe areas— for example, away from LGBT friendly cities, or away from ethnically diverse neighborhoods. Often participants spoke of increased levels of harassment, not just within the household, but also in the wider neighbourhood to which they had moved. Hence it is important to note that the micro-geography of the home cannot be thought of in isolation to the wider neighbourhood. ‘Un-homing’ here is a dual process, a move into an unhomely shared domestic space, and a move into an unfamiliar neighbourhood. These feelings of isolation, both within the home and the wider community, were often described as a key factor that had led to deteriorating mental health.

**Conclusion: A house not a home?**

This paper has provided an important contribution to existing debates around the relation between housing, health and wellbeing, by examining the everyday experiences of those who are forced to live in ‘stranger shares’ at the lowest end of the housing market. In order to better understand the links between housing, home and wellbeing it is vital to understand home as something more than simply a material structure— home is lived, sensed, created and uprooted through everyday practice. In our research, interview participants often described the shared accommodation in which they lived as an ‘unhomely’ space. Yet here, participants were rarely reflecting upon the poor physical conditions of the property, instead they spoke about a lack of privacy and safety, or feelings of isolation and disconnection. The creation of a safe and healthy home is therefore about far more than just the elimination of physical or environmental hazards. Yet despite this, housing policy tends to primarily focus on the physical and environmental aspects of housing—tenure, poor quality housing, over-crowding, or unsanitary conditions (Barnes et al., 2013; Leng, 2011; Housing Act, 2004). Of equal importance however, are the lived relationships that unfold within the household. Our research is therefore a call for policy makers to fully take into consideration the psychosocial and interpersonal factors that can make a house feel like home.

Yet this possibility of ‘feeling at home’ has been undermined by recent cuts to housing welfare. Changes to the Shared Accommodation Rate have meant that young people often have no choice but to move into shared housing with strangers in cheaper rental areas. This has resulted in people feeling trapped in the places they live, and also often having to move away from wider social ties and networks of support.[[4]](#endnote-4) Thus while reforms to welfare were brought about to try and ensure economic savings, it appears that the government has failed to fully consider the social cost of these reforms. Our research has stressed the importance of using an intersectional framework when attempting to assess the impact of welfare reform. By treating ‘young people’ as a homogenous group, the government failed to take into consideration how different protected equalities groups might be impacted by this reform to housing welfare. In this paper we have provided important empirical data on the suitability of stranger shares for protected equalities groups; outlining how different subject positions may be particularly at risk from the potential harms of shared living with strangers. Our research highlights the pressing need to take into greater consideration the impact that specific policies might have on protected equalities groups. Policy-makers need to fully consider the equalities impacts of housing welfare reforms, else risk implementing policies that will further exacerbate existing inequalities, by placing already marginalized people in potentially dangerous and unhealthy housing situations. Our research thus highlights the importance of listening to the experiences of those who have been impacted by housing welfare reform, in order to ensure that all welfare claimants have the right to a secure and safe place to call home.

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1. Standard tenancies in the British private rental sector are predominantly six-month shortholds, which the landlord can terminate at little notice. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Local Housing Allowance is the housing welfare people claim when renting in the private sector [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Data on ethnicity and disability is not collected in housing benefit administrative data, so the government used the Family Resources Survey to make estimates to the numbers of people affected. Data on sexual orientation and gender reassignment is not available. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In our research we did come across a small number of instances where shared accommodation was working well, however, these were cases where a charity or housing provider had sought to match tenants (e.g. housing LGBT tenants with other LGBT people—see Ortega‐Alcázar and Wilkinson, 2019, and also Green & McCarthy, 2015 on the importance of co-ordinated schemes to help support young sharers). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)