

# Criminal landlords in the shadow private rented sector in England

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*A report from the ESRC study: Understanding criminality in the private rented sector and co-producing solutions*

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

- This report presents findings from a large-scale multi-method research project drawing together – for the first time – expertise in criminology, policing, housing policy and housing law to explore the nature of landlord-perpetrated crime in the private rented sector (PRS) in England.
- Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, successive policy interventions have identified ‘rogue landlords’ who let out poor-quality property and disregard tenant law. From 2018, a ‘Rogue Landlord database’ has permitted local authorities to publish a list of landlords and letting agents who have been convicted of banning order offences or received two or more financial penalties in reflect of a banning order offence.
- In 2020, the London charity Safer Renting produced the report *Journeys in the Shadow Private Rented Sector*, which identified links between rentals at the lowest end of the PRS and landlords actively engaged in criminal landlord behaviour. The June 2022 White Paper *A Fairer Private Rented Sector* made extensive reference to criminal landlords, mentioning behaviours including scam lettings, illegal eviction, harassment, theft, threat of violence and extreme overcrowding. The White Paper proposed regulation to support local authorities to tackle this behaviour; this regulation was passed as the Renters Rights Act in November 2024.
- The ESRC project sought to build on findings from *Journeys in the Shadow Private Rented Sector* and was delivered in interconnected work packages that explored the nature of criminal landlord behaviour and policing responses, multi-agency approaches to tackling landlord criminality, local authority prosecutions under the Housing Acts, understanding victim experiences of criminality and reviewing the operation of the Protection from Eviction Act. A full summary of research method is given in Appendix 1. This report is one of a series of four reports summarising findings from the project.
- This report draws on concepts that are more routinely deployed within criminology to suggest effective intervention strategies to tackle landlord-perpetrated crime.

## Criminal landlord, criminal landlord behaviours and the shadow private rented sector

- One obstacle in dealing with landlord criminality is confusion around definition and intent. A clear definition of landlord-perpetrated criminality contributes clarity with regard to effective interventions.
- This report defines criminal landlords in terms of: a willingness to break the law routinely; operating with no regard for tenant welfare; and awareness of criminality expressed through the deployment of tactics to frustrate detection or prosecution. Police and local authority respondents identified multiple types of crime associated with letting property

### *Slum landlords*

- All local authorities reported serial-problem landlords who were familiar to enforcement teams and to homelessness teams. Slum landlordism is a way of working that combines multiple practices including:

- No or limited investment in essential repairs or routine maintenance
- Maximising rent through overcrowding
- Attracting tenants through word of mouth
- Collecting rent informally, often accepting cash only
- No/no legal supporting documentation for the tenancy
- Focus on vulnerable tenants who are less likely to complain
- Frequent recourse to harassment and illegal eviction to end tenancies<sup>1</sup>
- Coercive control of tenants to deter their contacting the authorities<sup>2</sup>
- Tolerance of criminal activity in properties
- Sufficient knowledge of the law to apply evasive techniques
- Engaging in vexatious appeals to discourage prosecution
- Possible links to organised crime.
- These landlords 'milk' properties to maximise income through zero or limited expenditure on repairs and maintenance, maximising rental income through overcrowding and other forms of criminality.

#### *Scam landlords*

- Scam landlords are more likely to be involved in fraudulent letting practice. Of particular importance is use of 'rent-to-rent' models to secure property from either legitimate or complicit landlords and subletting the property to tenants who are unaware of that arrangement. These arrangements make it easier to obscure responsibility for property repair and maintenance, and for illegalities such as licensing breaches.

#### *Criminal letting agents*

- Criminal letting agents often exploit tenants and landlords and can benefit from confusion with regard to culpability for crimes such as cannabis farming. Criminal letting agents often facilitated slum and scam landlordism and could also have links with organised criminal gangs.

#### *Organised criminal gangs*

- Police and local authority respondents were aware of links between the PRS and organised criminal gangs (OCGs). Property within the PRS was used as a location for criminal activities such as cannabis farming and could facilitate modern slavery. Accommodating trafficked individuals was a means of containing and further exploiting victims through extorting both labour and 'rent'.
- OCGs might also seek to entice poorly performing landlords into allowing property to be let for criminal activity: substantial cash benefits could be appealing to landlords whose properties were badly maintained and unlikely to yield good rental returns.

#### *Criminal landlord behaviours*

- Respondents were often of the view that not all non-compliant landlords were rogue landlords. In some instances, non-compliance was a one-off event reflecting inexperience, lack of awareness of relevant legislation, poor advice or lacking finance to complete required works.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Carr, K. Colliver, C. Hunter, I. Langdale, B. Reeve-Lewis, J. Rugg, D. Scully & R. Spencer (2025) *Are the English civil and criminal remedies for harassment and illegal eviction fit for purpose?* University of York.

<sup>2</sup> L. O'Malley, L. Parton & J. Rugg (2025) *Landlord-perpetrated tenant abuse in the English private rented sector*, University of York.

- Applying the concept of 'drift' in these circumstances encourages a focus on the circumstances in which an individual suspends law-abiding values to engage in criminal acts. The non-compliant landlords who were interviewed could generally offer a reason for their behaviour. However, isolated non-compliance does still amount to harm from the tenant's perspective: lack of heating has the same impact on health irrespective of the reason why a landlord is not attending to the repair.

#### *The shadow private rented sector*

- A shadow market exists where both buyer and seller are engaged in an exchange that is not legitimate. The shadow PRS sits alongside and merges with the legitimate market, using the same structures and processes of commercial exchange. However, in the case of the shadow PRS, tenant involvement reflects a degree of desperation.
- The importance of recognising a shadow PRS lies in understanding that exploitation and criminality are standard practices within this market. Criminality in this sphere cannot be tackled using regulatory frameworks that intend to improve tenant rights, since landlords in this market operate with no respect for rights. The highly marginalised tenants in the shadow PRS are unlikely to consult a 'rogue landlord database'.

### The PRS as a criminogenic system

#### *The private rented sector as a complex system*

- The PRS is a complex system with multiple sub-markets, each comprised of more or less well-defined demand groups (tenants), suppliers (landlords) and letting agents; and with characteristics defined by the specifics of the local economy; and where letting activities are subject to a range of statutory interventions from government ministries whose agendas do not necessarily align; using statutory enforcement agencies operating at national, regional and local levels, where commitment to and resources for enforcement vary markedly; and relying on a criminal justice system to deliver appropriate prosecution outcomes. Landlord and tenants are supported through a variety of agencies and lobby groups that offer guidance on rights and responsibilities
- Multiple agencies have responsibility for intervening in the PRS with regulatory intent, with enforcement taking place at national, regional and local levels. The court system frames the likelihood of prosecution and sets the degree to which sanctions act as a deterrent. There is no guarantee that tenants will secure specialist housing advice when required.

#### *Affordances for crime in the PRS*

The PRS fosters crime in many ways:

- The nature of letting tends to tolerate amateur practices: professional practice is not expected.
- The nature of the letting arrangement creates 'culpable deniability' of crime taking place in let space, with landlords, tenants and letting agents able to blame each other;
- Power dynamics in the sector are unbalanced in favour of the landlord, which can normalise abusive exploitation;
- Both high and low demand areas create opportunities for criminality;
- Marginalised and vulnerable households constitute a ready supply of tenants for 'shadow' lettings, as does demand from seasonal workers seeking to minimise their rental costs;

- The probability of discovery and prosecution is low, due to patchy enforcement, problems with policing, and multiple obstacles within the legal system; and sanctions are inadequate to constitute a deterrent.

## Undermining ‘techniques of neutralisation’

### *Techniques of neutralisation*

- Interviews with sixteen landlords who have contravened housing regulations indicate that most deploy ‘techniques of neutralisation’ to justify their criminal acts. These include the following.
  - A denial of responsibility blaming someone else for the infraction, such as a letting agent for offering poor advice;
  - Denial of injury claims that no harm came from the infraction, so the contravention was irrelevant;
  - Denial of the victim, indicating that the victim was somehow to blame or almost deserving of the landlord’s criminal actions;
  - Condemning the condemners, claiming that accusers are equally – for example, that conditions in social housing are worse than in the PRS; and
  - Appealing to higher loyalties, by claiming that the landlords’ higher motive – such as accommodating people who would otherwise be homeless – justified their offering poor-quality accommodation.

### *Statutory sanction of techniques of neutralisation*

- Local authorities could express a degree of sympathy with landlords’ techniques of neutralisation. For example, it could be agreed that the law was complicated, so infractions were inevitable; or that tenants were culpable when landlords made recourse to illegal eviction. This kind of response could only confirm landlords’ presumptions that their rationales for non-compliance were valid.

### *Undermining techniques of neutralisation*

- Alternative approaches might be to pursue strategies to remove any claim that infraction is justifiable. For example, measures include ensuring that sufficient information is available to landlords, to undermine a claim to being misinformed. The Renters’ Rights Act landlord database promises to act as a portal for advice and information. Adopting a more victim-centred approach would undermine excuses that look to the lack of a victim, or that a victim was in measure to blame for the infraction.

## Conclusions: borrowing from situational prevention

### *Situational crime prevention*

- Situational crime prevention points towards five key categories for interventions: increase the effort required to benefit from the crime; increase the risk of detection; reduce the possible reward; remove the circumstances in which crime is a likely outcome; and remove the excuses for criminal acts.



*Primary prevention: reducing criminogenic conditions in the PRS*

- Addressing the structural factors that foster crime in the PRS could include the following measures:
  - Controlling access to the PRS through mandatory landlord registration and broader surveillance to include actors including businesses and statutory agencies that routinely deal with landlords;
  - Reducing tenant vulnerability by attending to the factors that exclude tenants from the mainstream market, for example, through increasing the local housing allowance so that lower-income tenants are able to access better-quality properties; and increasing funding for agencies supporting individuals who are No Recourse to Public Funds;
  - Simplify regulation and offer clear protocols for compliance;
  - Seek to change the culture of landlordism to create a presumption of professional practice so that, landlordism is seen less as a 'hands-off' investment and more as a small business: for example, landlords should be obliged to have rental business accounts separate from their own bank accounts.

*Secondary prevention: identifying and interrupting (emerging) criminal behaviour*

- Target early signs of non-compliance, and disrupt these practices before they escalate:
  - Increase the number of agencies with responsibility for 'soft policing', to draw on a range of actors to identify problematic behaviours and potential victims;
  - Seek to correct minor infractions before they escalate to routinised serious offences;
  - Improve monitoring of intermediaries including letting agencies and on-line lettings platforms so that criminal practices are not fostered in overlooked ancillary industries;
  - Offering early mediation between landlord and tenant reduces the stressors that might provoke a landlord to resort to criminal action.

*Tertiary prevention: containing the harm of criminal landlordism and preventing re-offending*

- This level of intervention seeks to incapacitate entrenched criminal landlords, to 'reduce their rewards', and ensure that they cannot benefit from their actions:
  - Hard enforcement and asset control, using measures such as interim management orders and banning orders to remove assets from the landlord's control;
  - Post-enforcement monitoring to prevent landlords from re-entering the market using new business/ownership structures;
  - A focus on victim recovery to empower the tenant, for example, through supporting tenant claims for Rent Repayment Orders. A focus on victim support reframes cultures around the 'inevitability' of a shadow PRS, signalling to landlords that active efforts are being made to protect the welfare and rights of tenants letting at the bottom end of the market.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

This report presents findings from a multi-method ESRC-funded project exploring criminal landlordism in the English private rented sector. The range of criminal behaviours that occur in the context of letting arrangements was first explored in the 2020 report *Journeys in the Shadow Private Rented Sector*. The ESRC project, for the first time, drew together a team with expertise in criminology, housing policy, and housing law. This report applies frameworks that are more familiar in criminology and policing to suggest new ways to understand landlord-perpetrated crime and frameworks for intervention.

## 1.2 Background

The private rented sector (PRS) accommodates around 19 per cent of all households in England.<sup>3</sup> The PRS is associated with problems relating to poor quality property conditions and management practices. These have been attributed to the 'amateur' nature of landlordism, reflecting the high proportion of landlords who do not let property full time and who let perhaps just a single property. However, since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, successive policy interventions have identified 'rogue landlords', 'who let out substandard homes and make tenants' lives a misery'<sup>4</sup>, and 'flout their legal obligations'.<sup>5</sup> Established in April 2018, a 'Rogue Landlord Database' permits local authorities to add to a published list of landlords and letting agents who have been convicted of banning order offences or received two or more financial penalties in respect of a banning order offence.

In 2020, the London charity Safer Renting produced the report *Journeys in the Shadow Private Rented Sector*, which recognised links between rentals at lowest end of the market and landlords actively engaging in criminal behaviour. This behaviour included a willingness to disregard statutory obligations in relation to property quality, overcrowding, and tenancy law. Illegal eviction was commonplace. Actions also included elements of serious criminality including use of rented property for cannabis farming and to support modern slavery and trafficking. The government white paper *A Fairer Private Rented Sector*, published in June 2022, made extensive reference to 'criminal landlords', with behaviours including 'scam lettings, frequent use of illegal eviction, harassment, thefts, threats of violence and extreme overcrowding'.<sup>6</sup> The paper signalled the intention to support local authorities in their efforts to tackle criminal landlordism by introducing a 'property portal' or landlord register to capture information on compliant landlords and so focus attention on non-compliance, and to increase the level of fines for Category 1 hazards. The White Paper also promised abolition of Section 21 of the Housing Act 1988, which permits landlords to give notice to tenants without specifying a reason. For many commentators, 'no-fault eviction' constitutes a primary reason for tenant failure to complain since doing so would risk loss of their home. Arguably, in

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<sup>3</sup> English Housing Survey 2022-23: Headline Report, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/english-housing-survey-2022-to-2023-headline-report>, accessed 28 Oct 2025.

<sup>4</sup> 'New funding to crack down on rogue landlords and tackle "beds in sheds"', <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-funding-to-crack-down-on-rogue-landlords-and-tackle-beds-in-sheds>, accessed 28 Oct 2025.

<sup>5</sup> MHCLG (2016) 'Database of rogue landlords and property agents under the Housing and Planning Act 2016', [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5ac63a19e5274a5adc960cf1/Database\\_of\\_rogue\\_landlords\\_statutory\\_guidance.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5ac63a19e5274a5adc960cf1/Database_of_rogue_landlords_statutory_guidance.pdf), accessed 14 Nov 2025.

<sup>6</sup> DLUHC (2022) *A Fairer Private Rented Sector*, Department of Levelling-up, Housing and Communities, 19.

strengthening tenant rights, this measure aimed to give tenants themselves sufficient confidence to challenge poor management practice.

Measures proposed by the white paper were initially introduced in Conservative 'Renters Reform Bill' and were further adapted by the Labour Government's Renters' Rights Act, passed in October 2025. Box 1.1 summarises the measures that are relevant to task of tackling criminal landlordism.

**Box 1.1 *Renters Rights Act 2025: measures to tackle criminal landlordism***

*From 27 December 2025*

- Local authorities will be given new investigatory powers to inspect properties, demand documents and access data to 'crack down on rogue landlords and enforce housing standards more effectively';

*From 1<sup>st</sup> May 2026*

- The scope of civil penalties will be expanded; local authorities must report on their enforcement activities; rent repayment orders will be extended to superior landlords with the maximum penalty doubled and repeat offenders required to pay the maximum amount;

*From late 2026*

- Introduction of the PRS Database: signing up will be mandatory, and require landlords to include their contact details and property details;

*From 2028*

- Introduction of the PRS Ombudsman: landlords will be obliged to join the scheme, which will 'support landlords with tools, guidance and training on handling complaints from tenants early'; and

*From c.2035*

- All privately rented property will be required to meet the Decent Homes Standard.<sup>7</sup>

This report will include some reflections on the degree to which the proposed measures will constitute an effective intervention to tackle landlord-perpetrated crime in the PRS.

### 1.3 Methodology: the ESRC criminal landlord project

The ESRC Criminal Landlord report was conceived following the production of *Journeys in the Shadow Private Rented Sector*, and has drawn together academic expertise in housing policy, housing law, policing and criminology. The project worked with staff from Safer Renting, which supports tenants who have been subject to criminal landlord behaviour. The work began in April 2023 and finished in December 2025.

The project was delivered in five interconnected work packages (WPs).

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<sup>7</sup> MHCLG (2025) *Implementing the Renters' Rights Act 2025: our roadmap for reforming the private rented sector*, MHCLG.

- **Understand criminal behaviour (WP1):** found out more about the criminal behaviours that are linked to letting property and explored police responses to landlord-perpetrated criminality.
- **Examine and learn from the most effective solutions (WP2):** a range of different agencies is involved in policing the PRS. The work package explored how multiple agencies worked together to tackle landlord-perpetrated criminality. This WP disseminated best practice via online webinars.
- **Housing justice (WP3):** used interviews and a case study method to explore the decisions made by local authorities taking legal action under their housing powers, and progress made in terms of prosecution. This strand also considered the sentencing decisions made by magistrates and the First Tier Property Tribunal and analysed Ministry of Justice prosecutions data.
- **Supporting victims of landlord criminality (WP4):** worked with housing charities to arriving at a better understanding of tenant experience of criminal landlord behaviour.
- **Reviewing the operation of the Protection from Eviction Act (WP5):** working with the London charity Safer Renting, this package considered the scale of illegal eviction, its impact on tenants, and on the effectiveness of the Protection from Eviction Act 1977.

Full details of the methods used in each work package are given in Appendix 1. Findings for the project are presented in four grey reports.<sup>8</sup>

This report draws together findings from all work packages and draws principally on qualitative interview material from the police, local authority officers in various capacities; landlords who were aware that they had committed illegal or potentially illegal acts; and tenants who had experienced landlord criminality. The data also draws on accounts of landlord criminality reported in specialist and national media. Within this report, statutory agency interviewees are defined by officer type – for example, ‘PSH’ (private sector housing) – and a code relating to their local authority area; policing interview respondents are coded in a similar way. Landlord interviewees are simply designated Landlord 1-16, and Safer Renting material is defined in terms of an anonymised set of initials and ‘Safer Renting interview’ for the interviews and ‘Safer Renting case’ where the report draws on anonymised case studies collated from Safer Renting case workers.

## 1.4 Criminology and landlord-perpetrated crime

This report uses conceptual frameworks that are common within criminology, but which have not been applied within the context of landlord enforcement. This approach suggests that different modes of criminality are evidence in the PRS which suggests that effective strategy rests on deploying a suite of interventions.

- Defining criminal landlords, criminal landlord behaviours and the shadow PRS can contribute to better targeted policy interventions (chapter 2);
- Understanding the PRS as ‘criminogenic space’ directs attention towards the circumstances in which crime flourishes in the PRS (chapter 3);

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<sup>8</sup> X. L’Hoiry, G. Page, L. Parton, J. Rugg & G. Antonopoulos (2025) *Criminal landlords and the shadow private rented sector in England*, University of York; J. Carr, K. Colliver, C. Hunter, I. Langdale, B. Reeve-Lewis, J. Rugg, D. Scully & R. Spencer (2025) *Are the English civil and criminal remedies for harassment and illegal eviction fit for purpose?* York; L. O’Malley, L. Parton & J. Rugg (2025) *Landlord-perpetrated tenant abuse in the English private rented sector*, University of York; K. Colliver & C. Hunter (2025) *Enforcement against slum landlords in England*, University of York.

- The 'techniques of neutralisation' that are offered by individuals to excuse their criminal activity can be recognised and undermined (chapter 4); and
- Situational prevention contributes a framework for exploring strategic options for tackling landlord crime (chapter 5).

## 1.5 Conclusion

Explanations of poor landlord practices in the private rented sector have been framed in various ways, reflecting the fact that many landlords do not let property full-time and may be managing just one letting. In recent years there has been a marked acknowledgement that landlords who are prepared to engage in active criminality are now in evidence in the market. This report bringing together expertise relating to criminology, policing, housing policy and housing law and reflects on findings from a large-scale exercise that has included interviews with various types of local authority officer, police also operating at various levels, landlords who have been engaged in non-compliant behaviour and tenants who have been the victims of landlord crime. The report draws on concepts that are more routinely deployed within criminology to apply new frameworks for understanding landlord crime, and for devising effective intervention strategy.

## 2. Criminal landlord, criminal landlord behaviours and the shadow private rented sector

### 2.1 Introduction

One obstacle with dealing with criminality in the PRS is confusion around terminology and intent. The concept of 'rogue landlord' has a great deal of currency but lacks clear definition. This means that policy interventions can become muddled. The weight of qualitative work undertaken for this project reflects the value in defining criminal landlords, criminal landlord behaviours and the shadow private rented sector. Definitions can create clarity around possible policy responses and frontline interventions. This chapter draws on qualitative fieldwork from across the ESRC project but also includes references to successful prosecutions that have appeared in national or local news outlets.

### 2.2 Criminal landlords and letting agents

Criminal landlords can be defined in terms of three key characteristics:

- Willingness to break the law routinely;
- Operating with no regard for tenant welfare;
- Awareness of criminality expressed through deployment of tactics to frustrate detection or prosecution.

For one private sector housing professional, criminal landlords were morally compromised and so likely to be involved in more than one type of criminality: '*they don't know the boundaries, do they?*' [PSH-IJl01]. Interviews with police indicated that they associated multiple types of criminality with private renting. Two respondents, who worked within Regional Organised Crime Units, were involved with several agencies tackling crime in the sector and mentioned benefit fraud which included multiple claims made from a single address; mortgage fraud; brothels; cannabis farming; renting associated with trafficking; and money laundering.

#### *Slum landlords*

All local authorities in the case study area reported serial-problem landlords who were 'familiar names' to local authority enforcement staff.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that slum landlordism is endemic in the PRS. Slum landlordism is a way of working that combines multiple practices including:

- No or limited investment in essential repairs or routine maintenance
- Maximising rent through overcrowding
- Attracting tenants through word of mouth
- Collecting rent informally, often accepting cash only
- No/no legal supporting documentation for the tenancy
- Focus on vulnerable tenants who are less likely to complain

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<sup>9</sup> K. Colliver & C. Hunter (2025) *Enforcement against slum landlords in England*, University of York.

- Frequent recourse to harassment and illegal eviction to end tenancies<sup>10</sup>
- Coercive control of tenants to deter their contacting the authorities<sup>11</sup>
- Tolerance of criminal activity in properties
- Sufficient knowledge of the law to apply evasive techniques
- Engaging in vexatious appeals to discourage prosecution
- Possible links to organised crime.

## Box 2.2: Slum landlords

### 'Landlord prosecuted over dangerous property'

This prosecution involved a Bridlington landlord, who was charged with breaching a prohibition order. The local environmental health team had served the order following an inspection in April 2022 which found a broken central heating and hot water system, faulty electronics, mould and damp and a partially collapsed ceiling. The tenants were a couple who had five children. The landlord had relet the property following the inspection in 2023, without dealing with any of the hazards. According to the local housing sector manager, 'the landlord knowingly put people back into the property and then charged them rent, despite the serious dangers within it'.<sup>12</sup>

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### 'Sheffield rogue landlord who rented out "dangerous homes" banned'

A Sheffield landlord was prosecuted in 2021 for multiple failures to comply with improvement notices. His properties were characterised in terms of 'gross neglect' including inadequate fire protection, unsafe electrics, and rodent infestation. One property had been served with a prohibition order but tenants still living there one month later, with no improvements completed. In commenting on the case, a local councillor stated that the landlord

shows a blatant disregard for the law and in doing so, puts the lives of his tenants at risk. He often attracts tenants who don't tend to complain even though they are living in very poor housing conditions. We have given him very reasonable timescales to complete work but these have been ignored, leaving us no other choice than to pursue action through the courts.<sup>13</sup>

In 2023, the same landlord was added to the Rogue Landlord database and served with a banning order for ten years following further prosecution by Sheffield City Council. Despite multiple interventions, the landlord had continued to let substandard properties. According to the Council,

<sup>10</sup> J. Carr, K. Colliver, C. Hunter, I. Langdale, B. Reeve-Lewis, J. Rugg, D. Scully & R. Spencer (2025) *Are the English civil and criminal remedies for harassment and illegal eviction fit for purpose?* University of York.

<sup>11</sup> L. O'Malley, L. Parton & J. Rugg (2025) *Landlord-perpetrated tenant abuse in the English private rented sector*, University of York.

<sup>12</sup> G. Norwood (2024) 'Landlord prosecuted over dangerous property', *Landlord Today*, 10 Apr, accessed 18 Aug 2025.

<sup>13</sup> C. Lewis (2021) 'Sheffield landlord prosecuted for risking lives of tenants', *The Star*, 20 Mar, accessed 18 Aug 2025.

'his properties were some of the most dangerous properties ever seen by the council's enforcement staff'.<sup>14</sup>

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Prosecution case BCB-F related to the landlord of a property that had been illegally converted into eight separate flats. The council had been contacted by a tenant of one of the flats, because the water supply to the flat had been discontinued. This matter was itself a relatively easy issue to resolve, but on inspection all the flats in the property revealed multiple deficiencies. The landlord had been known to the authorities for over 20 years. Over the last five years the same landlord had received thirty improvement notices, plus notices served against informal notices. He was well-known for the poor standard of his properties: cockroaches were common, as was damp and mould and lack of attention to fire safety. The landlord tended to target tenants who had drug and alcohol dependencies.

It is not possible to be categorical about the circumstances in which an individual becomes a slum landlord. They may construe exploitation as 'canny' working practices and regard themselves as entrepreneurs. In some cases, they might have built up a portfolio over many years but find letting in the mainstream market problematic because of the location and condition of their properties. However, lack of effective sanction means that their practices can remain unchallenged, despite being well known to enforcement authorities.

Academics writing on criminal landlord practice in Europe have defined behaviour known as 'milking' properties.<sup>15</sup> This means that property is let in very poor condition, with no intention of attending to essential maintenance or repairs, whilst aiming to extract maximum rental return often through letting the property as an HMO and then overcrowding the HMO. This project has found that landlords are often able to retain long-term tenants in generally appalling conditions through use of coercive tactics and threat, targeting tenants who have limited access to the mainstream PRS.<sup>16</sup> Local authority practices to tackle slum landlordism are also considered in an associated report.<sup>17</sup>

### *Scam landlords*

Scam landlords were more likely to be involved in fraudulent activity. Some scammers defraud would-be tenants who have paid deposits for properties viewed online. This type of scam falls outside the purview of this project, since the perpetrator does not even need to own property to commit this kind of fraud.

In this report, a more relevant type of scam involves rent-to-rent models. A tenant might rent a property from a legitimate landlord for single-household occupancy and then re-let the property either for single use or more commonly for shared use. The mesne tenant presents themselves to the tenant as the landlord and does not inform the actual landlord of this arrangement. This kind of scam can also be perpetrated by letting agents and tends to exploit absentee landlords who are not on hand to undertake property inspections. It also exploits tenants

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<sup>14</sup> BBC News (2023) 'Sheffield rogue landlord who rented out "dangerous" homes banned', 3 Oct, accessed 18 Aug 2025.

<sup>15</sup> M. Aalbers (2006) "'When the banks withdraw, slum landlords take over": the structuration of neighbourhood decline through redlining, drug dealing, speculation and immigrant exploitation', *Urban Studies*, 43:7, 14061-1086.

<sup>16</sup> O'Malley *et al.*, *Landlord-perpetrated tenant abuse*, 19-20.

<sup>17</sup> Colliver & Hunter, *Enforcement against slum landlords*.



who may be overcrowded in the rent-to-rent properties that have been illegally and unsafely converted to HMO use, and which are often not licensed. Tenants face obfuscation in attempts to contact the 'real' landlord where issues occur in relation to repairs or maintenance.

### **Box 2.3 Scam landlords – rent-to-rent**

#### **'Cunning criminal landlord gang must pay approaching half a million'**

In March 2023 it was reported that eight criminal landlords, operating as five individuals and three companies, had been fined £434,000 for multiple offences under the Housing Acts. The individuals claimed they were seeking single-property lets and had used false ID to secure accommodation from high-street letting agents. The properties were then converted into HMOs, and the criminals used company structures to handle rent payments between the tenants, themselves and the legitimate owners. The gang created fourteen HMOs. All were unlicensed and contained multiple breaches including fire safety. The District Judge remarked that this had been 'a deliberate, large-scale operation of falsity and that the defendants broke safety laws with no regard to the safety of the tenants, engineered solely for financial gain and profit'.<sup>18</sup>

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Safer Renting interview BT had been living in a three-bed flat, sharing a kitchen and bathroom with two men. It had been advertised on Gumtree and, online, looked to be quite modern – '*It seemed like I'd got a bargain*'. Once she moved in, she realised that the property was mice-infested and in poor repair. She eventually complained about the property to the council, and the landlord gave her two weeks' notice. She told the landlord that she was entitled to 28 days' notice but was told that she had a lodger's agreement and so that did not apply. However, the landlord did not live in the property, so BT could not be a lodger. It transpired that the 'landlord' was in fact a tenant, who had secured the two-bed flat from a landlord but then let it out as a three-bed HMO whilst living elsewhere. The owner of the property had agreed that the tenant could let out the spare room but not turn the flat into an HMO. The scam landlord forcibly evicted all the tenants in the property by smashing up the bathroom.

### *Criminal letting agents*

Many tenants will seek to protect themselves from poor management practice by using a letting agent rather than letting from the landlord directly. However, criminal behaviour also extends to letting agents, who might routinely contravene the Tenant Fees Act 2019, commit other kinds of fraudulent crimes or are complicit in the activities of criminal landlords. Criminal letting agents may present in sophisticated ways, operating from shop fronts or online, and are often prepared to phoenix in and out of different ownership models to frustrate detection and prosecution. Tenant experiences indicated that letting agents were frequently involved in aspects of tenant abuse. For example, one of the ESRC local authority prosecution cases – HIH-H – involved an individual with developmental difficulties, and who had a slum landlord. This landlord's practices were clearly well-

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<sup>18</sup> G. Norwood (2023) 'Cunning criminal landlord gang must pay approaching half a million', *Landlord Today*, accessed 12 Nov 2025.

known to the letting agent he used; both the landlord and the letting agent were requiring the tenant to make cash payments additional to their rent.<sup>19</sup>

Landlords often act as letting agents and vice versa, and there were instances where these roles were variously played by different family members. Blurring lines in terms of responsibility created uncertainty for tenants. One example of collusion is included in Box 2.4.

#### **Box 2.4 Criminal letting agents**

##### **'Rogue landlord who conned more than 100 tenants jailed and ordered to pay back £100,000'**

Tahir Khaliq was in fact a letting agent who had several letting agency firms in Bury. He showed multiple tenants the same property and required them to pay a holding deposit of £200-£400 to reserve the property. He kept the holding deposits, claiming that tenants had failed their credit checks. Tarique and his associate Paul Dickinson also perpetrated several insurance frauds, submitting claims for works that had been done at a fraction of the cost being claimed. Kaliq and Dickinson also collected rentals from over 100 properties which they then failed to pass on to the landlord. Kaliq was jailed for 45 months. Dickinson's defence lawyer claimed that Dickinson 'was paid a relatively modest salary and did more or less what he was told. He did not just engage in what he thought at the time was "sharp business practices", he now accepts that he crossed that line into criminality'.<sup>20</sup>

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Safer Renting interview BM2 was subject to collusion between the letting agent and the landlord. He had found a room in a shared house on the website Spare Room and paid three months up-front to move in. He was sent a rudimentary contract: *'there was no other paperwork, no how to rent guide or the sort of things you'd expect, like the energy stuff, none of that'*. There was serious overcrowding: nine people were living in a seven-bed HMO. The kitchen had several broken items including the washing machine and microwave. BM2 complained repeatedly to the letting agent over the course of a few weeks and was eventually given two weeks' notice. BM2 told the letting agent that this was not legal. A 'representative' of the letting agent visited the property and told BM2 that there had been a serious leak in an upper floor, and he needed to remove his belongings immediately. BM2 returned later to discover that the locks had been changed. The letting agent's representative had in fact been the landlord.

#### *Links to organised crime groups*

Each of these kinds of criminal landlord and letting agent may in some instances be linked to organised crime groups (OCGs). OCGs operating in the PRS include British indigenous actors as well as foreign nationals. Practitioners in the Yorkshire and the Humber region identified a rapid and significant growth in the presence of Western Balkan OCG nominals who tend to be involved in drug-related criminality, specifically cannabis cultivation in the PRS. OCGs were also involved in

<sup>19</sup> O'Malley *et al.*, *Landlord-perpetrated tenant abuse*.

<sup>20</sup> C. Riches (2017) 'Rogue landlord who conned more than 100 tenants jailed and ordered to pay back £1000,000', 8 Feb, accessed 14 Nov 2025.

sexual exploitation and financial fraud including mortgage and benefit fraud. OCGs are highly adept at identifying suitable targets to facilitate their criminal activities. OCGs can work in collaboration with other actors including letting agencies, landlords, and other OCGs. For example, Regional Organised Crime interviewee considered viewed letting agents as 'professional enablers' of cannabis farming:

*I'm sure there will be professional enablers in the letting agencies that will be assisting because greed takes over, doesn't it? Also, I'm sure we've got letting agencies that have been set up just based on this kind of business [POLMANo3].*

OCGs also engage in forms of exploitation of landlords, having identified points of vulnerability such as financial hardship or poor landlord/letting practices. In some cases, landlords and OCGs may appear to be working together but closer examination of specific circumstances may reveal that OCGs are simply exploiting a landlord's 'amateurish' practices or – more simply – greed:

*I don't know for sure, but I doubt people go into it because you don't have that knowledge initially when you start, I don't think people go into it thinking let's set this up for criminality purposes. I don't believe that. I've not come across that.[...], I think they see it as an opportunity to... a quick buck. They might dally with one, might try one - that worked. Okay, so we're ten grand up this year. Well, let's keep them going a bit longer. It might be the same one, on the second cycle. Got away with it, wasn't that bad, was it. What would two look like? I think it's like that. I think it literally is, it's partly greed, it's partly risk and reward [POLMANo7].*

The landlord then finds it difficult to extricate their involvement with the OCG, who would expand their operations across the landlord's portfolio:

*Now the vast majority what we did were landlords or terraced housing. We saw patterns where several of these houses were taken over. You might have a landlord that might have, in one case, 70. So like 20 of these houses had been taken over by Albanian OCGs or OCGs, growers from various nationalities. They would basically pay a rent. A lot of it was cash. They'd make a very good go of it. Some occasions, it would be not just one grow, it would be multiple grows, at multiple times [POLMANo7].*

Some OCGs are highly adaptable and may engage in diversification of criminal activities, at times responding to market opportunities or other circumstances. For instance, the same property may alternately be used as a 'pop-up brothel' or for the purposes of cannabis cultivation based on a desire to switch from high visibility activities, such as customers coming and going to a pop-up brothel, to low visibility activities such as trafficking or benefit fraud including fraudulent exempt accommodation arrangements (see Box 2.5).

OCGs leverage their reputations to ensure that local residents do not report concerns to police and local authorities. In some, albeit limited, instances, OCGs are described as operating monopolies of sorts by amassing large portfolios of properties in specific locales, allowing them some level of control of private rental markets. This means residents and prospective tenants are reluctant to report OCG activity to authorities for fear of being 'locked out' of local private rental markets, risking homelessness.

In many instances, OCGs operating in the PRS will keep a low profile to be deemed as non-problematic in the eyes of local communities. For instance, OCGs using several properties for the purposes of cannabis cultivation in the same locality will operate with relatively low visibility, avoiding violent or other conflict with residents, and ensuring that rent is paid on time to landlords

who are often complicit with this activity. Low visibility acts as a protective factor against possible reports to police.

#### **Box 2.4 Landlord and letting agent links to organised crime groups**

##### **'How the police took down the "Breaking Bad" landlord at the centre of a massive Hull drugs ring'**

Local newspapers in February 2024 reported the prosecution of Jeremy Southgate, a property landlord who was jailed for eleven years for allowing an 'Albanian organised crime group' to use properties that he owned for cannabis farming. The operation was obscured by Southgate's creation of 'ghost tenants'. Southgate operated a letting agency, 'Anderson Estates', which used fake property images to give the impression of legitimate operation. In actuality, he was purchasing properties cheaply at auction, creating fake tenancies, and turning properties over for cannabis cultivation. The properties were managed by an Albanian national, who used illegal migrants as farmers. Southgate was aware of the possibility of discovery, and *'did everything he could to evade the law at every step of the way'*. In defence, Southgate stated that he had simply provided property to the group.<sup>21</sup>

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##### **'Harrogate guest house owner Yoko Banks ordered to repay £140,000 for role in half-a-million-pound cannabis racket'**

In August, 2021, Harrogate landlord Yoko Banks was prosecuted for *'being concerned with the production of cannabis'*. She had let three properties to a drugs gang, with the expectation of 'significant profit'. The property had been let to an intermediary and then sublet to the gang's leader. Investigating Banks' role in the cannabis production had been obscured by the *'complex web'* of her ownership of property and assets, and a failure to cooperate with investigation. It was estimated that she had netted £142,300 from the arrangement. It is notable that she had previous convictions for health and safety offences.<sup>22</sup>

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##### **'Crime leader who recruited illegal workers to clean at Sainsbury's jailed'**

In August 2023, the government website reported that Momodou Chune had been jailed for six years for counts of assisting unlawful immigration and concealing criminal property. He had abused his position in a contract cleaning firm to profiteer from the exploitation of 40 illegal workers, mainly from West Africa. Chune knew that the individuals had no right to work in the UK and had their wages paid directly into his own bank account. He accommodated the workers in his own HMOs and deducted rent from their wages: one individual was paid £250 a month in cash but charged £220 a month in rent.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.hulldailymail.co.uk/news/hull-east-yorkshire-news/how-police-took-down-breaking-9082680>, accessed 1 Sep 2025.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.harrogateadvertiser.co.uk/news/crime/harrogate-guest-house-owner-yoko-banks-ordered-to-repay-ps140000-for-role-in-half-a-million-pound-cannabis-racket-3979215>, accessed 1 Sep 2025.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/crime-leader-who-recruited-illegal-workers-to-clean-at-sainsburys-jailed>, accessed 1 Sep 2025.

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Two police officers operating in the Yorkshire and the Humber region reported that they had worked on a team investigating cannabis grows in their area. They came across an individual landlord who had over 100 properties across two local authority areas, and around 30 of these were found to be cannabis farms. The officers regarded the landlord as complicit in the farming because his practice was so poor that it attracted criminal behaviour:

*I interviewed him and I was very much of the opinion that whilst he was somewhat complicit, there was more evidence that he was suffering the property to be utilised for the production of a controlled drug because he was a crap landlord. He talked about how he would pull up on a street one day and people would just come out of the properties with cash in hand as their rent and sometimes he wouldn't know who these people were and he'd have to ask them what property they were paying rent to him for and he was giving accounts of poor vetting. I think he was giving accounts of no, little to no, tenancy visits, poor tenancy agreements, and he was just effectively a rogue landlord [POLFL05 & POLFL06].*

#### **Box 2.5 Exempt/supported accommodation**

The supply of supported accommodation can be linked with organised criminality. Supported accommodation is a mode of housing in which multiple individuals with support needs are placed in HMOs where the housing provider either contracts with another agency to deliver support or provides support themselves. Housing benefit is exempt from caps in these circumstances. Almost all the local authorities in the case study region mentioned that exempt accommodation in their area was problematic in terms of fraud, since landlords were simply not delivering support. In 2022, the House of Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee report on exempt accommodation included written evidence West Midlands Police indicating that organised crime groups had become involved in supplying exempt accommodation as a lucrative exercise, a means of laundering money and to further exploit highly vulnerable tenants.<sup>24</sup>

Safer Renting cases included a group of eight young women who had been living in two houses provided by a company purporting to be an exempt accommodation provider. The arrangement had come to the notice of the local authority as part of another fraud investigation, and it was found that the provider was a known OCG: *'they used to have multiple sorts of criminal activity but they settled on supported accommodation because obviously it's the most profitable of any kind of exploitation'*. The supplier was claiming £1,500 a month for each tenant but providing no support at all. The local authority suspended the housing benefit payments. All the tenants were illegally evicted.

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<sup>24</sup> House of Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee (2025) *Exempt accommodation*, HC21.

## 2.3 Criminal landlord behaviours

Not all landlords who contravene housing regulations are regarded as 'rogue' landlords. The fact that generally compliant landlords sometimes break the law creates problems for local authority enforcement officers. Environmental health officers distinguished between landlord types:

*You might have individuals who commit one-off offenses like failure to licence. They may be unaware or decided to chance their luck in not licensing their property and we catch them and impose a penalty. That'll be in the range of £3,000 to £6,000. They'll pay it and move on. Their properties are generally in good condition. The alternative to that are people who are breaching improvement notices. In some cases they'll have been given the chance to do the work informally. Then it goes to formal enforcement and they still don't comply [PSH-MNM01].*

Non-compliance might be evident amongst landlords for reasons of

- inexperience;
- lack of awareness of the relevant legislation;
- being poorly advised; or
- lacking the finance to complete required works.

In these circumstances, certain types of punitive response can seem disproportionate, given a landlord's intention to operate in the right way. A more appropriate response might be 'soft' enforcement measures that direct landlords to legal practices. PSH officers were of the view that many landlords who are inadvertently guilty of criminal landlord behaviours quickly comply once their contravention comes to the notice of the authorities. A great deal of policy intervention has been directed towards steering these 'mostly compliant' landlords towards full compliance. Indeed, a recent contribution to this debate has suggested that 'social censure can act as a disciplinary mechanism' to landlords 'tempted to offer substandard accommodation'.<sup>25</sup>

Classic criminological literature may refer to these types of criminal landlords as 'drifting' between compliant behaviour and – temporarily – criminal behaviour. The concept of drift was developed by David Matza to account for individuals who temporarily suspend law abiding values to engage in criminal acts, before returning to law abiding lives but potentially in the future again engaging in occasional criminal activities.<sup>26</sup> For Matza, such individuals are therefore not committed criminals but individuals who engage in criminal acts intermittently or sporadically while leading otherwise law-abiding lives. Matza proposed that the temporary state of drifting occurs when social controls which usually elicit compliant behaviours weaken, giving individuals a sense of temporary freedom to break the law. Other factors may coalesce such as situational opportunity which will also support occasional law breaking.

Though Matza's work focused on youth delinquency, there are notable parallels in his conceptualisation of drift to the behaviours of and accounts offered by landlords in this study. Almost all the landlords who were interviewed asserted that – in their day-to-day lives – they would never consider breaking the law, although they were able to rationalise their law-breaking within the specific context of letting property. In drifting between law abiding and criminal behaviours, Matza argued that individuals may rationalise their law breaking by drawing on a series of

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<sup>25</sup> A. Earley, A. Marsh and K. Gibb (2025) 'The policy and politics of improving standards in the English private rented sector', *The Political Quarterly*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13572>, acc. 18 Aug 2025.

<sup>26</sup> D. Matza (1964) *Delinquency and Drift*. New York: Wiley

techniques of neutralisation which help them to avoid identifying as criminals and instead see themselves as individuals somehow placed in circumstances which led to them breaking the law. Such deployment of techniques of neutralisation by landlords was evident in their accounts (see Chapter 4).

Individuals who break the law in the course of their landlordism but are not considered to be slum landlords may be viewed as existing on a spectrum from accidental law breakers to reluctant and/or occasional law breakers. Accidental law breakers may have inadvertently breached some form of regulation and, having been alerted to this, remedied the issue immediately. Occasional and/or reluctant law breakers may be aware of their criminal behaviour but will rationalise that exigent circumstances caused the law breaking to occur, as opposed to a personal moral failure. This might include landlords who might engage in criminal activity as a temporary or expedient measure because they would otherwise not be able to continue operating in the market. For example, one landlord justified their use of illegal eviction because it had started to become unclear whether the property was occupied by the original tenant (Landlord 16). Another landlord failed to report a tenant's drug-related criminality to police and undertook an illegal eviction on the basis that the lost rental income resulting from waiting for a police investigation and court proceedings would jeopardise their capacity to continue operating in the PRS (Landlord 10). In a third case, a landlord engaged in tax fraud relating to rental income due to difficult economic circumstances which impacted the financial viability of their letting practices (Landlord 15). These landlords were clearly of the view that they were operating in a grey area where their actions had a moral justification (see chapter 4).

However, it remains the case that, although a particular landlord might not operate as a slum landlord – in knowingly operating poor quality property and having no intention to comply with the law – isolated incidents of non-compliance can still amount to serious harm in a tenant's experience. A landlord who has inadvertently served an illegal notice to quit may well force a tenant out of a property before they are legally obliged to do so. Narratives of tenant abuse and illegal eviction indicate that many tenants will take tenancies they know to be suspect but have little time to make alternative arrangements because they have been given insufficient notice.<sup>27</sup> A landlord who lets property containing Category 1 hazards is delivering the same level of harm to a tenant irrespective of the reason why the landlord has not dealt with those hazards. Understanding criminal landlord behaviours as 'harms' shifts focus from the legalities of the contravention and landlord intentionality to assessing the impact on the tenant. A protracted period without hot water or heating has the same detrimental effect, irrespective of whether the landlord is inept, inexperienced or actively criminal.

The weakening of social controls described by Matza was also evident in landlords' accounts. While Matza's focus on young people saw social controls as related to, among other things, young people's experiences vis-à-vis parental supervision or educational settings, for landlords social control relates to enforcement action undertaken by local authorities and other agencies. As per Matza's vision, where landlords' law breaking was undiscovered or unenforced and social controls therefore loosened, landlords appeared to feel emboldened or more justified in their law breaking. For instance, one landlord who engaged in tax fraud relating to rental income argued that the lack of enforcement gave them the impression they '*weren't doing anything wrong*' and '*really, I think the authorities have bigger things to worry about*' (Landlord 15). Broadly speaking and admittedly from a modest sample size, landlord interviewees whose illegal actions were not discovered or sanctioned were less likely to accept they had broken the law and were more likely to have committed multiple offences. This suggests that the notion of drift is particularly

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<sup>27</sup> Carr et al. *Harassment and illegal eviction*.

salient where landlord illegality is not met with an active policing or prosecution response. This signals to the landlord that there is limited risk in relation to non-compliance, encouraging further acts of illegality and perhaps leading some landlords to develop routinised non-compliance if their contravention was not detected or prosecuted.

## 2.4 The shadow private rented sector

Markets have a buyer, a seller and a product. A shadow market emerges where buyers and sellers are engaged in exchange that is not regarded as legitimate. Shadow markets, whether in the PRS or in the context of other goods and services, operate seamlessly with legitimate markets, often moving in and out of legality by drawing on the same structures and processes as legitimate commercial exchanges. In this sense, binary visions of legal and illegal markets as separate entities may be unhelpful. In the 'shadow' PRS, letting takes place in violation of regulatory obligations that relate to issues such as property condition and tenancy law. For some criminologists, the operation of a shadow or illegal market requires both sides of the exchange be aware that there is legal contravention.<sup>28</sup> However, in the case of renting in the shadow PRS, it might be argued that the tenant's acceptance of illegal operation may reflect a degree of desperation. The property might be offered by the landlord with no investigation in terms of a tenant's right to rent or other references, with payments accepted in cash. Tenants may be 'surprised' that the landlord is being so flexible, but in retrospect feel foolish for being gullible. For example, Safer Renting interview BM2 indicated:

*I was on SpareRoom and just looking for some rooms I could afford and yes, just messaged a bunch of landlords and this one got back to me and accepted my sort of three months up-front payment. Which I guess is, was quite rare, and looking back, it was maybe too good to be true, because they turned out to be very dodgy.*

As with much of landlord-perpetrated criminality, the shadow PRS hides in plain sight, with renting often conducted within the legitimate market. In more detailed research on illegal eviction, it is notable how often tenants accessed properties through legitimate or semi-legitimate market platforms such as Facebook or Gumtree. Legal frameworks are mimicked but subverted, for example, landlords offering tenancy agreements that hide grossly unfair terms and conditions that do not emerge until later in the tenancy.<sup>29</sup>

The importance in recognising the existence of a shadow PRS lies in understanding that exploitation and criminality are standard working practices within this sector. There is a degree to which these practices become expected by tenants as their experience of this part of the market becomes more protracted. This means that enforcement practices that rest on market levers for ensuring compliance lack relevance. For example, the institution of a 'rogue landlord database' presumes that it is feasible for tenants to check to see whether their prospective landlord has a previous conviction, and to choose accordingly. A tenant who has been excluded from the mainstream market will be unlikely to check a rogue database. Criminal landlords will always find tenants.

In some ways, this description of the shadow PRS draws parallels with the shadow-market conditions of people smuggling. Criminals will always find desperate and vulnerable individuals to

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<sup>28</sup> J. Beckert & F. Wehinger (2013) 'In the shadow: illegal markets and economic sociology', *Socio-Economic Review*, 11:1, 5-30.

<sup>29</sup> Carr et al. *Harassment and illegal eviction*.



smuggle across borders because those people are excluded from legitimate pathways. As a result, the power in negotiating terms and conditions weighs heavily in favour of smugglers. Vulnerable individuals are therefore, by virtue of their vulnerability and lack of negotiating power, likely to accept – reluctantly – extremely poor and dangerous conditions in return for the service being offered. While all parties are aware that the exchange is illegal and all parties theoretically consent to the conditions of the exchange, vulnerable people lack genuine agency and power in this relationship due to broader market conditions which place them in desperate need. The core economic principles and market logics are the same in the shadow PRS.

Understanding the shadow PRS using this approach indicates that attempts to regulate the shadow market through actions such as reforming tenancy law are unlikely to be effective. Proposed regulations to strengthen tenant rights operate on the presumption that the landlord is likely to take those rights into account. The regulations also aim to improve market levers that mean tenants are in a better position to choose a good quality landlord, forcing the poorer-quality landlords to improve their practices. However, these regulations are unlikely to impact landlords with no intention of respecting tenant rights and who seek to exploit an expanding pool of marginalised tenants.

## 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has drawn on multiple concepts that are common currency within criminology to offer new approaches to understanding non-compliance in the PRS. There is substantial evidence of active criminality in the sector, and this includes the existence of slum and scam landlords, criminal letting agents, and multiple ways in which organised crime groups working with landlords and letting agents, exploiting these actors or indeed acting as landlords and letting agents themselves. Recognising that some landlords' business models are consciously criminal suggests – as will be seen – that it is appropriate for enforcement agencies to seek stronger penalties that will exclude those actors from the market. This chapter also recognises landlords who 'inadvertently' engage in criminal landlord behaviours, but here it is necessary to be alert to the possibility of 'drift': that a landlord's single contravention does not become habitual infraction. The shadow private rented sector works alongside and even within the mainstream market, borrowing many of its conventions and infrastructure. However, the shadow PRS cannot be controlled by mainstream interventions to support tenants exercising their rights, since landlords in this part of the market have no intention of respecting those rights.

### 3. The PRS as a criminogenic system

#### 3.1 Introduction

Within criminology, the term 'criminogenic' is used to define a system, situation or place that creates affordances for criminal behaviour and is thus likely to cause and sustain criminal behaviour. The use of the term shifts attention away from perpetrators and towards the circumstances in which crimes are committed, inviting a broader understanding of causation. The private rented sector is best understood as a complex system. Multiple aspects of this system contribute factors that either encourage or fail to deter criminality, and these factors often work in conjunction. This compounds difficulties in defining effective solutions to criminality in the PRS. This chapter considers: the letting relationship as a set of opportunities for exploitation; structural affordances which consider the ways in which the housing market creates opportunities for criminality; and lack of deterrence. All these factors contribute to making the PRS a criminogenic environment.

#### 3.2 The private rented sector as a complex system

The complexity of the private rented sector means that most research tends to focus on one aspect only. This report attempts a more holistic approach and views the PRS as a system containing multiple elements. The PRS comprises:

- Multiple sub-markets, each comprised of
- more or less well-defined demand groups (tenants), suppliers (landlords) and letting agents; and with
- characteristics defined by the specifics of the local economy; and where
- letting activities are subject to a range of statutory interventions from government ministries whose agendas do not necessarily align;
- using statutory enforcement agencies operating at national, regional and local levels, where commitment to and resources for enforcement vary markedly; and
- relying on a criminal justice system to deliver appropriate prosecution outcomes.
- Landlord and tenants are supported through a variety of advice agencies and lobby groups that offer guidance on rights and responsibilities.

Multiple niche markets exist in the PRS, where modes of property supply meet tenant need, in particular types of property (e.g. Purpose-Built Student Accommodation); in distinct legislative frameworks (e.g. Asylum Seeker contracts); or with adjustments to standard working practices. This latter market includes the 'housing benefit market', where letting practices accommodate rent payments in arrears rather than – as is more generally the case – in advance. Letting agents are involved in a large minority of lettings, selling letting and management services to landlords across a range of markets.

Within this system, landlordism varies in scale and includes individuals with one property only and large institutional providers with many hundreds of units in different parts of the country. Every local area will have a distinctive rental market, often characterised through reference to rent levels, property types, and its mix of specialised demand/supply niche markets. Very often, markets are often judged in terms of the degree to which demand exceeds supply.

The priorities of governance are set by whichever government is in power. Governments deploy resources in directions reflecting its manifesto commitments. Governance of the market takes place

at multiple levels, and relates to areas including the legalities of letting, its commercial nature, property conditions, management standards and finance. This spread of responsibility means that governance is delivered by several ministries with various policy focuses, as indicated in Table 3.1.

*Table 3.1: Governance of the private rented sector*

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government	Local authorities including combined authorities	<i>Environmental Health</i> Enforcement activity relating to housing standards
		<i>Homelessness</i> Role of the PRS in causing or alleviating housing need
		<i>Planning</i> Controlling/promoting housing supply to meet local need
Ministry of Justice	Judiciary and the courts	Issuing possession orders; prosecution of criminal and civil offences
Home Office	Police forces	Upholding criminal law including the Protection from Eviction Act
	Immigration Office	'Right to Rent' regulation
	Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority	Labour exploitation
	Fire Service	Fire safety in rental properties
Department for Work and Pensions	Universal Credit	Housing allowances to support rent payments
His Majesty's Revenues and Customs	Central taxation system	Taxation system

Many different agencies are responsible for intervening in the PRS with regulatory intent. At the local level, there are multiple statutory agencies whose responsibilities include dealing with crime in the PRS, either directly or tangentially. Each agency gives a different level of priority to tackling criminal behaviour in the PRS, depending on levels of statutory responsibility. Criminality in terms of failure to comply with housing regulations that define property and management standards are largely the responsibility of local authorities' private sector housing teams. Enforcement styles vary between local authorities reflecting different attitudes towards the effectiveness of hard-line versus more collaborative approaches.<sup>30</sup> These approaches will themselves reflect the configuration of problematic landlord behaviours in a local authority area and political decisions on resource commitment. Not every local authority will have a dedicated Private Sector Housing team: for more rural authorities, responsibility for PRS enforcement can be one component of a broader environmental health workload.

Criminal behaviour within the PRS also sits under the purview of Trading Standards, which operates as specialised national teams including the National Trading Standards Estate and Letting

<sup>30</sup> See e.g. T. Simcock, & N. Mykkanen (2018) *The postcode lottery of local authority enforcement in the PRS*, RLA PEARL; J. Harris, D. Cowan & A. Marsh (2020), *Improving compliance with private rented sector legislation: local authority regulation and enforcement*, UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence; Colliver & Hunter, *Enforcement against slum landlords*.

Agent Team. Trading Standards establishes national priorities for its activities and these frame the level of concentration given to housing-related offences. Trading Standards is responsible for enforcing against letting agents who non-compliant with the Tenant Fees Act 2019.

The Protection from Eviction Act 1977 gives the police have direct PRS-related responsibility. Under this Act, harassment and illegal eviction are defined as criminal behaviours that, in extreme cases, could result in a prison sentence. More generally, Community Safety Partnerships draw together local authority and police resources to tackle local issues such as neighbourhood criminality and anti-social behaviour. Specialist policing units tackle crimes including cannabis farming and modern slavery. Regional Organised Crime Units will focus on crimes perpetrated by organised crime groups. Privately rented properties can facilitate crime, and letting property can be a means of laundering the proceeds of crime.

Other agencies involved in regulating and prosecuting behaviours where letting is a tangential element include the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA) and the Immigration Service. The GLAA 'works in partnership to protect vulnerable and exploited workers'.<sup>31</sup> The workers protected under the GLAA are often in industries where accommodation is offered alongside work. This accommodation can be overcrowded and/or generally unsuitable for human habitation which means that such properties sometimes come to the attention of private sector housing teams. Within this framework of enforcement, the individuals responsible for labour exploitation are rarely regarded as landlords. Immigration Enforcement also holds responsibility for tackling labour exploitation where victims are migrants who may have been trafficked into the country. Little information is available about the number of undocumented migrants who are currently living in rental arrangements, and who may have used falsified documents to secure a tenancy.

Criminal landlord behaviour also relates to the infringement of financial regulation, including money laundering, tax evasion and benefit fraud. HMRC will be responsible for investigating tax evasion, which will generally relate to landlords and letting agents. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has responsibility for investigating the incidence of benefit fraud, which can be perpetrated by either landlords or tenants.

The judicial system plays multiple roles. If a tenant fails to leave a property after due notice has been served, landlord can apply to the courts for a possession order. The First-Tier Tribunal (Property Chamber) deals with disputes relating to improvement notices, licenses for HMOs and applications for rent repayment orders. Both civil and criminal courts will deal with the prosecution of a range of housing-related offenses. The operation of the courts in terms of the speed of process, standards of evidence required to bring a prosecution, the nature of decision-making around prosecution and the severity of civil penalties or sentences create an important context framing the likelihood of prosecution and the deterrent nature of penalties. Tenant support within the judicial system is markedly variable and is dependent on the availability of specialist legal housing advice.

Any study of the PRS must negotiate the complexity of markets and highly fractured modes of government, enforcement, policing and prosecution which tend to play out differently at regional and local levels.

### 3.3 Criminogenic spaces

There is long-standing policy recognition of the relationship between housing and crime. Since the 1960s, Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) approaches have sought to 'design out' crime from housing estates, for example by giving due attention to spaces that lack surveillance and giving each housing unit its own defensible space.

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.glaa.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-we-do>, accessed 25 Nov 2024.

Interventions have also been more tenure specific. For example, numerous interventions have been directed towards anti-social behaviour (ASB) in social housing,<sup>32</sup> and the forthcoming Crime and Policing Bill includes additional powers for housing providers in relation to this problem. This Bill also introduces measure to criminalise 'cuckooing'. This form of housing-related crime comprises the appropriation of space in someone's home by someone not in their household, and who seeks to control that space through coercion or violence, often for criminal purposes.

Grey reports associating crime with the private rented sector are uncommon. One exception is a 2018 policing report exploring crime in Slough and Luton, which recognised the prevalence of violent crime in houses in multiple occupation and a higher incidence of burglary in rented properties. The report concluded that

In both towns, analysis suggested that housing factors, particularly the prevalence of lower quality, privately rented accommodation, were relevant to understanding the contemporary drivers of the crime problems being faced.<sup>33</sup>

Poor housing standards, which is not always associated with criminality, has been the subject of multiple policy interventions including a programme of licensing introduced by the Housing Act 2004. The growth of the private rented sector has meant that increasing attention has been paid to sectoral standards, and multiple reports have considered the efficacy of the Housing Act 2004 as a measure to control property standards.<sup>34</sup> Controlling 'rogue landlords' has been a policy focus for many decades and has provoked the production of multiple toolkits and enforcement strategies.<sup>35</sup> This approach focuses on just one element of the PRS – enforcement – and tends to overlook other relevant considerations, for example, the intersection between homelessness regulation and enforcement activity.

A siloed approach does not accommodate the intersection of factors that can make the PRS, as a system, prone to or supportive of crime and criminality or 'criminogenic'. Considering the PRS as a criminogenic system encourages recognition of the multiple affordances and opportunities for criminality that emerge because of the very nature of letting as a distinct set of behaviours, and because of the way in which those behaviours are governed. The remainder of this chapter considers the many ways in which private letting in England can foster criminality.

From this point, the report will focus specifically on landlord- and letting agent-perpetrated criminality. This concentration does not dismiss the seriousness of tenant-perpetrated crime, which merits its own extended exploration. This report also focuses on criminality where the tenant is directly affected by the landlords' actions. This precludes practices such as money laundering or tax evasion.

### 3.4 Affordances for crime in the private rented sector

#### *Crimes engendered by letting arrangements*

Letting and renting property is a very particular kind of arrangement. In the UK, there are several ways in which this arrangement can provoke criminal activity.

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<sup>32</sup> W. Wilson (2019) 'Tackling anti-social behaviour in social housing (England)', *House of Commons Library Briefing Paper*, 0264.

<sup>33</sup> A. Higgins & R. Jarman (2015) *Safe as houses? Crime and changing tenure patterns*, The Police Foundation, 3.

<sup>34</sup> For example, S. Lawrence (2019) *An independent review of the use and effectiveness of selective licensing*, MHCLG; Harris *et al.*, *Improving compliance*.

<sup>35</sup> For example, MHCLG (2019) *Rogue landlord enforcement: Guidance for local authorities*, MHCLG.

### Nature of landlordism

Crime perpetrated by landlords tends to be hidden by the nature of landlordism itself. The English Private Landlord Survey (EPLS) routinely collects information on individuals who let property.<sup>36</sup> The EPLS indicates that most landlords in their survey of c.9,000 respondents were individuals or groups of individuals; the majority let fewer than five properties.<sup>37</sup> There are an estimated 2.82mn landlords operating in England, renting out over 4.6mn properties.

The activity is generally regarded as amateur, with many individuals who let property actually not regarding themselves as landlords. An uncertain number of landlords will be letting very informally, perhaps to a family member or friend. This kind of letting can be regarded as benign: the arrangement is flexible, the rent charged might be low, and the activity is a negotiated agreement. There may be an element of criminality: for example, the landlord might fail to declare their rental income. A presumption that 'amateurism' is acceptable implies tolerance for unprofessional behaviours including failure to undertake gas safety checks or inattention to the required paperwork setting up the tenancy.

Very little attention is paid to criminality that relates to corporate landlordism, although several international academic papers have highlighted some problematic global corporate landlord management practices. These include coercing tenants to leave housing blocks that are then refurbished to achieve a higher rent.<sup>38</sup>

### Letting agent crime

The mediating role of letting agents within the PRS makes it possible to perpetrate for such actors to commit crimes against the landlord or the tenant, including charging spurious fees to both or either; retaining deposits; and failure to safeguard rental income. Letting agents often control properties on behalf of non-resident landlords and can use that property for criminal activity.<sup>39</sup>

### Obscuring culpability

The nature of the letting arrangement means that many different types of criminality are obscured by confusion about culpability. Cannabis farming is a prime example, where farming can take place at the instigation of the letting agent, who uses property that they know landlords will not inspect; of tenants using properties they rent fraudulently, thus obscuring their identity; and landlords using poor-quality rental properties that would otherwise garner only limited rental income, but blaming the tenant when drug production is discovered. Similar confusion can sit around culpability for using the property to house sex work. It also becomes problematic to assign blame where there is serious overcrowding in a property, where the landlord and letting agent may claim ignorance; or cases where the landlord might choose to blame poor letting agent advice, for example, for a failure to licence a licensable property.

This capacity by actors throughout the PRS to draw on plausible deniability for their involvement in criminal acts creates difficulties for enforcement agencies. This means that police or other agencies might tend to act against 'low hanging fruit' such as tenants acting as growers in cannabis cultivation, while other complicit actors avoid intervention.

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<sup>36</sup> The survey is based on a sample of landlords who lodge deposits with one of the three government-supported Tenancy Deposit Protection schemes. As a consequence, the survey covers the part of the market where deposits are routinely collected, and landlords who fulfil their obligation to register the deposit.

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-private-landlord-survey-2024-main-report/english-private-landlord-survey-2024-main-report#profile-of-private-landlords>, accessed 11 Aug 2025.

<sup>38</sup> M. August & J. Mah (2025) 'Evictions, spatial inequality, and the financialization of rental housing in Toronto', *Urban Geography*, 1-23.

<sup>39</sup> S. Kale (2025) 'The cannabis farm scandal: how a rogue lettings agency destroyed countless homes', *Guardian*, 20 Feb, accessed 13 Aug 2025.

### Power dynamics

Within English culture, the landlord/tenant relationship is generally regarded as balanced in favour of the landlord. Multiple commentators have concluded that property conditions are poor because of tenant unwillingness to complain because landlords might then choose to bring the tenancy to an end. The Renters' Rights Act aims to address this imbalance by defining the reasons that landlords must use in court to secure possession in their favour. The existing regulation allows for use of s21 of the Housing Act 1988, which supports possessions where the landlord does not have to state a reason.

However, despite the change of legislation, the power dynamic is unlikely to be resolved for tenants operating at the lowest end of the PRS, where landlords are much more likely to resort to illegal eviction.<sup>40</sup> The constant threat of homelessness can underpin a range of abusive and coercive behaviours.<sup>41</sup> Power dynamics may also be particularly acute for tenant without recourse to public funds and/or for tenants with uncertain migrant status whose precarity can be weaponised against them by landlords (see further discussion below).

### *Structural affordances*

There are, in addition, structural features within the housing and labour markets which create opportunities for criminality in the PRS.

#### High levels of demand for rental property

High levels of demand create desperation within tenants' search strategies, given the nature of competition for properties. This means that prospective tenants might not play close attention to advertised properties on the internet and fall prey to scam artists asking for payments in advance for fictitious properties or homes they have no authority to let. High levels of demand can also foster incentives to institute rent-to-rent scams.

A limited choice of affordable rentals also increases levels of tolerance for poor property conditions. Once in a tenancy, fear of losing it can be a strong incentive for a tenant to submit to criminal exploitation. The Deregulation Act 2015 is intended to provide protection for tenants who complain about property conditions, but this legislation is cumbersome and only works in circumstances where the landlord is minded to be compliant.

#### Low-demand areas

The housing market can also create circumstances for crime within areas of low demand. Locations where housing is relatively cheap can attract inward investment and more exploitative letting practices. It is notable that supported accommodation arrangements (see Box 2.5) are often set up in areas where low housing costs yield high returns for shared property, with even higher returns promised where housing benefit payments are uncapped.

Locations that a legitimate landlord might regard as unprofitable can attract slum landlords whose property purchase precludes any further investment in maintenance or repair. Landlords in lower-rent areas may become tempted by more lucrative alternative non-legal property uses including cannabis farming. Properties that are unprofitable as single lettings might then suggest multi-occupancy letting with overcrowding as a strategy to increase income.

#### Tenant exclusion from the main market

Policy intervention in the housing market generally has not sought to create equality of access to good quality, affordable housing. Some tenants are funnelled towards illegal and informal letting

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<sup>40</sup> Carr *et al.* *Harassment and illegal eviction*.

<sup>41</sup> O'Malley *et al.*, *Landlord-perpetrated tenant abuse*.

because their demographic and economic characteristics exclude them from the mainstream market. They are vulnerable because the market makes them so. A marked reliance on the lowest-standard lettings is evident amongst two groups.

#### *Hyper-precarious households*

Some types of households become increasingly reliant on the illegal and informal letting because they face challenges in securing and holding down mainstream tenancies. These challenges become increasingly acute over time. These households may be reliant on low and/or fluctuating incomes and/or have mental health problems including ongoing addictions and challenging behaviours. They cannot provide references, guarantors or proof of creditworthiness. Consequently, these tenants may find themselves more heavily reliant on the shadow private rented sector and will tend to move from one insecure poor-quality tenancy to another, often experiencing serial illegal evictions. Hyper-precarity then becomes a further signal that the tenant is in some measure personally problematic.

These tenants also constitute a key group for more financial exploitation. The housing allowance within Universal Credit can be paid directly to the landlord where a case can be made that the tenant would find it difficult to manage their finances or the tenant has already accrued arrears. Landlords report that local authorities often do not monitor those arrangements once they have been set up.<sup>42</sup> Payments continue to be made irrespective of the tenant's living conditions. Local authorities also play a role in channelling marginalised households towards the lowest end of the private rented sector, into accommodation that is known to be substandard.<sup>43</sup>

#### *Immigration status*

A second major group that is structurally vulnerable is people whose immigration status might be regarded as moot. The Immigration Act 2014 requires landlord and letting agents to verify the immigration status of prospective tenants and imposes substantial fines for contravention. This means that some landlords might tend to preclude letting to tenants whose ethnicity might be judged to be 'non-UK', as a way of mitigating the risk of prosecution.<sup>44</sup> Again, these tenants may find themselves excluded from the mainstream market.

Within this category there are tenants whose immigration status is indeed moot, and whose application for leave to remain in the UK is pending. This group can be subject to exploitation by landlords who are aware that the tenant may be unaware of their rights and unlikely to approach the authorities for assistance.

#### *Seasonal working and migrant labour*

Seasonal work and the existence of industries that are heavily reliant low-grade manual labour can also inflate demand for rental properties, particularly where labour demand might be met through migrant labour. Labour market exploitation creates a grey area in terms of complicity, in the overlap between legitimate economic migration, and decisions made by migrant workers in the UK maximising their earned income by minimising their housing costs. This means multiple unrelated individuals living in a room or perhaps even an element of shift-based bed sharing. This is another area where plausible deniability creates a defence for the landlord.

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<sup>42</sup> J. Rugg & A. Wallace (2021) *Property supply to the lower end of the English private rented sector*, Nationwide Foundation/University of York.

<sup>43</sup> O' Malley, *Landlord-perpetrated abuse of tenants*.

<sup>44</sup> C. Patel & C. Peel (2017) *Passport please: the impact of the Right to Rent checks on migrants and ethnic minorities in England*, Joint Council for the Welfare of Migrants.



### *Lack of deterrence*

Crime occurs in space and circumstances where the probability of discovery and prosecution is low. Multiple elements of PRS governance contribute to lack of deterrence. It should be noted that the associated grey report on enforcement considers this issue in more detail.<sup>45</sup>

### *Patchy enforcement*

Local authorities are responsible for application of a range of enactments seeking to improve property quality in the private rented sector. The law has created an extended patchwork of measures that give powers to local authorities regarding property licencing and prohibition orders, and the use of punitive measures including banning orders. However, application of the legislation is remarkably patchy. This reflects variation across local authorities in the priority given to PRS housing enforcement, which in some areas results in a reactive service that has limited capacity or skill for active, strategic engagement with poor letting practice.

### *Opportunities in 'enforcement deserts'*

Patchy enforcement means that criminal activity can become more prevalent in areas where no effective safeguards are in place. This may lead to 'safe zones' for criminal actors. Relatedly, there is the potential for displacement to take place when intensive and/or sustained enforcement activity is carried out in a specific locality, for example in the use of Selective Licensing in some areas but not others. Criminal actors may come to recognise that one locality is subject to strong enforcement and may therefore move their activities to low-enforcement areas. This appears to be a common occurrence for cannabis cultivation in the PRS.

### *Problems with policing*

Policing approaches tend to focus on crimes such as drug-related offences and modern slavery that often take place in the context of a rental arrangement. Action taken against cannabis farming does not always extend to investigation of landlord or letting agent culpability, partly, as discussed above, due to difficulties in evidencing the complicity of landlords/letting agents who can plausibly deny their involvement.

One area where the police does have a duty to intervene relates to the Protection from Eviction Act 1977. However, the police often regard harassment and eviction as civil rather than criminal matters, and this crime is largely overlooked even where police attend cases of 'lock-change' evictions.<sup>46</sup>

### *Obstacles in pathway to prosecution*

There are multiple obstacles to local authority prosecuting landlords under the Housing Acts. These include limited support for prosecuting housing-related offences within local authority legal teams, and the intensive resources required to demonstrate culpability to criminal evidence level. Vexatious appeals from landlords can also tie up officer time, further contributing to limitation in resources.

### *Tenants' limited access to legal support*

Tenants facing problems with their landlord have several options in terms of advice and support, but limited assistance regarding legal aid. The ability of tenants to take landlords to court depends,

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<sup>45</sup> Colliver & Hunter, *Enforcement against slum landlords*.

<sup>46</sup> Carr *et al.* *Harassment and illegal eviction*.

often, on access to legal aid advice. In 2024, the Law Society reported that 44 per cent of the English population did not have a legal aid provider in their local authority areas.<sup>47</sup>

Within the Housing Acts, Rent Repayment Orders give tenants the opportunity to reclaim paid rent for specified housing infractions including a landlords' failure to licence a licensable property. However, local authorities do not routinely offer tenants support to make those applications.

#### Inadequate sanction

In the case of illegal evictions, fines are the most likely sanction. Data on the level of fines is incomplete, since information is only made available for years where more than ten prosecutions have taken place. This was the case in only four years between 2011 and 2023, and the average fine was £799.<sup>48</sup>

#### Exploiting innovation and regulation gaps

The private rented sector is a market that encourages innovation. New practices and letting models often develop ahead of any regulatory framework and offer opportunities for subversion and exploitation.

For example, it has been noted that the provision of supported exempt accommodation has developed in response to a failure to supply housing with associated care for tenants who would be extremely vulnerable in the open market without a degree of support. Supported accommodation has been recognised as one area where it is very easy for the landlord to set up an arrangement with no intention of delivering the level of support required, and with limited attention to property quality. Scrutiny requires the combined intervention of local authority adult social services, environmental health professionals and the Department for Work and Pensions, and regulatory frameworks have been slow to develop.<sup>49</sup>

'Rent-to-rent' models are legitimate management products that encourage landlords to enter into long leases at a guaranteed rent, where the letting agent then either subdivides the property or relets at a higher rent to benefit from the difference. However, rent-to-rent scams are now routinely found within the legitimate rental market, creating problems for tenants who are misled as to the identity of their landlord. Limited legislation is in place to protect tenants in these circumstances.

### 3.5 Conclusion

The PRS is a complex system that includes a variety of markets subject to a patchy and uncoordinated governance structure. The PRS is criminogenic, in providing multiple opportunities for criminal activity that can only occur within a letting arrangement. The prevalence of small landlords creates a tolerance for a lack of professionalism. Letting agents operate in space which generates opportunities to exploit both landlords and tenants. Limited rental opportunity in the mainstream markets means that marginalised groups become increasingly reliant on criminal landlords. Local authorities vary substantially in investment in enforcement measures; and the police tend not to regard housing problems as a criminal concern even though illegal eviction is a criminal offence. There are multiple obstacles to prosecution, which mean that criminals

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<sup>47</sup> Law Society (2024) 'Housing aid – legal aid deserts', <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/campaigns/justice-and-rule-of-law/civil-justice/legal-aid-deserts/housing>, accessed 14 Aug 2025.

<sup>48</sup> Carr *et al.*, *Harassment and illegal eviction*.

<sup>49</sup> T. Raisbeck (2019) *Exempt from responsibility? Ending social injustice in exempt accommodation*, Spring Housing Association; W. Wilson (2023) 'The Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023: Debate in Parliament', *House of Commons Library Research Briefing*, CBP09668, 7 Sept.

understand their activities are likely to evade serious sanction. Tackling criminality in the private rented sector requires that attention be paid to all the ways in which the PRS system is criminogenic: dealing with just one facet is unlikely to have the desired effect.

## 4. Undermining ‘techniques of neutralisation’

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter draws from interviews with sixteen landlords who self-reported to the project that they had engaged in law breaking relating to their letting activity. These landlords were at varying places in relation to their infractions: seven had been investigated and prosecuted and a further one was in the middle of court proceedings. Six had not had their law-breaking detected or investigated and two had resolved the issue informally following interaction with the local authority.

The chapter analyses data from the interviews to explore ‘techniques of neutralisation’, which allow criminal actors, in their own minds, to rationalise and justify morally their law-breaking behaviours. Using these techniques means that it becomes possible for an individual to conclude that they have somehow being wronged themselves or placed in exceptional circumstances leading to them breaking the law. In the longer term, sustained engagement with these techniques of neutralisation may persuade landlords that non-compliance is justified and more serious criminality can be excused. This chapter indicates that there can be a degree of statutory complicity with landlords’ techniques of neutralisation. A preferable response would be actions that undermine the specific excuses that are most often deployed.

### 4.2 Landlord respondents

The landlords were contacted using various methods (see Appendix 1). In total, sixteen were interviewed, whose behaviours involved sometimes multiple legal contraventions that took place at various stages throughout their landlord career. Contraventions included letting properties that did not meet the required standard, including properties with Category 1 hazards. Several of the landlords resorted to illegal eviction to deal with tenants they found problematic: for example, Landlord 7 had developed a small portfolio of shared properties and talked about two occasions when she simply returned tenants’ deposits and told them to leave that day. Landlords also reported failures to meet electrical safety standards, and some with HMOs were letting rooms that were below minimum standard sizes. Four landlords were letting properties that were being used as cannabis farms. In one case [Landlord 11], the landlord said that he had developed a large portfolio in the years of easier finance pre-financial crisis but mostly worked abroad during that time and was unconcerned about the condition of his property. He employed a manager to deal with his properties, which were being let as HMOs often with rooms below the standard size requirement. He was aware that this man was also using some of the properties to set up cannabis farms.

*Table 4.1: Landlord respondents*

Landlord	Property portfolio <sup>50</sup>	Nature of offence	Offence Discovered/Enforced
1	Small	Harassment of tenants; non-reporting of cannabis cultivation	Not enforced but local authority involvement
2	Medium	Substandard living conditions	Informally resolved

<sup>50</sup> Property portfolio sizes: Small 1-2; Medium 3-9; Large 10+.

3	Small	Failure to adhere to electrical safety standards	Not discovered/enforced
4	Medium	Failure to adhere to electrical safety standards	Not discovered/enforced
5	Small	Failure to report cannabis cultivation; entering property illegally; illegal eviction	Not discovered/enforced
6	Small	Multiple illegal evictions	Not discovered/enforced
7	Large	Substandard living conditions	Enforced by local authority
8	Large	Failure to report cannabis cultivation	Not discovered/enforced
9	Small	Illegal eviction; housing undocumented migrants; financial irregularities	Some offences enforced; others not discovered/enforced
10	Small	Illegal eviction; failure to adhere to electrical safety standards	Some offences not discovered; others informally resolved by local authority
11	Large	Failure to report cannabis cultivation to police; HMO licensing breach	Some offences enforced; others not discovered/enforced
12	Medium	HMO licensing breach	Discovered and enforced
13	Large	Cannabis cultivation	Discovered and enforced
14	Small	Overcrowding, health and safety breaches	Discovered and enforced
15	Small	Tax evasion	Not discovered/enforced
16	Small	Illegal eviction; illegal disposal of tenant possessions	Currently going through court proceedings

### 4.3 Techniques of neutralisation

The conceptual framework of techniques of neutralisation was developed by the American scholars Gresham Sykes and David Matza in 1957, who proposed five ways in which offenders seek to suspend normative values to justify deviant/criminal acts. These five techniques are:

*Denial of responsibility* – e.g.: 'It wasn't my fault'. Allows offenders to abdicate personal responsibility for wrongdoing either by casting a specific incident as accidental or by claiming that one's behaviour is the result of forces beyond their control.

*Denial of injury* – e.g.: 'No one got hurt'. Invokes the notion that acts may be 'illegal but not immoral' (Sykes and Matza, 1957: 667) and offenders may understand their behaviours as having broken the law but having caused no harm.

*Denial of the victim – e.g.: 'They were asking for it'.* Involves the offender casting a victimised person as someone against whom punishment is somehow justified. Here, the offender accepts responsibility, and that harm has occurred, but rejects claims of victimhood by claiming the apparent victim as someone deserving of the harm they have incurred. Victimhood may also be denied simply by virtue of the victim not being physically present at the time an offence is committed or being unknown to the offender.

*Condemnation of the condemners – e.g.: 'They've done far worse than me'.* Sees offenders reject claims of condemnation from others and instead shift the focus of attention from their own criminality to the motives and behaviours of those who condemn them. Condemners may be accused of hypocrisy, jealousy or of engaging in worse instances of criminality themselves.

*Appeal to higher loyalties – e.g.: 'I was protecting my family'.* Involves offenders prioritising the needs of a smaller/more specific group as more important than adhering to the law or more broadly respecting societal values.

#### 4.4 Techniques of neutralisation in landlord narratives

One or more of the techniques of neutralisation described above were drawn upon by the sixteen landlords who were interviewed. It is probable that at least two of the landlords might be described as slum landlords, since it was evident that they paid little attention to repairs and maintenance. Others had had been convicted of criminal landlord behaviours such as overcrowding, illegal eviction and tax evasion. The interviewers asked the landlords to reflect on their law breaking. In doing so, the landlords drew on all the techniques indicated above.

##### *Denial of responsibility*

This technique was in evidence in the experience Safer Renting interview UN who moved to London with his partner because she needed specialist cancer treatment. They found a very small property, which was in fact an illegal cupboard conversion. The couple were given an assured shorthold tenancy. The property was bought and sold twice by auction without the new owners even seeing it. Ownership finally rested with a property developer who attempted to evict the tenant illegally. He claimed that he did not know that the property was not compliant when he purchased it.

The landlord interviewees often also denied responsibility for breaches of regulations by blaming other actors' lack of expertise or other ways in which landlords had been let down through no fault of their own.

*I found myself without necessary certificates because my agent had kind of basically gone AWOL and I didn't pick on it [Landlord 3].*

*The person who did the original inspection wasn't qualified... And even if you call the council in for advice and if their advice is wrong, you're still fined because it's your fault [Landlord 1 - Harassment of tenants; non-reporting of cannabis cultivation].*

In these instances, landlords pointed towards other actors within their letting activity who they had relied on to give appropriate advice or guidance. The landlord had acted 'in good faith', and they had been penalised unfairly.

##### *Denial of injury*

Criminal landlords also denied injury or harm had been incurred by tenants, justifying their own illegal acts as vicariously benefitting the tenant [see Landlord 10's account below] or rejecting notions that any harm had occurred at all [see Landlord 16 below].

*I visited her, and I said... if it goes to court, I will tell the court why I was asking you to leave. In other words, they're going to find out that you're a druggie. And so, I never served any of the notices I should have served, she just found somewhere else to live [Landlord 10 – Illegal eviction; failure to adhere to electrical safety standards].*

*It was a technicality; it was a point of law. Yes, you can't go in and you can't clear the house. But I mean, there was nothing of any value in the property. It was all full of rubbish and broken things and drug detritus [Landlord 16].*

A denial of injury generally relates to narratives where it appears that the tenant had walked away from a particular situation, with no action taken. There is a particularly strong association between 'denial of injury'-type defences, and illegal eviction where a landlord might claim that the tenant simply surrendered their keys. In actuality, the landlord may well have forced that outcome through harassing or threatening behaviour.

#### *Denial of the victim*

Tenants were commonly described by landlords in negative and disparaging terms, as 'nasty people' [Landlord 7] who 'choose to live in squalor and a pigsty' [Landlord 12], 'don't seem to care' [Landlord 16] about upkeeping properties and feel 'entitled to everything' [Landlord 4]. Landlord 11 blamed the excessive 'moaning' of his tenants for his failure to upkeep his properties to an acceptable standard:

*Normally tenants are moaning and they've got a list of jobs for you. So whilst in theory you should go around and inspect your properties, the downside is you get moaning tenants... So, it's always better I found just to keep away and then they don't proactively complain.*

By framing tenants in unfavourable terms, landlords justified the harms experienced by tenants as somehow deserved and brought about by tenants themselves. When recounting instances where harm is difficult to deny, such as illegal evictions leaving tenants homeless, landlords often described tenants as undeserving of sympathy, responsible for their own circumstances (for example, they had not kept the property clean; they were in rent arrears; they had some form of substance misuse issue) and, therefore, harmful and criminal landlord behaviours were a reasonable response.

#### *Condemnation of the condemners*

A repeated narrative for criminal landlords is to cast themselves as victims of the hypocritical condemnation of others, lamenting the unjust negative depictions of private landlords which they perceive as having created a hostile climate in which private sector landlords are vilified and regulations created with a deliberate bias against them. Included in the list of hypocritical, jealous or otherwise incompetent condemners were politicians, local authorities and charities:

*[Politicians are] spiteful for the sake of being spiteful... totally riddled with jealousy... [A previous law was] a vindictive, nasty law with green eyes from somebody, who was probably an aide, who probably just let his rent go up over time or whatever and hasn't got a hope in hell of buying his own house [Landlord 7].*

Criminal landlords were particularly keen to point out what they saw as the hypocritical position which sees private sector accommodation standards enforced to a greater extent than those in social housing:

*You have social housing that do not have to follow the same rules and regulations as private landlords, yet we're vilified as being rogue landlords. And yet, if you looked at the news, a lot of these council properties are in such bad disrepair. A private landlord would be crucified for it [Landlord 1].*

*If I go into a property where there's something wrong with it, I repair it, you know, and then you let it out again. So, why are the councils allowed to get away with all these things in their housing policy? You know, I mean, it's disgusting [Landlord 2].*

Police were also regularly included in such narratives. Police were often described as being uninterested in tenant criminality – ‘*the police don't want to know*’ [Landlord 5] – with calls to police often failing to elicit any response. Police were also viewed by landlords as lacking basic understandings of tenant-related criminality, or were considered completely overstretched and under-resourced, meaning landlords lacked confidence that calls to police would result in a satisfactory outcome. As a result, landlords saw police criticism of their law-breaking behaviours as hypocritical since they often felt that these behaviours had, at least partly, been prompted by the police's own failures. For instance, landlords justified carrying out illegal evictions, illegally disposing of tenants' property, or failing to notify police of drug cultivation in their properties by claiming that the police would either be uninterested or would take so long to address the issue that the landlord would suffer considerable economic harm.

#### *Appeal to higher loyalties*

Finally, criminal landlords rejected notions of criminality or other negative identity by casting themselves as critical actors in addressing key societal challenges such as the housing crisis in the UK. Landlords described housing vulnerable tenants (such as victims of domestic abuse and precarious migrants), accommodating tenants that otherwise would be homeless: ‘*no one else would have them*’ (Landlord 5). They also argued that by employing others to manage their property portfolios, landlords were making positive contributions to society more broadly via their landlordism: ‘*It's the system that's broken, but then it trickles down to landlords to fix it*’ [Landlord 14].

*I think that people are missing a lot of the point that landlords actually... should be thanked for doing what a local authority is unable to do, and also to help people who would otherwise be homeless [Landlord 7].*

Landlords offered examples of praiseworthy actions such as housing NHS staff during Covid in order for them to isolate; regularly providing accommodation for individuals released from prison; renting to tenants who carried some form of risk (for example, substance misuse); and not raising rents when they were entitled to do so. These accounts were offered as examples of a landlord operating to a self-defined moral code which – in their eyes – excused their occasional law-breaking behaviour, offsetting the negative impacts of their law breaking against the broader positive outcomes of their status as private sector landlords.

## 4.5 Statutory sanction of techniques of neutralisation

Interviews with statutory agencies across the Yorkshire and the Humber region indicate that there can be a degree of sympathy with landlord techniques of neutralisation. For example, there could



be widespread agreement that the legal framework for letting can be complex, and it was understandable that properties might not be 100 per cent compliant on inspection. Indeed, rationale of soft enforcement rests in the presumption that it is more effective to work *with* landlords, in terms of increasing access to information and offering advice and support where a landlord has been non-compliant. Soft enforcement is predicated on the presumption that landlords cannot be expected to act professionally, in accordance with the law, and that some contravention is inevitable in cases of inexperience.

Agencies also appear to support techniques that blame the victim. Landlords reported that local authorities often agreed with them that particular tenants were ‘a nightmare’ or otherwise challenging. Such interactions, either explicitly or implicitly, supported landlords’ justifications their own law-breaking behaviours. This is particularly the case where a landlord has taken the step to evict a tenant illegally. A standard statutory response to an illegal eviction is for the homelessness team to contact the landlord and attempt to reinstate the tenancy by dealing with whatever tenant infraction has ‘caused’ the illegal eviction.<sup>51</sup> For example, the local authority might resolve a tenants’ rent arrears. A failure to address the landlords’ illegal eviction underlines a landlord’s neutralising techniques of denying that a crime has taken place, that no harm has occurred, and that victim was to blame. More broadly, housing options teams operated to augment landlords’ presumptions that without them, some people would remain homeless, and this might extend to a degree of complicity in the view that poor quality property was preferable to homelessness. This stance could only confirm landlords’ presumptions that their appeal to higher loyalties had been sanctioned and that also – to a degree – their non-compliance has no victim.

## 4.6 Undermining techniques of neutralisation

Undermining landlords’ rationalisations for breaking the law may reduce the volume of law breaking by these actors. In some cases, this may require action to ‘remove excuses’, a common approach in situational approaches to crime prevention.<sup>52</sup> The removal of excuses may be most appropriately applied to neutralisation techniques such as denial of responsibility. Some neutralisation techniques may be more challenging to disrupt. Attempts to appeal to higher loyalties or condemn the condemners may be deeply embedded in the psyche of landlords or may be much broader socio-economic and/or cultural issues. However, that is not to say that some action cannot disrupt these neutralisations. For instance, government intervention should be mindful of not reinforcing other forms of excuse-making such as denying victimhood and harm.

*Table 4.1: Neutralisations and responses*

Neutralisations	Responses
“The law is too complicated, it’s no wonder I messed up”	Clear enforcement protocols and widely available sources of landlord advice and information should mean that landlords cannot argue that the law is too complicated to comply with. The forthcoming Landlord Database, introduced by the Renters Rights Act, will include advice and information and should,

<sup>51</sup> Carr *et al.*, *Harassment and illegal eviction*.

<sup>52</sup>

[https://popcenter.asu.edu/sites/g/files/litvpz3631/files/twenty\\_five\\_techniques\\_of\\_situational\\_prevention.pdf](https://popcenter.asu.edu/sites/g/files/litvpz3631/files/twenty_five_techniques_of_situational_prevention.pdf), accessed 13 Nov 2025.

	in theory, mean that this technique of neutralisation will lack validity.
"The letting agent/solicitor gave me the wrong advice" / "I had no idea what to do in this instance"	In part, this issue will be dealt with by the Landlord Database. Landlords have been given incorrect advice by a letting agent or solicitor should be encouraged to take action including, for example, reporting the letting agent to Trading Standards. Ensure attempts to deny responsibility are rejected in court proceedings.
"These tenants brought this on themselves"	Ensure (via training/recruitment) that statutory responses do not explicitly or implicitly validate landlord narratives which seek to blame tenants for the harm they experience at the hands of landlords.
"These people would be homeless without me"	Adopting a victim-centred approach challenges the presumption that the landlord is has a moral claim because they house marginalised groups. Ensure that all property used for the purposes of homeless relief meets the required standard. Foster a stronger support environment for tenants including supporting tenant civil prosecution.
"The police are not interested"	Landlords facing problems in relation to tenant criminality – such as cannabis farming or anti-social behaviour – should have a clearer pathway to police intervention which removes the justification for responding illegally.

## 4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has used the concept of 'techniques of neutralisation' as a lens to assess qualitative data from landlords whose letting practices have in the past been non-compliant with legislation in respect to property condition and illegal eviction. The paper indicates that these techniques chime with reasons that are often proposed as reasons why landlords might break the law, including the landlord not being responsible for the infraction perhaps because of poor advice. Some rationalisations claim that no harm is a consequence, particularly in cases where the landlord has manoeuvred an illegal eviction by encouraging the tenant to move on. The sense in which the landlord views their contraventions as having no victim merges with claims that landlords are – in fact – offering a public service in letting to tenants who might otherwise not be able to secure a rental property. This view could be underlined by local authority homelessness teams, whose work with landlords has tended to agree with their problematisation of tenant behaviour.

## 5. Conclusion: Borrowing from situational prevention

### 5.1 Introduction

This final section considers how situational prevention might suggest some techniques for tackling criminality in the PRS. Situational prevention focuses on the settings where crime occurs rather than the pathology of the perpetrator. Situational prevention also emphasizes the opportunity structures available to potential criminal actors and how to minimise such opportunities as a pathway to reduce crime more broadly. Situational prevention has been applied to many contexts of criminality and has proven popular in policing in the past several decades. Many of the opportunities presented to criminal landlords and those engaging in criminal landlord behaviours may be usefully tackled by adopting elements of this model and applying them to the PRS. Landlord criminality always takes place in the context of a residential letting arrangement. The fixed nature of this context allows some consideration of common frames for prevention that can be applied to the crime in the PRS and suggests some approaches that are perhaps under-utilised.

### 5.2 Situational Crime Prevention

A cohesive and robust prevention strategy for criminal landlordism requires interventions at three levels: *primary*, *secondary*, and *tertiary* prevention. These interventions are supported here by Situational Crime Prevention (SCP) approaches. SCP, developed in the late 1970s, focuses on the settings where crime occurs rather than the pathology of the perpetrator. Situational prevention also emphasises the opportunity structures available to potential criminal actors and how to minimise such opportunities as a pathway to reduce crime more broadly.<sup>53</sup> It is a well-known model within policing and draws from theoretical frameworks such as Rational Choice Theory<sup>54</sup> and Routine Activities Theory<sup>55</sup>.

Cornish and Clarke (2003) developed a framework of 25 techniques of SCP composed around five key categories<sup>56</sup>:

- 1) *Increase the effort* – using forms of target hardening or controlling access to spaces.
- 2) *Increase the risks* – increasing the risks of detection by improving natural and formal surveillance.
- 3) *Reduce the rewards* – removing or concealing possible targets such as parking vehicles on drives rather than on the street.
- 4) *Reduce provocations* – dispute avoidance tactics or ways of reducing stress and frustration in specific settings.
- 5) *Remove excuses* – giving clarity on rules and acceptable behaviours through signage or other instructions.

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<sup>53</sup> R. Clark (1995) 'Situational Crime Prevention', in M. Tonry & D. Farrington (eds) *Building a Safer Society: Strategic Approaches to Crime*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 91-150.

<sup>54</sup> R. V. Clarke & D.B. Cornish (1985) 'Modelling offenders' decisions: a framework for research and policy', *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*, 6, 147-185.

<sup>55</sup> L.E. Cohen & M. Felson (1979). 'Social change and crime rate trends: a routine activity approach', *American Sociological Review*, 44, 588-608.

<sup>56</sup> D. B. Cornish & R.V. Clarke (2003) 'Opportunities, precipitators and criminal decisions: a reply to Wortley's critique of Situational Crime Prevention', in M.J. Smith & D.B. Cornish (eds) *Theory for Practice in Situational Crime Prevention*. [Crime Prevention Studies, Vol. 16], Monsey: Criminal Justice Press, 111-124.

Landlord criminality always takes place in the context of a residential letting arrangement. The fixed nature of this context allows some consideration of common frames for prevention that can be applied to the crime in the PRS and suggests some approaches that are perhaps under-utilised. Situational prevention has been applied to many contexts of criminality – both ‘conventional’<sup>57</sup> and ‘organised’ criminality<sup>58</sup> - and has proven popular in policing in the past several decades.<sup>59</sup> Many of the opportunities presented to criminal landlords and those engaging in criminal landlord behaviours may be usefully tackled by adopting elements of this model and applying them to the PRS. Although SCP is primarily considered primary crime prevention, it can also be classified as secondary or tertiary depending on its specific target and goal.<sup>60</sup> Embedding SCP principles within each prevention tier, suggests a broader strategy for tackling criminal landlordism effectively.

### *Primary prevention: Reducing criminogenic conditions in the PRS*

Primary prevention aims to address the structural factors that make the PRS susceptible to criminal landlord practices (or omissions). It focuses on creating an environment where criminal behaviour is less likely to emerge.

#### Mandatory landlord registration

Enforcing mandatory landlord registration, as supported by the Renters’ Rights Act is a critical step in controlling access to the rental market. Agencies and organisations with a professional association with letting must fall under a similar obligation to check that they are dealing with a registered landlord. This includes:

- On-line sites that advertise lettings such as SpareRoom, Gumtree, Facebook marketplace;
- Trades such as electrical safety testers and gas safety engineers;
- Businesses offering financial products including mortgage providers and rental insurance firms; and
- Government departments including the DWP and HMRC.

Broader surveillance of the registration requirement reduces anonymity and increasing accountability. More effective data-sharing between relevant agencies such as local authorities, DWP, HMRC should support this registration to further control access and limit the opportunities the landlords have for exploitation. For example, it should not be possible for the housing component of Universal Credit to be paid directly to any unregistered landlord.

#### Reducing tenant vulnerability and improving the protection of potential victims

One endemic factor predicting the incidence of landlord criminality is the existence of tenants who are vulnerable to victimisation, by dint of their demographic and economic characteristics. For example, people who are not in regular work, who cannot provide references or guarantors, who may have ongoing addictions or challenging behaviours, who are mentally ill, immigrants, and seasonal (foreign) workers.<sup>61</sup> Here, the victimisation is predicated on the tenant having little option

<sup>57</sup> Cale, J, Burton, M. & LeClerc, B. (2017) ‘Primary prevention of child sexual abuse: Applications, effectiveness and international innovations’, in Winterdyk, J. (eds) *Crime Prevention: International Perspectives, Issues and Trends*. (pp.91-113) New York: CRC Press

<sup>58</sup> Van de Bunt, H. & van der Schoot, C. (eds) (2003) *Prevention of Organised Crime: A Situational Approach*. Den Haag: Boom Juridische uitgevers; Bullock, K., Clarke, R. & Tilley, N. (eds) (2010) *Situational Prevention of Organised Crime*. London: Routledge

<sup>59</sup> Clarke, R. (1992) *Situational Crime Prevention: Successful Case Studies*. New York: Harrow & Heston.

<sup>60</sup> Hughes, G. (1998) *Understanding Crime Prevention*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

<sup>61</sup> Carr et al., *Harassment and illegal eviction*.

but to let at the very bottom end of the market. This kind of renting can fall outside of normal legal frameworks, although there is in every case an exchange of cash, goods, labour or other services to secure a place to stay.

Criminal landlordism is heavily reliant on a pool of victims whose housing choices are constrained. Reducing the number of marginalised tenants in the housing market means that criminal landlords will have to increase their efforts to locate victims it is possible to exploit. Effective factors here include:

- improving access to mainstream housing options, by ensuring that the most vulnerable tenants are supported within good quality property and better able to achieve a degree of security. A key intervention would be to increase Local Housing Allowance rates so that benefit recipients are better able to 'shop' in the mainstream market<sup>62</sup>;
- expanding the supply of housing at social rent levels;
- increasing funding to charities who support individuals who are No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) to ensure that those households do not fall prey to criminal exploitation.

#### Regulatory simplification and availability

Denying responsibility, one of landlords' techniques of neutralisation, often rests on landlords lacking information and guidance for their letting activity. Local authorities should ensure that clear enforcement protocols, and widely available sources of advice and information, mean that landlords cannot argue that the law is difficult to negotiate.

Streamlining legal obligations for landlords and providing clear, accessible guidance helps to 'remove excuses' for non-compliance on the part of the landlords. This makes it harder for them to justify omissions and/or exploitation due to 'confusion' or 'misunderstanding', thus effectively neutralising that technique of neutralisation. The Renters Rights Act promises to be an effective tool for delivering information to landlords. The proposed landlord database should remove any claim that a landlord might make that they lack the information needed to ensure that they operate within the law.

#### Landlord professional culture change

Public campaigns and initiatives promoting professional standards among landlords can help shift public attitudes towards criminal landlord behaviour. These initiatives should focus on the importance of letting as a regulated activity and encourage landlords to view compliance as a professional responsibility. This means a shift away from regarding letting property as a 'hands-off' investment, and towards a model of letting as a business activity. Culture change might be supported through an obligation that landlords have rental business accounts that are separate from their own private banking accounts.

#### *Secondary prevention: Identifying and interrupting (emerging) criminal behaviour*

Secondary prevention focuses on identifying and intervening with landlords who exhibit patterns of non-compliance. Here, the target is to identify early signs of criminal behaviour and disrupting these practices before they escalate.

#### Enhanced intelligence and guardianship

It is essential to extend effective guardianship by increasing the number of agencies with responsibility for regulation, by augmenting enforcement teams and strengthening formal

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<sup>62</sup> The Renters Rights Act prohibition on 'No DSS' in rental advertisements offers no incentive to landlord to accept tenants who will struggle to pay the rent because LHA levels are low.

surveillance, as well as by extending surveillance through 'soft policing'. This method draws on a range of actors to identify problematic behaviours/possible victims, for instance, GPs, health workers, mental health workers, adult safeguarding teams, or even private sector professionals engaging with private properties in the course of their work, for example, gas safety engineers.

Increasing inspection staffing resources is essential because paper-based licensing systems depend on in-person checks to verify that properties meet compliance standards. The Landlord Database does not remove the need for licensing of high-risk properties including HMOs, and properties in locations where selective licensing approaches are suitable since this mode of licensing guarantees that a physical inspection will take place. It has been demonstrated that a landlord purchasing a licence is no guarantee that the property is compliant; local authority selective licensing schemes routinely find Category 1 hazards in licenced properties.<sup>63</sup>

The above, coupled with regular data-sharing between local authorities, police, and trading standards ensures that problem landlords are monitored more effectively. Shared intelligence allows agencies to work together to spot patterns of (recurrent) non-compliance.

#### Early-intervention enforcement

Improvement notices and/or formal warnings can be employed to correct minor infractions before they escalate into more serious offences. These interventions can act as an early signal to landlords that non-compliance is not tolerated, making it riskier for them to continue their exploitative practices. It is suggested that housing options teams use the landlord database to record instances where a landlord has used a non-compliant notice to quit. The local authority should guidance on the initial infraction but then institute a harder level of enforcement against a repeated infraction.

#### Increased monitoring of intermediaries

Licensing and oversight mechanisms have increasingly been applied to landlords in recent years, but the regulation of intermediaries, such as letting agents, has evolved in a more piecemeal manner. Enforcement of the relevant frameworks is fragmented and inconsistent and divided between different jurisdictions and there has been limited evaluation of how effective these frameworks have been.<sup>64</sup> As yet, no work has been undertaken to assess implementation of the Tenant Fees Act; evidence from the Yorkshire & the Humber region indicates that this is likely to be patchy.

Increased scrutiny of letting agents, rent-to-rent operators, and short-let platforms can help extend surveillance and prevent criminal landlord behaviour. By monitoring intermediaries, authorities can disrupt criminal practices that may be occurring out of sight in parts of the market not subject to enforcement activity.<sup>65</sup>

#### Early mediation between landlord and tenant

Offering mediation when tenancies start to become problematic, including support around missed rent payments, can reduce the excuse of landlords having 'nowhere to turn to'. Here the focus is on preventing further escalation of conflicts that may lead to illegal eviction or other criminal behaviour. A local authority's homeless team will tend to step in only when a landlord is threatening eviction; earlier intervention will prevent escalation and also offer landlords assurances that support is available, so removing the provocation for an illegal action.

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<sup>63</sup> R. Spencer & J. Rugg (2024) *Licensing private rented homes: experiences and insights from five London boroughs*, Safer Renting/Cambridge House.

<sup>64</sup> L'Hoiry, X., Rugg, J., Parton, L. & Antonopoulos, G.A. (2025) 'Plausibly deniable: Domestic cannabis cultivation and the Private Rented Sector in the UK', *Trends in Organised Crime*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-025-09571-7>

<sup>65</sup> See B. van Gestel (2010) 'Mortgage fraud and facilitating circumstances', in K. Bullock, R. Clarke & N. Tilley (eds) (2010) *Situational Prevention of Organised Crime*, London: Routledge, 111-129.

### *Tertiary prevention: Containing the harm of criminal landlordism and preventing re-offending*

Tertiary prevention focuses on persistent offenders and entrenched criminal landlords who require hard enforcement measures. This level of intervention aims to incapacitate criminal landlords, 'reducing their rewards' and increasing surveillance, ensuring that criminal landlords cannot benefit from their actions. Simultaneously, it deals with containing the harm to the victims.

#### 'Hard' enforcement and asset control

Local authorities should increase the use of Banning Orders, which prohibit criminal landlords from letting property for a defined time period.<sup>66</sup> Increased use should also be made of Prohibition Orders, which prevent properties from being let, and measures that remove the property asset from the landlord's control including Interim Management Order and Final Management Orders. These measures are essential tools for incapacitating criminal landlords and directly address the strategy of 'reducing the rewards' by ensuring that they no longer benefit from their illegal activities.

#### Post-enforcement monitoring

Conducting regular checks on landlords with criminal convictions contributes to preventing them from returning to the market under different identities or new business/ownership structures, often referred to as 'phoenixing'. This continued monitoring broadens the scope of enforcement and makes it harder for criminal landlords to re-offend. The landlord database can contribute to this task through the use of unique property reference numbers and landlord identifier numbers, perhaps linked to national insurance numbers.

#### Focusing on victim recovery

Strengthening services for tenants, including legal aid and Rent Repayment Orders (RROs) after a landlord is convicted can aid victims in recovering and rebuilding their lives. This approach not only addresses the harm caused by criminal landlords but also helps prevent further victimisation. A focus on victim support and recovery also contributes to a reframing of cultures around letting at the lowest end of the PRS, by indicating that these tenants are indeed valued, and signals to the landlord that active efforts are being made to protect the welfare and rights of all tenants.

## 5.3 Tailored interventions

Creating distinctions between *criminal landlords*, *criminal landlord behaviours* and the *shadow private rented sector* means that it becomes easier to identify the nature of the problem facing policymakers. Criminal landlords operate within a moral framework where routine non-compliance with legislation is regarded as standard working practice. Attempts to 'nudge' behaviours into a higher level of compliance are irrelevant in this context. It is appropriate for that local authorities, trading standards and the police should deploy hard enforcement measures where landlord behaviour evidences criminal intent. Indeed, hard enforcement against such actors should focus on driving them out of the market altogether which, given their harmful practices, should be considered as the most desirable outcome.

An understanding of circumstances where generally compliant landlords will break the law fits more closely with policy concerns relating, for example, to improved education. However, understanding why a landlord breaks the law should not be allowed to translate to complicity. It is possible to argue that current enforcement activity fails to challenge landlords who may engage in

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<sup>66</sup> Colliver & Hunter, *Enforcement against slum landlords*.

criminal landlord behaviours; the failure to challenge creates a normative assumption that such behaviour is in some way expected or excusable. The operation of a shadow private rented sector demonstrates broader, systemic failures in the housing market. As such, addressing the shadow PRS requires systemic interventions that not only increase enforcement but also improve tenant protections and address market failures.

Understanding the PRS as a 'system' indicates that a range of policy responses is required (see chapter 2 in this report). Table 5.1 below provides a framework for which type of intervention may be most appropriate by types of offenders, behaviours and/or the shadow PRS, leading to desirable outcomes.

*Table 5.1: Enforcement responses, type of intervention and expected outcomes*

Actors / Behaviour / Space	Type of Intervention	Expected Outcomes
<b>Criminal landlord</b> - Slum landlords - Scam Landlords - Criminal letting agents - OCGs/links to OCGs	<b>Hard enforcement, for example:</b> - prosecutions - crime-oriented policing - asset seizure; management orders	- deterrence of repeat offenders - removal of harmful landlords from PRS - disruption of criminal networks - stronger market oversight
<b>Criminal landlord behaviours</b> - Accidental law breakers - Reluctant/occasional law breakers	<b>Soft enforcement, for example:</b> - formal warnings - training - mediation	- corrected behaviour (without displacement) - improved compliance - reduced burden on the CJS
<b>Shadow Private Rented Sector</b>	<b>Structural market interventions</b> - improved welfare support - non-PRS housing alternatives - NRPF-focused strategies, for example supporting third sector housing alternatives	- Reduced criminogenic conditions - vulnerable tenants integrated into legitimate housing circuits

## 5.4 Conclusions

This final chapter has borrowed the concept of situational crime prevention to consider ways in which this approach might suggest a framework of interventions to deal with the modes of criminality discussed in this report. This approach suggests interventions that increase the effort needed to benefit from criminality; increase the risks of detection; reducing the profitability; reducing provocations to resort to criminal actions; and removing excuses. This approach can be simplified through attention paid to primary, secondary and tertiary preventions. Primary preventions operate at the highest level, to address the structural factors contributing to the criminogenic nature of the PRS. Secondary prevention identifies and interrupts emerging criminal behaviour by introducing increased surveillance and 'soft' policing interventions. Tertiary prevention focuses on harder interventions that aim to remove the offender from the market.



## Appendix One: Research Methods

This project began in April 2023 and finished in December 2025. The project used Yorkshire and the Humber (Y&H) as a case study region. The fifteen constituent local authorities have varied economic and social demographics, with concentrations of high deprivation and low-demand housing. In 2023/4, Y&H had the highest crime rate of all English regions.<sup>67</sup> The local authorities varied in their degree of proactivity in terms of housing enforcement.

All qualitative respondents were sent a work package (WP)-specific information sheet, with consent secured in writing or in some cases verbally. Within the reports, all participants are identified with a unique code. Verbatim quotations are given in italics. All the four principal grey reports published in December 2025 draw on information from each WP.

This project was completed by a team of researchers, with Kit Colliver (York Law School) employed to deliver elements of WP3 and WP4, and Loren Parton (University of Sheffield) delivering elements of WP1, WP2 and WP4. Geoff Page (University of York) and Georgios Antonopoulos (Northumbria University) made substantial contributions to WP1. The research also drew on the expertise of Safer Renting staff Roz Spencer, Ben Reeve-Lewis, Isobel Langdale, David Scully and Joey Carr.

### WP1: Criminal landlord behaviour and the policing response

(Lead: Xavier L'Hoiry, University of Sheffield)

WP1 focused on identifying the criminal behaviours that are associated with letting property. WP1 research involved qualitative data collection in the form of interviews. Interviews were analysed descriptively with NVivo 12 and further thematic analysis identified. Ethics approval for this WP was secured from the Department of Sociological Studies Ethics Committee, University of Sheffield.

#### Qualitative data

##### *Interviews with law enforcement and other practitioners*

Across the WP, 49 interviews were carried out with practitioners working in the Y&H region. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was deployed to recruit participants. Purposive sampling was used to target practitioners with experience of intervening with criminality taking place in the PRS. The research team drew on existing professional networks with police forces in the first phase of participant recruitment. In the second phase of recruitment, snowball sampling was used to ask interview participants to connect the team with additional potential participants. This resulted in 37 interviews carried out with police practitioners across the four forces in Y&H. Of these, 28 were officers/staff working with local forces, seven were Regional Organised Crime Unit officers/staff and two interviewees held national roles. The WP sought to capture a range of police ranks (from Police Constable through to Detective Chief Inspector) and roles (frontline and management). Moreover, a further five interviews were carried out with heads of community safety partnerships in Y&H and seven interviews with representatives from local authorities in Y&H with a specific focus on criminality (e.g.: Serious and Organised Crime Coordinators). Interviews were conducted between July 2023 and March 2024.

##### *Interviews with landlords*

The WP also sought to gain insights into why landlords engage in criminality. A purposive sampling strategy was used to target landlords who were aware they had committed illegal or potentially

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<sup>67</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/866788/crime-rate-england-and-wales-by-region>, accessed 23 Nov 2025.

illegal acts. Recruiting such participants proved to be very challenging and time consuming. The research team initially approached known contacts in law enforcement and local authorities for potential leads to participants. This yielded one participant. The research team also reviewed media reports of landlord prosecutions and contacted over 20 of these landlords via social media to invite them to interview. This was not successful and several of these individuals 'blocked' the research team online. The most successful recruitment method proved to be an open invitation posted on social media groups dedicated to landlords as well as a specialist landlord website in the UK. These invitations yielded 24 responses, and once potential participants contacted the project team, pre-interview discussions were held to ensure that participants were fully aware the study was focused on landlords' illegal behaviours. In total, 17 interviews were carried out as seven potential participants did not respond following initial exchange of emails/messages. One interview was subsequently discounted as it was clear that the participant had not broken the law. All but two interviews across the WP were audio recorded and transcripts were produced. For the two non-audio recorded interviews, detailed notes were made. Transcripts and notes were anonymised as per the ethical protocol of the WP, with further review to identify information that was then redacted to ensure anonymity.

## WP2: Examining and learning from the most effective solutions

(Lead: Julie Rugg, University of York)

Dealing with criminal behaviour in the private rented sector is the responsibility of organisations including the police, environmental health professionals, trading standards officers and tenancy relations officers. This work package explored local authority perspectives on criminal landlord behaviour and sought to disseminate examples of best practice. All the interviews were transcribed, and analysis was undertaken using a thematic grid. Ethical approval for this WP was secured from the Social Policy and Social Work Ethics Committee at the University of York.

### Qualitative data

This work package used qualitative data collection across all fifteen local authorities in Y&H, using existing contacts to secure a contact for each local authority. This resulted in interviews with 30 PSH professionals, sixteen homelessness team members, four trading standards officers (at local and regional levels) and three professionals from other agencies. These interviews were completed in stages, from the summer of 2023 to the winter of 2024. One further formal interview was conducted with a PSH professional working in an authority outside the region, to secure further information on innovation in its operational practice.

An attempt was made to complete formal interviews with other statutory agencies operating at national and regional levels including the Department for Work and Pensions, the Gangmaster Labour Abuse Authority, HMRC and the Immigration Agency but none of these agencies supplied a respondent.

### RIAMS workshops

The WP used the RIAMS network which supports professionals working in environmental health to disseminate best practice via online workshops.<sup>68</sup> These workshops were recorded and made available via a dedicated section within the RIAMS website. Thirteen recordings were made available on subjects including local authority strategies for tackling criminal landlords; information sharing between trading standards and private housing environmental health teams; presenting evidence at residential property tribunals; use of banning orders; use of interim management orders; cuckooing; safeguarding and brothel closures; rent-to-rent scams; defending against CPN

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<sup>68</sup> <https://riams.org/>, accessed 23 Nov 2025.

appeals; effective approaches to prosecution for illegal eviction; the Cannabis Grow Aware scheme; tackling modern-day slavery; and recovering rent and fines from criminal landlords including use of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA).

### WP3: Housing justice

(Lead: Caroline Hunter, York Law School)

WP3 sought to explore how do local authorities decide to take legal action under their housing powers against criminal landlords and work the courts in those cases. The research involved a range of primarily qualitative data with a smaller element of quantitative data. The interviews for the case study authorities were analysed descriptively with NVivo 12 and further thematic analysis identified. All other interviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

Ethics approval for this WP was secured from the Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology (ELMPS) Ethics Committee, University of York. All respondents were sent a WP information sheet, and consent was secured.

#### Qualitative data

##### *Case study authorities - case tracking and interviews*

For the research the Project followed four local authority private sector housing services within the Y&H region. The teams of three of the authorities (FGF, HIH, BCB) were primarily involved in housing standards work. The fourth team (MNM) was focused on illegal eviction and harassment. Activities included analysing current or recent case files of housing offences on the upper end of severity (n=29)<sup>69</sup>, conducting longitudinal practice-level interviews with case leads over an 18-month period, and strategic-level interviews with heads of service (n=4) and local authority lawyers (n=3). The analysis identified commonalities and differences in enforcement strategy and practice and the factors that informed these choices.

##### *Interviews with criminal lawyers and staff in other local authorities*

In addition to the lawyers for the case study authorities, the Project team interviewed four criminal lawyers involved in prosecuting cases in other local authorities (Criminal lawyers 1 -4). The interviewees were purposefully identified either from contacts at Safer Renting or from newspaper reports of illegal eviction prosecutions. One of the interviews included not only the lawyer at the local authority but also two PSH officers involved in the prosecutions undertaken by that authority. The interviews explored the progress for illegal eviction and harassment cases, any obstacles to justice and reform of the Protection from Eviction Act 1977.

##### *Interviews civil lawyers and staff at advice organisations*

Eleven interviews were undertaken with civil lawyers (Civil Lawyers 1 - 11). Again, the interviewees were purposefully identified from: knowledge of the research team; contacts made through a presentation made a research team member for the Doughty Street Chambers' All Day Housing Conference 2025: 'Rogue Landlords'; and contacting solicitors with legal aid housing contracts in the Y&H region. Three were barristers (one employed in a tenant organisation), all in London. Three were solicitors in private practice firms that have legal aid contracts for housing cases; two were in London and one in Birmingham. The remaining worked in Law Centres or NGOs with legal aid contracts for housing cases either as solicitors or as housing advisors. One was out of London. None

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<sup>69</sup> Local authorities were requested to choose cases on these criteria: the seriousness of behaviour by the landlord (most serious examples of criminality); the stage of action by the authority; whether legal action was ongoing; police involvement and/or other non-housing offences being involved.

of the interviewees worked north of Birmingham. No responses were received from the solicitors in the Y&H region. The interviews asked about the interviewees' experience of clients who had been illegally evicted and/or harassed, and taking cases to the county court of the tribunal for rent repayment orders. In addition, three interviews were undertaken with advice organisations (Advice 1-3). A focus group also took place with four Safer Renting staff. These interviews were focused on the advice and support given to clients and working with other organisations.

#### *Observation of three cases at Sheffield Magistrates' Court*

One of the research team observed a hearing day for local authority cases at Sheffield Magistrates' Court in June 2025. Three illegal eviction cases were heard. All were adjourned for trial or sentencing at a later date.

#### *Focus groups with judges*

The research team sought to interview both magistrates and judges of the First Tier Tribunal (Residential Property) (the FTT). In order to interview judges, it is necessary to seek permission from the Judicial Office.<sup>70</sup> An application was made in November 2024. Permission to interview judges from the FTT was given in June 2025. Two focus groups and an individual interview with judges from the London and Northern region of the FTT took place in August 2025. The interviews explored the judges' experience of civil penalty appeals, rent repayment and banning orders and what factors informed their decision-making. Permission to interview magistrates was given on 13 August 2025, but it was not possible, within the timeframe of the project, to recruit any magistrates who had experience of housing offences.

#### Quantitative data

##### *Data from FOI request to London boroughs*

The research team were sent the responses to an FOI request to all London Boroughs for information on illegal eviction and harassment made by Gus Silverman, solicitor at Deighton Pierce Glynn in August 2024. The responses to the requests had limited quantitative data, but the qualitative data has been included in the analysis.

##### *Banning order decisions*

Decisions on banning orders are published on the FTT website.<sup>71</sup> All the decisions published up to March 2024 (n=40) were analysed to explore what contributed to a successful banning order application. Note that this figure includes two appeal cases seen by the Upper Tribunal and one variation of a decision.

##### *Ministry of Justice prosecution data*

An application for data on housing offences (Protection from Eviction Act 1977 and Housing Act 2004) prosecuted between 2011-2023, was made to the MoJ. The data was released 21 May 2024.<sup>72</sup> Analysis was conducted using the data flat files for each year, which capture defendant cases at principal offence level. Where cases involve more than one offence, this dataset records information for the offence with the most serious disposal. As such, the data may underestimate the overall number of offences and less serious disposals (e.g. disposal orders and victim surcharges). However, as housing offence cases are prosecuted by the local authority, a significant discrepancy between actual and reported case figures is unlikely.

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<sup>70</sup> See <https://www.judiciary.uk/guidance-and-resources/judicial-participation-in-research-projects/>, accessed 18 Nov 2025.

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/residential-property-tribunal-decisions>, accessed 18 Nov 2025.

<sup>72</sup> ONS SRS Metadata Catalogue, dataset, Ministry of Justice Data First Magistrates Court Iteration 2 - England and Wales, <https://doi.org/10.57906/1yrt-zd35>.

Data analysis involved identification of housing offence types using Home Office (HO) and Criminal Justice System (CJS) offence codes, associated outcomes including findings and disposal, and geographical and longitudinal trends.

*Disclaimer: This work was produced using administrative data accessed through the ONS Secure Research Service. The use of the data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS data owners (e.g., HM Courts and Tribunals Service and the MoJ) in relation to the interpretation or analysis. This work uses research datasets which may not exactly reproduce Accredited Official Statistics aggregates. Accredited Official Statistics follow consistent statistical conventions over time and cannot be compared to Data First linked datasets.*

#### *Local authority civil penalty notice data*

All local authorities in Y&H were asked for civil penalty notice (CPN) data: Data on offence, frequency and size of CPNs, and recovery rates. Data was collected from eight local authorities from the fifteen authorities in the region.

#### *Data from RRO applications and CPN appeals in the FTT*

Toward the end of the project, data created by Marks out of Tenancy (MOOT) using text-mining to scrape all the published decisions on the category 'Housing Act 2004 and Housing and Planning Act 2016' was sent to the Research team. A very small part of the data, concerning CPN cases and Rent Repayment Orders, was analysed.

#### *Data from legal aid*

Quarterly statistics for legal aid are published publicly.<sup>73</sup> Using that data, the number of legal aid applications for harassment and wrongful eviction over time were identified.

## WP4: Tenant experience

(Lead: Lisa O'Malley, University of York)

### Developmental work

This work package aimed to explore tenant experience of landlord-perpetrated crime. In part, ESRC funding was used to employ a support worker at the Bradford housing charity Hope Housing, which works with tenants excluded from the mainstream housing market. Early development was conducted with tenants and support workers. This work indicated that tenants did not always recognise that they had lived in the 'private rented sector': their experience included often extremely precarious living arrangements where there was still an expectation that they should pay rent. This research collaboration ended as a consequence of internal management change at the charity.

### Qualitative interviews and case studies

The WP then began work with Safer Renting, to pursue joint objectives for this WP and WP5. Safer Renting offers tenants relations expertise to London boroughs and works to secure beneficial outcomes for tenants who have been victimised by criminal landlords. Many tenants in their caseload will have experienced actual or attempted illegal eviction. Formal interviews with Safer Renting clients were conducted by Safer Renting caseworkers, using a topic guide agreed by the team and which focused on the tenants' rental experience. In total, fourteen depth interviews were completed and transcribed. These interviews were analysed using a thematic grid. Case workers were themselves interviewed to secure a further 33 case summaries. This method ensured that

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<sup>73</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/legal-aid-statistics-january-to-march-2025-data-files>

these clients remained anonymous. All these clients had agreed that their cases could be used for further research.

Attempts were made to contact other charities and agencies who support tenants who are likely to be marginalised in the private rented sector, with very limited success.

## WP5: Illegal eviction

(Lead: Julie Rugg, University of York)

This WP, which was not anticipated in the initial objectives for the project, was completed in collaboration with Safer Renting and staff working across the other WPs. This element of the project aimed to assess the degree to which the Protection from Eviction Act 1977 could be regarded as fit for purpose. This WP included multiple elements.

### Qualitative data

#### *Safer Renting interviews*

Interviews were conducted with fourteen Safer Renting clients who had been subjected to illegal eviction or attempted illegal eviction. The interviews were completed by Safer Renting staff. The interviews focused on the rental experience of the tenant from the start of the tenancy, including reasons why the tenant moved into the property, experiences through the course of the tenancy and events leading up to the attempted or actual illegal eviction.

#### *Safer Renting cases*

Safer Renting casework staff were asked to select four or five cases to discuss. All had been referred to Safer Renting between December 2023 and April 2025. The case workers were asked for basic demographic information about the client, the circumstances in which the case came to the attention of Safer Renting, and a summary of the problems with the landlord as reported by tenant including a narrative of the attempted or actual illegal eviction.

#### *WP2 interviews*

All the respondents who were interviewed in WP2 were asked about the incidence of illegal eviction and about the local authority responses in tackling this problem. Interviews with housing options staff were strongly focused on procedures in response to illegal eviction.

#### *WP3 qualitative data*

A number of the elements from WP3 qualitative data was used for this WP. This included:

- The case study of local authority MNM;
- Interviews with criminal lawyers and staff in other local authorities;
- Interviews civil lawyers and staff at advice organisations;
- Observation of three cases at Sheffield Magistrates' Court.

### Quantitative data

#### *WP3 quantitative data*

This WP also drew on the following quantitative data from WP3:

- MoJ data, reporting on the incidence of illegal eviction, sentencing and outcomes;
- Data from FOI request to London boroughs;
- Data from RRO applications and CPN appeals in the FTT;
- Data from legal aid.

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