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Understanding housing insecurity: a qualitative study exploring the perspectives of families and professional practitioners in England

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ABSTRACT

Like many high-income countries, England is experiencing a housing crisis, where conditions around housing availability and affordability are contributing to housing insecurity. Housing insecurity can be understood as experiencing, or being at risk of, forced and multiple housing moves. Our study explores families' experiences and navigation of housing insecurity, drawing on the perspectives of families and professional practitioners. We undertook 78 interviews with 81 participants (43 practitioners involved in housing support, and 38 parents and children who had experienced housing insecurity). Data analysis generated three themes which provide insight into families' experiences of housing insecurity: (i) navigating limited options and forced choices, (ii) trying to maintain normality, and, (iii) struggling to maintain hope. Our findings highlight how housing insecurity produces a pervasive state of uncertainty for families, marked by forced and frequent moves, limited choices, disrupted routines, and hopelessness. Further, our article discusses how the combined concepts of structural violence and slow violence produce a useful lens for understanding families' experiences of housing insecurity, and explanation of why inequalities in housing are produced and how harm unfolds and endures over time. This can help to move towards appreciating the social, economic, and political forces that create and maintain housing inequalities.

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Introduction

England is experiencing a housing crisis, with at least 354,000 people affected by some form of homelessness in 2023–2024 (Shelter, 2024a). This reflects a wider international trend around housing insecurity (Potts, 2020) driven by multiple factors: increased housing demand and costs (Clair et al., 2019); social housing shortages (Lally & McNally, 2025); welfare reform (Williams et al., 2024); and cost of living pressures (Broadbent et al., 2023). Low-income families, especially lone-parent and larger families, are particularly impacted (Hock et al., 2024).

In this article, we explore families' experiences of housing insecurity. We show that using the combined lenses of structural violence (Galtung, 1969) and slow violence (Nixon, 2011) enables a deeper understanding of how temporal, cumulative and systemic dimensions of harm are embedded within, and (re)produced through, housing systems. We identify central mechanisms through which slow violence is enacted in the housing system. In doing so, we offer a critical analysis to inform policies and interventions addressing the causes of housing insecurity.

Understanding housing insecurity

While there is no standard definition for housing insecurity, we mobilise the Children's Society definition: experiencing or being at risk of 'multiple moves that are (i) not through choice and (ii) related to poverty' (The Children's Society, 2020, p. 13). Housing insecurity denotes a lack of certainty and control over housing, which can manifest in numerous ways. This includes increasing and hidden homelessness, greater use of temporary accommodation, tenure insecurity, lack of appropriate properties, and living in poor and overcrowded conditions (Clair et al., 2019; Hock et al., 2024).

Housing insecurity in England stems from a complex interplay of factors. Issues around affordability are compounded by a shrinking social housing sector (Lally & McNally, 2025). Consequently, social housing waiting lists have grown considerably, contributing to reliance on the less secure and more expensive private rented sector (PRS) (Lally & McNally, 2025; Shelter, 2023). This is compounded by stagnant wages and benefits, particularly the freezing of the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024), and a rise in evictions, including section-21 or 'no-fault' evictions (Shelter, 2024b). (See Supplementary File for contextual information around LHA and section-21 evictions). Consequently, increasing numbers of families are forced into temporary accommodation, often for extended periods in inadequate conditions (Shelter, 2023). Housing insecurity is particularly acute in London. London has faced the largest shortfall in social housing supply (London Councils, 2025), as well as having some of the most unaffordable PRS rents and the highest temporary accommodation rates (Ministry of Housing & Communities & Local Government,

2025). However, housing insecurity is widespread across England, indicating that structural forces and systemic pressures extend beyond local variation.

Housing is a key social determinant of several life outcomes (Bess et al., 2023; Ortiz & Johannes, 2018; Shelter, 2023). There is increasing evidence that living in poor-quality and/or temporary housing has detrimental effects upon health and well-being (Clair, 2019; Greaves & Webb, 2025). This includes (amongst others) impacts upon physical and mental health (Shelter, 2023), diet, sleep issues (Mason et al., 2024) and access to healthcare. Furthermore, living in substandard or temporary housing has been noted as having adverse effects on development, educational and employment outcomes (Ortiz & Johannes, 2018).

There is a growing body of work examining the lived experience of housing insecurity in England and internationally (e.g., Brickell & Nowicki, 2023; McKee et al., 2020; Taylor, 2024). Much of this literature focuses on adult experiences and broader structural dynamics, for example how welfare and housing policies can generate debt that 'traps' people and restricts access to local authority (LA) housing (Brickell & Nowicki, 2023); how short-term tenancies, unaffordable rents and the threat of 'no-fault' evictions in the PRS undermine people's ability to 'make a home' (McKee et al., 2020); and, how rising rents, wage stagnation and welfare reform disrupt relationships and impede future planning (Taylor, 2024)). However, research that focuses on the perspectives of families, and particularly children and young people (CYP), remains comparatively limited (Hock et al., 2024; Lombard, 2023).

This article addresses this gap by foregrounding the perspectives and experiences of families and CYP, and theorising their accounts through the combined lenses of structural violence (Galtung, 1969) and slow violence (Nixon, 2011).

Conceptual background

Structural violence theory (Galtung, 1969) describes how 'violence' is built into societal structures. It refers to systemic ways in which structures and institutions create or perpetuate harm and inequalities, with these often operating invisibly and over time (Farmer, 2004). Structural violence leads to inequitable access to resources (Herrick & Bell, 2022) and disparities in health, well-being, and life chances. In relation to housing, structural conditions establish systemic disadvantages that make secure housing difficult to attain and maintain. High housing costs, limited affordability, stagnant wages, economic and employment precarity, and limited social support all contribute to this landscape. These intersecting factors illustrate the systemic ways in which social structures and institutions can trap, harm, disadvantage or fail certain groups (Brickell & Nowicki, 2023; Farmer et al., 2016). Consequently, such structural conditions can lead to housing precarity (Čanigová & Souralová, 2025; Clair et al., 2019). Housing precarity encompasses a wide range of housing issues, including components of

affordability, tenure security, housing quality, and access to essential services (Clair et al., 2019), as well as the wider context of uncertainty and potential issues that people face (such as eviction, precarious employment, or disruption to social networks) (Lombard, 2023). Housing insecurity is a tangible form of this precarity, characterised by forced moves and the immediate issues which accompany this (i.e., the use of LA homelessness support, the use of temporary accommodation) (Hock et al., 2024).

Despite being well placed to describe structural conditions which cause harm, a significant criticism of structural violence theory is its inability to capture the lived experiences of those affected. Here, the concept of slow violence (Nixon, 2011) can be used to highlight the temporal and spatial dimensions of harm for people and places subject to structural violence. Slow violence explains how structural harms play out gradually over time, rather than occurring as one-off events (Keller, 2024). It emphasises the gradual, attritional, cumulative and often invisible ways harm unfolds. It is particularly useful for analysing social issues where harm is dispersed, obscured or normalised (Farmer et al., 2016). While slow violence was originally used to highlight the gradual emergence of environmental harms (Nixon, 2011), it is also relevant for social issues like housing. It has been used to show how housing displacement (Keller, 2024; Rannila, 2022) and gentrification (Lees & Hubbard, 2022), can produce emotional, material, and health consequences, with conditions such as 'waiting' particularly for long periods for basic rights (like housing) when dependent upon powerful others (Keller, 2024), 'permanent temporality' (Čanigová & Souralová, 2025), where temporary arrangements become long-term, undermining any sense of stability, and 'frustrated hope' (Lees & Hubbard, 2022) from an inability to achieve housing stability, emerging as forms and features of slow violence. These harms are not the result of a single event but of ongoing conditions that impact people over time. Slow violence emphasises how these conditions accumulate, through the strain of prolonged instability, the compounding disruption to everyday lives, and the emotional burden of continued uncertainty.

We propose that together, theories of structural and slow violence provide a helpful framework for understanding how social, economic, and political forces create and perpetuate housing insecurity. Structural forces around the housing market, welfare systems, and labour markets, are creating conditions of vulnerability, where various policies, practices, and economic forces establish and sustain housing inequality (Clair et al., 2019). Structural violence then operates through such interconnected systems, creating a landscape where some families face significantly greater obstacles in accessing and maintaining secure housing simply due to inherent biases within societal structures. Housing precarity is a direct outcome of such structural vulnerabilities (Čanigová & Souralová, 2025), with the conditions of structural violence (high housing costs, stagnant wages/benefits, employment precarity, reduced social support, discriminatory policies and practices) creating the housing insecurity that many families experience.

Aim

In this article we focus on a key question: how do families understand, experience and navigate housing insecurity? To capture a holistic perspective, encompassing both lived realities and the systemic factors influencing them, we use a qualitative approach, and draw on the perspectives of families who have experienced housing insecurity and professional practitioners involved in providing housing support. In our article, we aim to draw out the common impacts of housing insecurity across different geographical contexts. We approach housing insecurity as a continuum of experiences and instability, rather than focusing on any single setting or tenure. This allows us to identify the shared lived experiences that cut across different forms of insecurity and to show how structural conditions shape families' trajectories through the wider housing system.

Methods

Between January and September 2024, we undertook 78 interviews with 81 participants (see Table 1), including:

i.   professional practitioners (see Table 2) involved in delivering support or designing and implementing strategies to reduce housing insecurity among families (n = 43), and
ii. families (parents and CYP) who have been receiving LA support for housing (n = 38).

Participant recruitment

In an attempt to achieve a broad geographical and demographic representation, participants were recruited through six LAs, across three

Table 1. Sample breakdown table.

	South Yorkshire	North West	London	Total
Practitioners	17	15	11	43
Parents	7	11	13	31
Children and young people	1	2	4	7
Total	25	28	28	81

Table 2. Practitioner roles.

Practitioner role	Total
Housing services management (e.g., Housing options manager, Temporary accommodation manager)	8
Strategic leadership and policy (e.g., Director of housing, Strategy lead for homelessness)	8
Frontline Housing Support (e.g., Housing advice officer, Housing improvement officer, Temporary accommodation support worker)	23
Public health professionals (Public Health Consultant, Public Health Officer)	4
Total	43

locations in England (South Yorkshire, the North West, and London). We adopted a purposive sampling strategy, designed to encapsulate a relevant range of perspectives. For practitioner recruitment, we used contacts from our LA partners and snowball sampling. To explore the range of complexities around housing support systems, we recruited professionals across the spectrum from housing policy development to front-line support (see Table 2 for an overview of practitioner roles). Potential participants were provided an information sheet (see Supplementary File), which asked them to contact the research team to discuss participation.

We recruited a diverse range of families who were at varying stages of support and levels of need (see Table 3). Our LA partners contacted both LA departments and voluntary and community sector organisations that work with families meeting our criteria to distribute study information sheets (see Supplementary File). The contact details of individuals who expressed interest were securely shared with the research team by LA partners. The research team then contacted family members to discuss the study and arrange interviews. However, only three out of six participating LA sites provided lists of eligible families to contact. To support recruitment efforts, the research team conducted several trips to temporary accommodation sites to raise awareness of the study, by engaging families, and sharing information sheets and posters.

Written consent was obtained from all participants before participation. We also collected basic demographic information from parents and CYP (see Table 4).

Data generation

We worked closely with a project advisory group and a separate group of young people and young adults who had lived experiences of housing issues, to develop and refine our topic guides, ensuring their sensitivity to families' experiences.

Table 3. Current family housing positions.

	Parents	Children	Total
Temporary accommodation	21	4	25
Social housing	6	2	8
Private rented sector	2	0	2
Stopping with friends/family	2	1	3
Total	31	7	38

Table 4. Sample demographic table (families).

	Age	Gender	Disability	Ethnicity
Parents	23–65	4 male 27 female	11 yes	4 Asian 10 black 17 white
Children and young people	8–18	7 female		4 black 3 white

Interviews with practitioners explored their perspectives regarding drivers of housing insecurity and the local strategies designed to reduce housing insecurity. Interviews with families explored their experiences of housing insecurity, its impacts on their health and wellbeing, and experiences of support and strategies designed to reduce housing insecurity. The families we spoke to had diverse, complex and non-linear housing trajectories, often experiencing varied and multiple housing situations and tenures (e.g., living in PRS, temporary accommodation, social housing and informal arrangements). To capture this, for family interviews, we offered an optional drawing activity to facilitate communication and reflection (Prosser & Loxley, 2008), asking participants to describe their current home and map out their housing histories. Interviews with practitioners and families were conducted by members of the research team (NW, EH, MC and A-MB), typically lasting between 45 and 90 min, with interviews with CYP ranging between 30 and 45 min.

All interviews with professional practitioners were conducted one-to-one, either by phone or *via* online video calls. Interviews with families took place through a mixture of phone, online and in-person formats. In-person interviews were held in families' current accommodation, including private rooms in temporary accommodation. For all CYP interviews, parents were present or nearby. Whilst most parent and CYP interviews were undertaken on a one-to-one basis, two parent interviews involved both the mother and father, and one CYP interview involved two siblings. These dyad interviews took place face-to-face.

Data analysis

The interviews were audio recorded *via* an encrypted dictaphone and transcribed verbatim.

We used framework analysis (Gale et al., 2013; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), a systematic approach which supports the analysis of large, complex qualitative datasets. Framework analysis is an iterative process involving five stages:

- Familiarisation
  - The research team (NW, MC, EH, HF, A-MB, PK) read over a selection of transcripts, making notes on key concepts.
- Framework identification
  - The research team met and developed an initial coding framework of key themes and sub-themes. This was refined over a selection of transcripts.
- Indexing
  - The transcripts were allocated between the researchers (NW, MC, EH), with the data being indexed. This was undertaken on NVivo-14, with indexed data then exported to Excel. Double coding on a selection of transcripts was undertaken.

- Charting
  - The Excel documents were allocated between the researchers (NW, MC, EH, HF, A-MB) for summarising. Participants' quotes/accounts were summarised using quotes to support key points.
- Mapping and interpretation
  - The summaries were brought together, with the data reviewed and combined. Key participant quotes were selected to reflect overall points.

The framework was used as a flexible starting point for analysis and theme development for this article.

Results

Data analysis generated three key overlapping themes, which provide a more nuanced understanding of families' experiences of housing insecurity: (i) navigating limited options and forced choices: being and feeling 'stuck', (ii) trying to maintain normality, and (iii) struggling to maintain hope. We use verbatim quotes from participants to illustrate the key findings. For each quote, we detail the type of participant (professional practitioner, parent, CYP) and the field site.

Navigating limited options and forced choices: being and feeling 'stuck'

Affordability and availability constricting choices

Housing affordability and availability were consistently described as key drivers of housing insecurity by families and practitioners. Across all geographical areas, the housing sector was described as being at 'breaking point', with considerable waiting times for social housing, unprecedented use of temporary accommodation, and reduced availability as well as increased cost of privately renting. The words 'waiting' and 'stuck' frequently appeared in both practitioner and family narratives.

> There's not enough houses for the people who want them, it's at breaking point, people are waiting months and years for social housing, they're stuck in private rented and in emergency accommodation because there's not enough. (Practitioner-North West)

> We're just stuck, can't afford to move anywhere at all, and so you're just on this waiting list until something comes up. (Parent-London)

Practitioners described how rising living costs and a lack of affordable housing were forcing families to move out of their communities, into smaller properties, onto ever-growing social housing waiting lists and, often, into homelessness and temporary accommodation. Indeed,

increasing numbers of families, not only those on the lowest incomes, were facing housing insecurity.

> It's just not affordable, for normal families on normal incomes, or on benefits to be honest will ever afford them, which is then pushing families out of the borough, away from the communities and links. (Practitioner-London)

Precarity in the private rented sector (PRS)

Across all participant groups, the PRS was seen as the most insecure form of housing due to the control that landlords have over tenancies.

> You can struggle getting however much they want per rent and they can easily boot you back out and there's no security, after like a year or so erm they could just sell up at any point couldn't they? Current landlord, I was there for about three years, never missed a payment, I was very good…but [landlord] wanted to sell up and I had nowhere to go. (Parent-North West)

Parents and practitioners highlighted systemic barriers to securing housing in the PRS, including landlord discrimination against people in receipt of benefits, the requirement to pay substantial deposits and securing a guarantor (typically someone with a well-paid, full-time job).

> I really feel that I'm discriminated…I don't have the right to rent the property because I don't have over £50,000 income and then they will ask you for someone to stand on your behalf…where am I going to find that? So the routes are hard. (Parent-London)

Such exclusionary practices restricted families' housing choices. Many families described how they were increasingly being priced-out of the PRS, and reliant on LA support. Consequently, LAs had limited housing options as they could not place families in the PRS if families could not cover the rent shortfall beyond the LHA.

> In my house I was paying £495 and the living allowance [LHA] round here is £450 so obviously I was paying the extra fifty whatever. But [after a section-21 eviction] I went on to look for houses I was only seeing £750…I was looking and every place I was looking I was "I can't do that, I can't do that." No matter even if like I'll eat beans on toast for the rest of my life I can't really do that much money. (Parent-North West)

Many families who lived in the PRS reported feeling powerless in the face of landlord demands. Some families attempted to negotiate with landlords, but with a lack of protection they were often left to manage expensive increases.

> I asked him "is [there] any chance I could remain at the property and you know, avoid making any more changes for myself and my children" and he said "that's not a problem…I will bring your new contract for one year."

> So I said "ok, that's great" and we have discussions before that, he will increase my rent from £1,300 to £1,500, however the contract increased to £1,700, which is a big amount of money. (Parent-London)

Parents and practitioners also described disrepair as common in the PRS. Many families reported unsafe conditions, including living with rats, damp and mould. The stress and health issues (e.g., aggravating asthma) such conditions created for families, were significant.

> My daughter she got very extreme, a lot of allergy, so doctor refer her to the hospital for the allergy clinic. So they found out that hygiene was something important…So I didn't know anything about the mould, it was in the kitchen and I complained to my landlord, the council, I didn't get any help from them. (Parent-London)

Parents described how they would live with issues rather than report them due to worries about retribution from landlords. They also described confusion over their rights to complain to the council, and when they had complained, felt that this had made little difference. Several parents spoke of refusing to pay their rent (after exhausting other options), and using this as leverage to force landlords to make essential repairs. This often led to accruing arrears, which landlords would then use as justification for eviction.

> [Landlord] refused to take action on the repairs that needed doing, some of them were, as I said, health and safety issues to me and my children, so I used some of it [rent] to do that…it was the only thing I felt that I could do to get somewhere with the landlord. The house was under a section, under licence, so the council was already aware of the disrepairs in the property…I refused to pay rent until he accepted the err, costs, which eventually he did but by that point it was erm, it was quite a lot of money in rent gone but he then took me to court for, to get the property off me and for rent arrears…yeah, got a section-21 eviction so we had to leave. (Parent-North West)

Limited choice in local authority support

Practitioners noted how the lack of available and affordable housing options were making it difficult to meet families' housing requirements and expectations. Some spoke of stretched council budgets resulting in repairs to available properties being delayed and not always completed. This meant lost income for LAs, but also a reduced property pool for councils. Delays in repairs were spoken of as contributing to insecurity, as families are forced to move to more suitable properties, exacerbating already stretched LA housing provision.

> Damp and condensation is becoming a huge issue, making some properties unliveable, so then we have to move them out of them to somewhere more suitable, whilst we deal with any issues that are rising with the houses, but like we don't have anywhere to move them. (Practitioner-South Yorkshire)

Practitioners explained that an increasing number of families are competing for limited housing resources. They are also now dealing with an increased complexity of need (e.g., people with multiple, intersecting challenges like disability, mental ill health), which has increased the number of families classed as priority need, thus, increasing waits for those in lower priority bands.

> I mean there's a lot of people on waiting lists and transfer lists…but because there isn't any room, room for wiggle, it's like "one in one out" and we're just trying to juggle and move this one to that one. (Practitioner-London)

As a result, families spoke of feeling pressured into moving and accepting unsuitable properties. Families are obliged to take the 'first reasonable offer' that is made to them for housing, and risk losing LA support if they do not. Hence, there was often anxiety about rejecting offered properties and asking for more appropriate accommodation.

> If you don't accept the property that they want you to accept, you become homeless again. So whatever the council, whatever property and wherever it is they give us we're gonna have to go there because if we don't, they're gonna take us off the priority list. (Parent-South Yorkshire)

Trying to maintain normality

Families experiencing housing insecurity faced considerable disruption. Without a safe and stable home, it was noted to be difficult for families to function in many aspects of life and to maintain stability and 'normal' routines.

> Say you've got children and they've got a routine at home or they've got a routine getting to school and that all gets shaken up…I think you base your life from where you live, when that changes, having to try and retain any aspect of that, in a housing crisis, so, is very difficult. (Practitioner-South Yorkshire)

Forced moves away from local communities produced numerous social, time and financial costs in terms of maintaining access to friends, family, employment, schools and health care. Many parents spoke of 'pressure' in efforts to create and maintain some aspect of normality and stability in children's social, educational, home and bedtime routines, all while attempting to mitigate stress and anxiety, and maintain children's wellbeing.

> It puts a lot of pressure on us because obviously trying to get the kids to school, trying to keep some normality for the kids is crucial, especially being in the situation we're in now…so having some normality for the kids as well, obviously the schools, but having normality of keeping them the same as well, psychologically you don't realise that it helps. (Parent-North West)

As well as frequent moves, many families had to share rooms with multiple family members and share facilities with other people in temporary accommodation. Families and practitioners reported how this impacted family routines and patterns (including sleeping, places for playing and homework, relaxation, cooking and eating, and moving around freely), with constant negotiation for privacy and space.

> Basically we live on, we live in our beds. We watch telly in the bed. We have to eat breakfast, dinner, tea, whatever in the bed. It's not normal, is it. (Parent-North West)

Parents often sacrificed their time, wellbeing and employment, for continuity – for instance, making considerable school commutes that were costly and time intensive.

> It's not very comfortable for me to commute [to child's school] every day, it takes me 3.5 hours every day to go there twice. So, I feel like I live on a bus sometimes…you have to go there, come back home, then go there and come back home again, it's a little bit exhausting. (Parent-North West)

Other parents had to move their children from schools because of unmanageable and expensive commutes. For children, this resulted in considerable upset and anxiety at having to leave behind schools where they felt they 'belonged'.

> I really don't want to move because, the thing I hate about moving is that I have to leave all my friends behind from school…my mum was planning to transfer me to a different school and I've been crying my eyes out…I don't want to change. My best friends are there…when I got into [previous school] I felt like I belonged there, and then I started crying when I left it, and when I got into [current school], I just felt like the underdog, and when I just joined I felt like a weirdo…so it was hard on my first day. (CYP-North West)

Whilst practitioners described a concerted effort to keep children near their schools, the lack of available properties made this extremely challenging.

> As much as we'd like to, we can't put everybody in the area they want to be…Obviously kids that go to schools in certain areas, we try to get the kids somewhere close to that school, but it can be an absolute nightmare… We don't have the stock, we have to kind of go where there's a gap. (Practitioner-South Yorkshire)

Struggling to maintain hope

Both practitioners and families described how the uncertainty of housing insecurity seeped into every aspect of life, wellbeing and functioning. Families spoke of feeling unsettled, scared and having a lack of control.

> I'm trying to think in my head, "well how am I gonna do this? What am I gonna do?." I were quite upset, I were crying…I want to be settled in a house with my kids that I know that's gonna be safe, and secure, but all I've got is, well this, I don't even know what will happen…it's the not knowing, where you're gonna be, what you're gonna do. (Parent-South Yorkshire)

> When we were moving from the last house, I was scared like, "Are we going to have anywhere to go? Are we going to have anywhere to go?" because it was getting sold. (CYP-North West)

As indicated above, families constantly described feeling 'stuck' by a variety of structural conditions that limited their access to safe and secure housing. Experiencing constant uncertainty made families feel hopeless.

> I have got to the point, where I have given up the fight and I am not getting nowhere, I can't afford private. Property pool isn't doing me any good, I will still bid but I know that I won't get anywhere with it. (Parent-North West)

Practitioners recognised the impact on families' mental health and wellbeing.

> We refer people into counselling services and other mental health support an awful lot. And when we do, it's not unusual to have people who are talking about feeling suicidal because of the situation…People are just despondent and hopeless, there's a lot of that. (Practitioner-North West)

Families spoke about a perceived lack of clear communication from LAs, particularly regarding timelines, processes, and expectations related to homelessness support and securing housing. With long gaps between updates making families feel frustrated and hopeless.

> During the [eviction] process, like I say, I was ringing up and I'm saying, "so, you know, how long does the eviction process take?," and they just constantly said, "well I don't know, I don't know"…I just felt that things like that they just wasn't helpful at all, and that really did impact, like I say, on me mental health. (Parent-North West)

Practitioners were often aware of such challenges, and spoke about how the current support system could contribute to this.

> One of the things we're picking up from families is the importance of communications. And it's that endless hopelessness of having no idea when you're going to move…and I kind of know where they're coming from but also, it's just the way the system work…and you're [as a practitioner] trying very hard. (Practitioner-London).

Engaging in the time-consuming bidding processes for social housing was disheartening given the sheer number of other people requiring social

housing (see Supplementary File for contextual information social housing bidding process).

> I look on property pool and I am 300 in line for a two bedroom house… it's like what's the point, it's never going to happen. (Parent-North West)

Families often felt powerless to resolve the challenges they faced, frequently expressing that, ultimately, escaping their situations was largely dependent on luck.

> Now I do believe that at the time there was about roughly like 80, 80 families all in the same circumstances of us, homeless and in a temporary accommodation that they were looking after…there's not many [properties] to supply all 80 of them so it's very scarce trying to get them but, we got lucky to get a two bedroom flat. (Parent-North West)

Discussion

Although our study focuses on the English housing context, the structural drivers we explore (insufficient social housing supply, rising rents, and weak regulation of the PRS) speak directly to international debates about the global rise in housing insecurity (Broadbent et al., 2023; Clair et al., 2019). Indeed, housing insecurity is perpetuated by the current housing system, which does not offer security for vulnerable and disadvantaged people. This results in a growing number of families having to navigate forced and multiple moves with limited choice and options due to affordability and availability of properties. Families experiencing housing insecurity are facing persistent instability, uncertainty and disruption, which impacts day-to-day life, as well as having wider impacts over other domains such as health, education, employment and social connectedness (Bess et al., 2023; Čanigová & Souralová, 2025; Lombard, 2023). Fundamentally, experiencing housing insecurity removes autonomy, restricts abilities to do everyday tasks and impedes families' abilities to live their normal lives due to long periods of disruption (Mayberry et al., 2014).

We suggest that, when combined, structural and slow violence can be powerful tools for understanding the compound inequalities built into housing systems, and, especially, for understanding the multiple-negative experiences of families experiencing housing insecurity. Structural violence helps explain why systemic inequalities are produced and reproduced through housing policy, while slow violence illuminates how harm unfolds, accumulates, and becomes embedded in daily life over time. This integrated framework provides a useful way of conceptualising housing insecurity as a systemic, temporal and relational form of harm (Brickell & Nowicki, 2023; Farmer et al., 2016).

We identify key temporal mechanisms (particularly repeated forced moves, waiting and uncertain housing timelines) through which slow violence is enacted in housing systems. These mechanisms generate

attritional harm, manifesting in sustained stress and poor mental health. They also highlight the material, emotional and metaphorical harm of living in unsuitable conditions (Garrett et al., 2023). Our participants described housing insecurity as a continuous feeling of uncertainty due to the potential and experience of forced moves. This pervasive uncertainty, in addition to causing stress, inhibited abilities to relax, settle, and establish a sense of home (Nowicki, 2014). This resonates with and extends what Čanigová and Souralová (2025:1) term 'permanent temporality' in relation to experiencing forced moves. More broadly, and importantly, our findings show how the constant struggle to maintain normality is the daily lived experience of families. Our findings show how trying to navigate their housing situations causes hopelessness for families. The constant worry about having a safe and stable place to live can worsen pre-existing mental health conditions and even lead to the development of new ones (Shelter, 2023), with the uncertainty of future living conditions and trauma of losing a home significantly impacting emotional health and wellbeing (Greaves & Webb, 2025; Hock et al., 2024; Lees & Hubbard, 2022). The constant stress, anxiety, and uncertainty associated with housing insecurity, and the psychological distress for parents and children this can cause, are affective manifestations of the slow violence caused by structural conditions.

We have also demonstrated how structural violence plays out in power imbalances inherent in housing systems. The limitations of LA support systems can be seen as a form of structural violence, as they fail to provide access to timely support, leaving many families vulnerable and feeling hopeless. Moreover, unequal landlord-tenant relationships, where landlords often have more power to dictate terms and conditions, are leaving tenants, especially low-income renters, vulnerable to exploitation, eviction and exposure to harm *via* poor housing conditions (Lally & McNally, 2025). Indeed, substandard housing conditions contribute to a range of physical health problems that are the result of longer-term exposure, including respiratory illnesses (due to mould or poor ventilation), injuries, and chronic conditions exacerbated by stress. Further, our findings echo discriminatory practices around PRS landlords not accepting people on benefits (The Children's Society, 2020), showing how families can be excluded based on their income/socio-economic status, and thus both priced-out and discriminated-out of the PRS. Together, this highlights the impacts of a weakly regulated PRS (Lombard, 2023), which can leave families feeling powerless, 'stuck' and 'waiting' (Keller, 2024). Our findings regarding discrimination, insecurity, and the power asymmetry within the PRS reflect international concerns about the growing precarity of renting (Clair et al., 2019; Gibb et al., 2022).

Children's education can be significantly impacted by frequent and forced moves. Our findings support other work which shows how families can be re-housed considerable distances from schools (The Children's Society, 2020). Our study adds to this work by highlighting that frequent

moves are not suitable for families, as increased distances to schools and changes in transport and commuting arrangements can negatively impact children's engagement, attendance and attainment. These moves result in lost learning time both inside and outside of school (Shelter, 2023), and can also contribute to children feeling out of place in their new school environments. Further, housing insecurity can lead to the disruption of established support networks and increased isolation (Ortiz & Johannes, 2018). Frequent moves, particularly for children, make it difficult to maintain friendships and build belonging in their communities (The Children's Society, 2020). Efforts to maintain social connection impact upon parents' time, money and wellbeing, and their abilities to undertake other essential tasks. These impacts echo international research showing that insecure or temporary housing disrupts developmental trajectories, social networks, and educational continuity (Bess et al., 2023). Our findings, therefore, contribute to a growing global evidence base about the implications of housing insecurity on children's health and wellbeing.

Appreciating housing insecurity and precarity as simultaneously constitutive of and constituted by conditions of structural violence, helps provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex, compound causes and outcomes of housing insecurity. The lenses of structural and slow violence enable a shift away from blaming individuals for their housing circumstances, and towards appreciating the broader social, economic, and political forces that create and maintain these inequalities (e.g., discriminatory housing policies, lack of affordable housing options, and economic exploitation).

Informing housing policy and practice

Research has suggested that the public in many countries can have 'little understanding of how social and economic forces align' to produce poor health and social outcomes (Ortiz & Johannes, 2018, p. 65). Our findings highlight how families' choices were forced and limited, constrained by the nature of the housing market and the practices of the PRS. Therefore, a key contribution of this article is to argue that structural and slow violence lenses allow for a more critical analysis of housing policies and practices, which can in turn inform more effective policies and interventions that appreciate and address the underlying structural causes of housing problems.

Our findings resonate with international calls for stronger regulation of the PRS (Gibb et al., 2022). Regulations in England have proven inadequate, allowing some landlords to avoid accountability and exploit families (Crisis, 2025). However, the recently enacted Renters' Rights Act 2025 represents a considerable step towards reform. From 1 May 2026, it will abolish Section 21 evictions, shift most tenancies to assured periodic tenancies and introduce a 'decent homes standard' for rented properties, giving

tenants greater security and stability. However, limited resources for LAs can impact their ability to enforce PRS standards (Lally & McNally, 2025). Whilst giving more support to tenants, including through providing information about tenant rights (Wheatly et al., 2019), may be helpful, as our study shows, many families can be fearful of retribution, and thus reticent to challenge landlords.

The disjointed, complicated (and multiple) support systems families had to negotiate with experiencing housing insecurity, contributed to uncertainty, waiting and hopelessness (Keller, 2024), which we have characterised as affective conditions of slow violence with very real health and social impacts. A review of the consistency and complexity of such support may lead to greater service efficiencies and better experiences for families.

Importantly, as we have demonstrated, housing is a key social determinant of health (Bess et al., 2023); simply put, bad housing is a form of structural and slow violence that has compound impacts on families' health and wellbeing. Policies that reduce housing insecurity have the potential to improve health (Bess et al., 2023; Cutts et al., 2011), especially if improvements to housing policies are integrated into broader health and social care policies and practices (Greaves & Webb, 2025). Policy focus should move from primarily managing 'crisis' (the consequences of homelessness) to preventing it from occurring in the first place by addressing the underlying root causes of housing instability. In particular, significant changes are needed in national policy, especially around funding and support for social housing, including a substantial (re)focusing on a social housing building program to reduce reliance on PRS and temporary accommodation.

Limitations

Recruitment through our LA partners provided various benefits, but also some challenges. Within LA housing teams, staffing and capacity challenges, and reduced direct access to families due to moving to online/phone support, hindered the recruitment of parents and children. Even when we were able to identify families, many were unable to commit to participating due to the disruption to their lives that housing insecurity was causing. Further, throughout discussions with our project partners and with families, it became clear that parents were not always comfortable with their children taking part in interviews. This reflects a key finding in our study around parents trying to maintain some aspect of normality in their families' lives and that parents were trying to reduce their children's awareness and reality of housing insecurity in any way possible.

Overall, we successfully recruited and interviewed a diverse range of families with varied experiences and pathways into housing insecurity. While the overall family sample was ethnically diverse (Table 4), the majority of parents and all CYP were female.

Conclusion

Our findings highlight the profound impact housing insecurity has on families, revealing a pervasive unsettled state marked by forced and frequent moves, limited choices, and a challenge to maintain normality in everyday life. A key contribution of this article is the focus on families' experiences of housing insecurity, including the voices of both adults and children and young people. Our research has enabled a more nuanced account of the complex and compound ways in which housing insecurity leads to constant uncertainty, instability, a lack of control, feelings of hopelessness and a destabilising of family life. Ultimately, housing insecurity has multiple adverse effects on outcomes for families – ranging from education, to employment, health and wellbeing. While grounded in an English context, our findings resonate with international debates about the growing precarity of housing systems. By identifying the shared temporal and systemic mechanisms that shape families' housing trajectories (specifically the slow, accumulative harms produced through forced and frequent moves, uncertainty around housing timelines and inability to maintain routine and normality) we contribute to wider international discussions on how contemporary housing systems generate and reproduce inequality. Our work highlights how structural issues propagate vulnerabilities which make families' abilities to achieve and maintain secure housing, and to navigate the housing market, challenging. We suggest that the conceptual lenses of structural and slow violence offer powerful tools for understanding families' experiences of housing insecurity, providing a clearer insight into both *why* inequalities in housing are produced and *how* harm unfolds and endures over time. In doing so, the study provides an analytical approach with direct relevance for policy and practice, shifting attention from individual circumstances to the broader political and economic forces that shape families' housing pathways and reproduce inequality.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the Sheffield Centre for Health and Related Research ethics committee (Reference Number 057838). Informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from all participants. All participants provided written informed consent for their involvement in the study which was electronically signed.

Consent for publication

Written informed consent included consent for publication of the findings and the use of anonymised quotations in publications.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, NW upon reasonable request.

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