

## Definition and description of severe domestic squalor

### The way we live

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Some people live in very messy dwellings. But a relatively small percentage of the world's population lives in conditions that nearly everyone in their local community, and in their cultural group, would consider unacceptable. One of the first questions we are posed with is 'whose squalor is it anyway?' These are people and circumstances that the community can start to feel concern about. The worry may be for the health and safety of the neighbour who lives in exceedingly unclean, odorous and physically precarious domestic circumstances. Other observers might find such conditions to be repulsive, offensive and intolerable, but might be thinking primarily about the effects on themselves and the majority of the community, rather than of the people residing in those conditions.

The way individuals live, and the habits and cultural expectations they acquire, vary between population groups and over time. They differ between people of different backgrounds, upbringing, education, culture and beliefs. Factors differentiating countries and regions, be they rich or poor, hot or cold, urban or rural, mountainous or flat, all may affect living habits. How people live their lives is determined partly by personality and perceptions, but also by other characteristics and factors. The views of men and women, old and young, hunters and gatherers, may diverge. What is acceptable to one person may not be acceptable to another. What is acceptable to a university student may not be acceptable to their parents. On such subjects there will be a range of opinions, even among people of similar background. The 'average' view may well differ between communities.

Accumulation of dirt, refuse, degraded material and vermin can result in living conditions within a dwelling being unhealthy, unsafe and potentially harmful. If the

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filth and degradation are so foul that they are likely to have unacceptably deleterious effects on the people living there or nearby, we believe ‘severe domestic squalor’ is an appropriate descriptive term. The term does not describe the people; it refers to the living conditions.

Before we attempt to justify our use of the word ‘squalor’, we might consider a news item in the *British Medical Journal*: ‘Half of the world lives in “medieval” squalor’ (Hope, 1997). The headline was prompted by a 1997 report from the United Nations Children’s Fund, which stated that half the world’s population has no access to hygienic sanitation and would not progress beyond ‘medieval’ living conditions until this basic need is met. It stated that almost three billion people could not (in 1997) safely dispose of their bodily waste, thus resulting in spread of disease that was paralysing whole communities. The report blamed a lack of political will in countries facing this debilitation, plus a need to repay foreign debt, with a resultant decrease in investment in improving sanitation. There was reference to one country where annual spending per capita on water and sewerage had fallen from £27.78 to £2.47 in a six-year period.

Even now, in spite of advances in sanitation, there are places where horrifying squalor (defined by the Oxford Dictionary as ‘a state of being extremely dirty and unpleasant, especially as a result of poverty or neglect’) can be observed. Naming them might help provoke political action to improve living conditions, but might also be considered as insulting to those who live there. Even if aware of squalor in their midst, some inhabitants of those countries might ask why we single them out for disparaging comment. However, the squalor inherent in the megacities even of one of the rapidly developing BRIC economies was communicated around the world in the film *Slumdog Millionaire*. The film showed rich people living in pleasant and healthy surroundings, and destitute fellow-countrymen living in unhygienic, unhealthy, dispiriting conditions. The film asked what is being done about it.

We have observed squalor around the world, in developed as well as developing nations, the extent varying within and between countries. One of us, while travelling to a city along a major highway, saw filth in open drains, and truck-high banks of garbage (discarded clothing, water bottles, packaging and disposable material of all kinds) along the sides of the road for many kilometres. A home visit in the city with an old age psychiatry team to see a client with mild dementia necessitated a walk along rubbish-strewn roads, across streams and rivers that were blocked by garbage. There was a smell, of course. The floors of the client’s house were clean but there were flies everywhere: they had flown in from the garbage heaps.

How can it be? What had those responsible for the administration of that city and care of that highway done about the squalor? Ten years previously, a government report relating to waste management in that province read ‘The uncontrolled disposal of liquid waste into open gutters, open spaces, along roads, etc., poses serious health hazards. Bodies of stagnant water produce bad odours.’ Successive governments since then had not been able to gain control of relevant systems. Those with power, money and influence had failed to effect a

change. Was it an issue of priority of resource? Was it corruption or incompetence? Were the garbage workers being paid enough? More garbage was being thrown on the streets than was being collected by them. Why had the cycle not been reversed?

The squalor observed in this present century is not new. Indeed, it was because of neglectful attitudes of nineteenth century politicians and administrators that Charles Dickens, Balzac and others drew sharp and disturbing word pictures to provoke the consciences of their readers. Dickens, in *Oliver Twist* wrote of:

rooms so small, so filthy, so confined, that the air would seem too tainted even for the dirt and squalor which they shelter . . . and dirt-besmeared walls and decaying foundations, every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot and garbage: all these ornament the banks of Folly Ditch.

At a similar time, in 88-year-old Sydney, a Sewage and Health Board report described visits to crowded and unwholesome localities:

Peering down narrow passageways opening off the busy thoroughfares of the City's business centre, committeemen found tenement blocks squeezed among crazily patterned canyons formed by the blank walls and paling fences of surrounding buildings, where the trapped air was fouled by the stench from uncollected house rubbish and accumulations of slops, and the sewage from defective closets and drains. Inside such dwellings the heat seemed intolerable, the rooms small and wretchedly furnished, the windows insufficient in number and so inadequately designed as to open only partially, if at all. In many a backyard, an out-of-repair and evilly smelling closet stood only feet away from living quarters. (Mayne, 1982)

Something was done about the slums of London. On the whole, English streets are now clean. Slums have been cleared away in Sydney, too. In both cities, there are people who discard litter carelessly – and one can wonder if they would do the same in their own homes and gardens; they may do and so may be at risk of living in squalor – but city care has improved since the 1870s. Governments enacted laws and gazetted regulations to improve hygiene and living conditions. They have ordered appropriate protection for those unable to look after themselves. Major advances in health care and technology have reduced much of the unpleasantness that was described in those nineteenth century novels and reports. But standards of care and provision vary, and that is part of the reason why squalor is much more pervasive in some jurisdictions than others. Another reason is that governments and administrators vary in their ability and determination to provide help, support and care for those who do not have the physical resources or capability to look after themselves properly.

Much of the above discussion relates to squalor outside dwellings, in public places and on streets. We believe there will be almost universal agreement that the word 'squalor' is meaningful and appropriate in describing conditions such as those portrayed in *Slumdog Millionaire*. Those in a position to act and get rid of the squalor should be strongly and persistently criticised if they fail to do so. Using the word 'mess' does not have the same impact. Getting messy can be fun. Living in

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**Box 1.1** Observations on squalor.

- (1) Horrific squalor can be seen in open areas of cities across the world.
- (2) This squalor has been recognised and has been deemed unacceptable by responsible people within those populations and by outsiders, but it is still there. Attempts at action have failed.
- (3) Equivalent squalor can be seen in dwellings across the world.
- (4) This squalor has been drawn to the attention of authorities and services, and action has been taken in many cases.
- (5) Attempts to deal with this squalor have commonly proved unsuccessful and ineffective.
- (6) There is good reason for the community and administrators to seek improved ways of intervening in such cases, as part of their duty of care to individuals and their communities.
- (7) Use of the word ‘squalor’ is confronting, and some critics regard it as a pejorative and degrading term. We believe that it is the right word to use in describing living conditions, not people, and that the strength of the word is consonant with the strength of response needed.

squalor is not enjoyed, even if the occupants commonly seem not to recognise the unpleasantness.

Similarly, we contend that ‘squalor’ is the most appropriate word to use if we want to describe the sort of unclean living conditions that, across countries and cultures, are regarded as unacceptable (Box 1.1). If the dirt and filth and (in many cases) clutter are not absolutely unacceptable, maybe we might call it ‘mess’ or ‘mild squalor’ or even ‘disorganised living’. Thresholds for what is acceptable vary, but if the condition of a particular dwelling is putting people at significant risk, then there is a need for action to deal with it. This state of uncleanliness is what we propose to call ‘severe domestic squalor’.

In cases of severe squalor, caring and responsible members of a community will generally feel impelled to make sure that something is done. In milder cases, we, as good neighbours or even as people who just happen to come across someone who seems to need some help or support, may, as responsible individuals, want to take some action. The least we would do is ensure that appropriate persons are aware of the need for monitoring.

A central focus of this book will be a consideration of how and when to intervene in cases of severe domestic squalor – squalor in the home as opposed to squalor in the streets and open places. To do this we need to try to understand what factors result in a person living in squalor. We will describe varying situations of squalor. We will start with descriptions to illustrate what we recognise as severe domestic squalor.

## Descriptions of severe domestic squalor

The following examples will illustrate what is meant by ‘severe domestic squalor’:

- Cooney and Hamid (1995) referred to ‘a dilapidated, filthy house. The home is cluttered with rubbish and infested with vermin. Excrement and decomposing food are strewn around the floors, and the stench emanating is unbearable to all but the occupant, who is blissfully unconcerned by the situation.’
- An Australian local newspaper (name and date withheld in order to preserve anonymity – though the paper itself published the name of the woman concerned) wrote: ‘It could take up to 6 months for [named] Council to rid a [suburb name] apartment of rats, mice and cockroaches while it awaits a court order. . . The council subsequently called in cleaners but suspended work at the unit, citing escalating costs (almost \$17,000) and saying work had reached the stage where baiting, fumigation, replacement, renovation and painting, rather than cleaning, was needed. . . A council official said Mrs [name] had repeatedly refused to leave. . . and said it was up to [named] aged care assessment team to persuade [her] to leave temporarily. . . The council issued a plea to the [named] aged care assessment team to act, after cleaners threatened to walk off the job because Mrs [name]’s health had reached “crisis” stage.’

The problems posed by this case, and the frustrations of neighbours in the block of units, were shown in a national television programme. The appalling [our word] state of the unit, with a mish-mash of rubbish, discarded plastic bottles, rotting food and attendant vermin in all rooms (but especially the kitchen) must surely have aroused feelings of nausea in many of the watching millions, even without being able to smell it. The television segment showed forensic cleaners, wearing face-masks, and the lady herself. The journalist asked her how long it had been like this and she said ‘Three days’. Yet the aged care assessment team reportedly declared that action could not be taken under the Mental Health Act to have her conveyed to hospital to assess whether treatment and intervention were thought to be needed. The team did not consider that she had a mental disorder as defined by the Act.

This account not only demonstrates that failure to keep domestic environments reasonably clean and clear of rubbish leads to hazards and unpleasantness for the community, and risks to occupants, but also makes clear the failure, in this case, of community and caring services to take appropriate and coordinated action within a reasonable time. Such ineffective intervention is common across continents. We know of numerous situations where there has been a lack of coordinated response to referral of such cases, varying in severity but all meriting support, help or intervention.

- A national tabloid newspaper commented on four children watching television in a ‘government-owned house amid the rancid smell of dog faeces and rotting food. . . Urine and faeces lay on the shower floor. . . and a pot roast in the oven was full of mould and decay.’

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- A team of forensic cleaning professionals (Clean Queens) talked of a place they had been asked to clean: ‘The smell on entering the flat is over-powering. There’s cat mess in trays on the floor and stains on the mattress, which looks like it hasn’t seen a sheet in months. The living room is crammed with random objects. . . and mouldy coffee cups. Clothes cover the bedroom floor and spill from the disused washing machine.’ But the Clean Queens noted that it was ‘actually not too bad. With a lot of squalors, you’ve got cockroaches, fleas, mites and worse.’
- Fry (2000) mentioned two occupants of an unremarkable house in suburbia. Whenever they ‘had no further use for what they were holding in their hands, they dropped it on the floor. There was no space in any room in the house where one could put a foot on the floor without encountering some flotsam – discarded clothing, food scraps, cartons, bottles, magazines, newspapers.’
- Cole *et al.* (1992) visited an upstairs flat that was uncarpeted and dirty, with sparse, shoddy furnishings. Clothes and manuscripts were strewn about, together with empty sherry bottles. The kitchen contained little food, but a pile of empty tins and dirty pans in the sink. There was human and feline excrement throughout the flat. In the bedroom were found several trays of cat litter and three very well-kempt cats.’
- Fry (2000) also described a house where the approach to two arm-chairs was ‘via a narrow corridor between compacted rubbish which was greater than knee-high at the sides of the corridor and consisted mainly of paper, food scraps, cartons and empty bottles. The corridor forked before the final approach to the arm-chairs. . . The electricity was disconnected. The other rooms in the house were similarly full of rubbish.’
- French clinicians (Esposito *et al.*, 2003) described the home of two siblings: ‘At the entrance, the flat was grossly dirty and untidy, with an unbearable stench. Rubbish had been hoarded to the extent that most of their living space was taken up with full cardboard boxes, bins and heaps of magazines. Miss and Mr M denied the precariousness and the insanitariness of their living conditions and vehemently refused any assistance.’
- A report from a Canadian ‘Task Force on Senile Squalor’ (Pelletier and Pollett, 2000) described an apartment where ‘the living area had a pathway from the hallway to the single bed between boxes and clothes piled to the ceiling. . . The kitchen counter and floor were covered with appliances, food cans, used coffee filters, dirty dishes and pipe smoking paraphernalia. The refrigerator was stuffed with small white plastic bags. There was a pile of crushed food cans behind the stove piled from the floor to the top of the stove. The bathroom had an assortment of gallon bottles of chemicals. The fixtures and floor were coated with filth. The apartment had that distinctive odour of filth that was noticeable in the apartment building hallway.’
- Another newspaper described ‘an overgrown backyard full of cardboard boxes, old tyres and discarded furniture. Cats perch on every surface; kittens roll about among the rusted drums and long grass. Inside, behind closed curtains,

the rooms are piled high with papers, cups, plates and bottles. Broken toys, old clothes and shopping bags spill across kitchen benches and floor, smothering the stove and filling the sink, neither of which has been used in years. The stench of cat faeces, urine and food scraps fills the house.’

- Fish (2008), writing in the *New York Law Journal*, referred to the opinion of Judge Anthony J. Cutrona in the matter of a couple who lived in Brooklyn: ‘Evidence was presented to this court that [named] suffers from Collier (sic) Brothers Syndrome, in other words, he is a hoarder. Their apartment at [address given], Brooklyn, was stacked floor to ceiling with magazines, newspapers, garbage, old mail (from the Post Office) etc. There was severe insect infestation. Moreover, there were two dogs in the apartment who were allowed to defecate and urinate in the house. In sum, the apartment was an unsanitary, unhealthy, disgusting mess. The description of the apartment was confirmed by several photographs taken by the court evaluator.’ A witness had observed mice all over the apartment as they skittered over the heaps of old newspaper and other assorted trash – ‘there were mounds of mouse feces everywhere and every square inch of the apartment was infested with cockroaches.’
- The *Washington Post* reported that ‘Last month, in San Jose, California, police entered the home of 70-year-old [name withheld] after neighbors complained her house gave off a disgusting odor. The house was brimming with more than 25 tons of rotting garbage, infested with maggots, mice and rats. Charged with violating state laws on storing refuse, [name withheld] argued that most of the heap was books and clothing she was saving.’
- In a book describing ‘true stories of tackling extreme clutter’, Paxton (2011) described ‘a classic, stereotypical hoarder who had clearly given up years ago. Living in a three-bedroom, double-wide trailer home in rural Idaho with too many dogs to count, she had been without electricity or running water for years. The floors were damp with brown muck. Decomposing trash was piled up to five feet high, through which narrow walkways gave limited access to each room. In the kitchen, flies swarmed the windows. . . All of the appliances and cabinets were smeared with unidentifiable black and orange gunk. Dust and cobwebs covered the walls and hung from the ceiling. The bathrooms were just as bad. . . The smell was overwhelming – a mix of urine, rotting food, and dog feces.’
- Randy Frost, in a book titled *Stuff* (Frost and Steketee, 2010, pp. 169–71), described a dwelling that was later compulsorily cleaned: ‘The apartment was dark. . . No floor was visible, only a layer of dirty papers, food wrappers, and urine-stained rags. . . From the edge of the door, the massive pile of junk rose precipitously to the ceiling, like a giant sea wave. It could have been landfill: papers, boxes, shopping carts, paper bags, dirty clothing, lamps – anything that could be easily collected from the street or fished out of a dumpster. It was one solid wall of trash twenty feet deep, all the way to the back of the apartment. There must have been windows on the far wall, but they were darkened by the broken fans, boxes, and clothing covering them. Inside the condo the sweet,

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pungent odor of insects and rotting food enveloped us... I could feel the cockroaches surrounding me as I stepped in. The walls were coated with their brown dung, and occasionally one dropped from the ceiling onto the piles of debris below. I walked further in to get a better look at the kitchen, or what I thought was the kitchen. It was impossible to tell, since everything was covered with bags. Food, mostly old and rotting, empty but unwashed tuna cans, and colourful coupons adorned the room. There was a path into the kitchen, though it was atop six inches of trash on the floor... All four adults living in the five-room condo had become so habituated to the squalor that they barely noticed it anymore.'

- Frost and Steketee (2010) provided descriptions of a number of other people who 'hoard', resulting in varying degrees of difficulty in cleaning, but none as severe as Frost's case described above.
- An American television series (called *Hoarders*) showed a person who had a compulsion to purchase items she did not need, and that she then felt unable to let go. Inability to clean, because of the piles of hoarded material, resulted in squalor. Her two children were removed by authorities because of the hazardous and insanitary conditions. To get the children back she was required to clean up her house and get psychological help.

We, ourselves, have visited literally hundreds of dwellings following referral of the occupants, the referrers having described them as living in very unclean conditions. A few are now presented in order to enhance awareness of the range of 'types' of squalor situation that clinicians may encounter.

- We called, with police, to see if anyone was residing at a house surrounded by an overgrown garden, where rats were seen often, and from which fleas came across to the adjoining property and bit the legs of children playing there. The occupant appeared only after police had forced a way into the house. The ceiling in the living room was falling in and all walls were filthy. The house was almost bare of furniture, and was very dusty. Piles and scatterings of newspapers were observed. A brown liquid filled the bath. (Plates 2.1, 2.2)
- We visited a professional man's house, which was in a smart suburb. The furniture was basic and greasy looking. The bed-clothing was stained, and vomit, faeces and urine were seen on the floors of the bathroom, toilet, hallways and other rooms. There was a profusion of maggots in the refrigerator. Cigarette ends, ash, dirt and empty cardboard wine casks littered the living room floor. Neither floors, walls, windows nor ceilings had been cleaned for years.
- Access was given on one occasion (but never willingly again) to a house and garden that exemplified very severe squalor. The garden was several inches deep in dried-up dog faeces. Access to sinks was restricted, and all surfaces and floors were very dirty and covered with an assortment of disorganised unusable objects, some electrical. Articles were piled up to near the ceiling in one room. Wires hung loose. The house was dilapidated. The owner's car (apart from the driving seat) was full of more items, and he drove off in it, daily, leaving large dogs to guard his home.



- There were a number of houses that we never entered because they were ‘stuffed’ with objects and materials. There was certainly no room for anyone to get inside and clean. One house (worth several million dollars if cleared and structurally sound again) contained a multitude of toys collected from the streets – as well as other objects. Items were piled up on top of the toilet (in an outside hut or ‘dunny’) and had to be removed when the occupant or his guest wanted to use it. His wardrobe was hung up on a washing line that extended the length of his garden. He slept under an umbrella by the back door. Rats were seen running along a fence. He was referred to us by his neighbour after the weight of piles of accrued possessions weighed down the fence on one side of the garden. (Plate 5.1)
- We visited the dwelling of a woman whose sleeping hollow was a depressed area on top of a pile of items, the uppermost being clothing. We could not safely climb over the pile to inspect the bathroom. Her windows (seen from outside) were very dirty, but we cannot comment on the cleanliness of her floors, surfaces or walls because they were mainly hidden from view. (Eventually this lady was evicted. She then went to live under a bridge across a park, and there accrued items, many of them toys, which formed a bank stretching about eight metres along a wall. Council clean-up trucks used to take away a large fraction of her possessions once a fortnight.)

### Defining and understanding ‘severe domestic squalor’ and ‘hoarding’

Squalor varies. Some of the people mentioned above could not get into their homes because they were packed with items. Others lived in relatively bare premises, which were still very unclean. The extent of the accumulation of rubbish and/or valued items differs between cases, and observing what and how much has been accumulated will give an indication of factors relevant to why their living conditions have been brought to attention.

The term ‘*sylogomania*’ was coined by Clark *et al.* (1975) to mean accumulation of useless rubbish (they referred to it as ‘hoarding of rubbish’). ‘Hoarding’ refers to the purposeful collection and storage of articles or material. Rubbish has been defined as meaning refuse, waste, litter, garbage or trash (*Oxford Thesaurus*; Urdang, 1991). Do some people purposefully collect and store rubbish, refuse, garbage, trash? Accumulating it in order to have enough to make it worthwhile discarding it is understandable. It might even be purposeful to some extent, though once the pile has grown big it would seem that occupants have neglected to discard rather than purposefully collected what is in the pile. If some people purposively collect and store waste products such as excreta, then their beliefs should be questioned, and the possibility of mental disorder should be considered. We will discuss the role of mental disorder in squalor later in the book.

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However, what is clear is that there is variation in views about which articles or goods should be regarded as waste and garbage, and which a legitimate focus for preservation or collection. This will depend on individual attitudes and capacity for lateral and creative thinking. For example, cardboard rolls discarded after using up the encircling sheets of toilet paper might be regarded by some as waste, but others might regard it as wasteful to throw away items that could be used in artistic endeavours or collected for recycling. Out-of-date newspapers can be seen as potentially interesting and useful – but to whom, and when? Whether ‘rubbish’ and ‘hoarding’ are appropriate words to use in particular cases will depend on observers’ views concerning whether accumulated articles should have been thrown away (i.e. that they are garbage, waste or trash) and whether accumulation of such trash was indeed purposeful. Amassing of trash and garbage (discarded food wrappings and the like) in a purposeful rather than neglectful way would surely be unusual and raise questions about mental disorder.

We believe that it could be useful to reserve the term ‘sylllogomania’ so that it refers specifically to the accumulation in a dwelling of rubbish or garbage/waste, as a result of not discarding it – the accumulation occurring whether or not the occupants perceive such rubbish as having value, or whether or not they state a reason for retaining it. We accept that sometimes the accumulation of garbage can be viewed as purposeful (and thus that it is hoarding), but usually it is not. ‘Hoarding’ describes the purposeful accumulation and retention of items that are perceived by occupants as having a value or purpose (and thus, usually, as not being rubbish). There will still be an overlap in usage of these two terms: one person’s valued possession may be perceived by others as garbage or rubbish. For example, retention of numerous empty cocoa containers may be viewed by some as retention of rubbish, and by others as retention of potentially useful and therefore valued containers.

Visitors to the trailer home described by Paxton (see above), in which a woman was surrounded by decomposing trash piled up to five feet high, might well have had feelings of revulsion. She was living in what we would regard as severe squalor. The trash and filth had accumulated. We would surmise that this was largely passive accumulation rather than active hoarding – even if (as Paxton intimates) she also had cravings to collect and then not discard items of little obvious value. The term ‘sylllogomania’, used in the way we have suggested above, would be an appropriate descriptor in this case.

Compulsive hoarding has been described as a mental disorder marked by an obsessive need to acquire and keep things, even if the items are worthless, hazardous or unsanitary (A & E Network, 2010). We will discuss definitions of hoarding below, but first we will propose a definition of severe domestic squalor. As we have stated before, the term describes an environment and does not refer to individuals who live in that environment (we will discuss personal (bodily) uncleanliness later). Our working definition of severe domestic squalor is presented in Box 1.2.