

# 'Shoebox rooms' with illegal partitions courting danger, says experts (Poll Inside)

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PETALING JAYA: Despite the lure of cheap monthly rental costs, community leaders and health experts say the overcrowded nature of partitioned and "shoebox rooms" pose serious safety and hygiene concerns.

Alliance for a Safe Community chairman Tan Sri Lee Lam they said a task force should be established to identify and inspect any suspected units that were housing partitioned rooms, with the necessary action taken.

*"Local authorities need to take preemptive measures to crack down on these types of rooms before a potential tragedy occurs. Guidelines should also be outlined to control occupancy loads."*

*"At the same time, there should be a greater awareness of the dangers of such rooms among the local community and room owners," he said.*

He added that overcrowding in partitioned rooms posed a serious fire hazard to all building residents.

*"The chances of a fire breaking out are extremely high. Tenants usually plug all their devices into the single available electrical outlet in these types of rooms, potentially causing it to overload."*

*"The room's compact size would then cause sparks to come into contact with the combustible materials around the room, including the mattress or bed frame."*

*"Fire hazard risks can also increase as room partitions are usually made from cheap and easily combustible materials, like wood," he said. Public health expert Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar said partitioned rooms could potentially become breeding grounds for diseases and pests to spread. "A dark, humid room due to the lack of ventilation and windows makes it an ideal environment for pests like cockroaches and fleas to multiply."*

*"Pathogens like viruses and bacteria could also multiply out of control."*

*"Left unattended, pests and pathogens will also easily spread to neighbouring rooms due to the thin walls and potentially even the whole building, leading to a potential public health crisis," he said.*

Ventilation could also be an issue, seeing as some had no windows, which increased the risk of disease spreading, he said.

*"If one really must stay in these rooms, I recommend they take the time to clean their room daily."*

*"Regardless, always try to avoid living in such places unless it really is an emergency."*

*"While you may save money on rent, it comes at the cost of your safety and wellbeing," he said.*

Apart from the physical risks of living here, one's mental health could also deteriorate by living in such conditions, according to a mental health expert. Malaysian Mental Health Association president Prof Datuk Dr Andrew Mohanraj said studies have shown that living in cramped spaces can reduce cognitive functioning, including memory, attention and decision-making.

*"This can make it more difficult for the individual to manage their daily responsibilities and further exacerbate feelings of stress and anxiety. "Living in small spaces can also lead to increased stress, anxiety and depression," the consultant psychiatrist said."*

He added that such living conditions can be stressful and anxiety-provoking, especially if the individual feels claustrophobic or cramped. He said it is important for individuals in such situations to mitigate these effects through decluttering, setting boundaries with housemates, and prioritising activities outside the living space.

Meanwhile, Malaysia Institute of Estate Agents president Chan Ai Cheng said two Acts governed renovations, namely the Street, Drainage, and Buildings Act 1974 and the Strata Management Act 2013.

*"For landed properties, local authorities will be the ones overseeing the approvals and permits for renovations."*

*"Strata properties, which are under the Strata Management Act, need to meet joint management body (JMB) requirements," she said. Chan said it was also important to note that a property's fitness certificate is based on internal and external property inspections from various government agencies to certify whether it is fit for use."*

*"Any modification could impose dangers to the safety of the occupants or affect the surrounding area."*

*"If one is uncertain, it is advisable to check with the local authorities or, in the case of strata developments, to check with the JMB on what can be done," she said."*

Non-adherence to the laws may even affect the insurance policy for the property, she added. Several JMBs in the Klang Valley, when contacted, said any renovation proposals had to be approved. Among the criteria listed were the partition or renovation details, such as the materials used and the measurements. Renovations also cannot affect the structural integrity of the support pillars and main walls of the unit. Some also require sprinklers to be installed in major rooms of the unit.

