

Studentification: Shining a Light on Students' Experiences of Living Amongst the Private Rented Sector: Impacts on Wellbeing and Study

With the expansion of higher education in the UK in 1992, the demand for student term-time accommodation increased. Universities could not accommodate all students within their halls of residence, and many students turned to the Private Rented Sector for term-time accommodation, leading to 'studentification' in some areas which is a process of student domination of residential neighbourhoods, largely driven by rent and locality to campus (1). The process has propelled a niche private sector rental market, characterised by a high demand for Houses in Multiple Occupation; intensive numbers occupying designated student areas and short-term tenancies between September and July driving annual tenant turnover (2).

Clearly, a significant number of students live amongst the Private Rented Sector. However, the student perspective is largely absent from the literature, despite students contributing to their local economies and cultural life. Instead, existing research tends to identify students as a 'causal' factor for degradation of the area and concentrates on the local residents' experience of studentification, including an increase in disruption, poorly kept properties, noise nuisance and crime (3). Local residents appear aggrieved by studentification; however, students are likely facing the same experiences. This is concerning as housing is a social determinant of health; poor housing is linked with poor health and wellbeing (2). Students are at a transition stage in their lives and action to support them can be seen as an important public health objective (in terms of their ability to reach their potential) as part of the life course approach endorsed by Marmot (4).

For many students, university is the first time away from home. They may face homesickness, difficult financial decisions and the pressures of living alone, alongside juggling academic demands. International students are often presented with further difficulties including language barriers and acculturative stress. These challenges can contribute to poor health and wellbeing, to which younger students are particularly vulnerable, due to undergoing a crucial period of psychological and biological change between the ages of 15-24 (5,6). However, the pressures from housing have not been considered as influential over a student's health and wellbeing. This is likely because many students are young and inexperienced, particularly when it comes to the housing market. Their naivety to housing standards, coupled with the social acceptance that student housing is of poor condition, has encouraged students to tolerate unsatisfactory accommodation and to avoid speaking out about their experiences (1,2,7).

The literature has begun to address the housing issues some students face. Morris and Genovese (2) remarked properties rented by students were typically older, with low levels of insulation, giving rise to damp and mould issues. Other problems including overcrowding, insecurity and poor maintenance were mentioned, however their exploration was limited due to the study's primary focus on fuel poverty. Nonetheless, Johnson, Cole and Merrill (8) had a broader focus and found students renting privately experienced a wide range of environmental health risks including inadequate security locks, missing smoke alarms, pest infestation, and damp and mould, compromising physical health. The study was quantitative, and therefore did not address students' emotions relating to the hazards, yet an older qualitative study by Christie, Munro and Rettig⁷ noted similar hazards, and found students became stressed over poor housing, limiting academic focus.

New research led by Lynch motivated by the observation that there was a gap in the literature regarding the students' own perspectives on their living environments, has found challenges for students living in a densely populated studentified area, as well as benefits. In particular, issues such as the length of tenure, feelings of security, wellbeing and connectivity were considered extremely

important alongside physical housing conditions. The study clearly indicates that the short-term nature of living tends towards a less extended interest in the area. There was also a disparity between the University area being seen as 'home' and a 'home' away from university.

Lynch study findings relate to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (9) in terms of physiological, safety and belonging needs, including respect of self and others and all of this relates to students' ability to reach their potential. Some have hypothesised that the concept of a 'home' is intrinsic to supplying psychological security and our identity (10). This would relate to the theory of ontological security, defined as the sense of reliability, trust and confidence of persons and things, extending to the home. As the link between housing, health and wellbeing is multidimensional and often described as complex, Rolfe (11) developed an empirically informed framework using the experiences of low-income tenants in the PRS to elucidate the relationship and found positive housing experiences created feelings of relaxation, comfort, a sense of self, socialisation opportunities, and reduces stress to improve health and wellbeing. All aspects important for experiencing ontological security (12). For example, with Christie, Munro and Rettig (7) finding poor housing increased student stress, it suggests ontological security was not achieved, likely due to students not feeling in control or at ease in their private property.

New research is emerging; however, further research is important to continue to shed light on studentification, with particular focus on the impact on a student's wellbeing and studies. New studies will be able us to understand in greater depth the theories behind achieving good wellbeing for students, taking not just their academic but their lived experience, whether it be Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (9) ontological security or an alternative theory.

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