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'What can a landlord do?' Criminal landlords and techniques of neutralisation

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Abstract

This article draws on neutralisation theory to explore the accounts of landlords involved in law-breaking in England and Wales. The private rented sector (PRS) in England and Wales and elsewhere has long been considered a space which can foster vulnerability and exploitation by bad actors. These actors include criminal landlords who may engage in illegal evictions, letting unsuitable accommodation, and complicity in cannabis cultivation or sexual exploitation by those renting their properties. While previous research has documented the challenges of policing the PRS, there is a dearth of scholarship engaging directly with criminal landlords. This article addresses this research gap, drawing on 16 interviews with landlords who have broken the law to develop understandings of how these actors rationalise and justify their illegal behaviours. In doing so, this article extends existing scholarship on neutralisation theory to a hitherto unexplored group – criminal landlords – and seeks to develop understandings more broadly of vulnerability and criminality in the PRS.

Keywords

Criminal landlord, private rented sector, property, techniques of neutralisation

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Introduction

In England, a fifth of all households live in the private rented sector (PRS) (English Housing Survey, 2023). While many of these households are safe places managed by landlords acting within the law, recent research in England has identified what has been termed a ‘shadow’ PRS (Spencer et al., 2020). Within this sector, activities such as landlord fraud, the letting of unsuitable accommodation, threatening behaviour and illegal evictions are known to take place. Tenants at the bottom end of the PRS are often vulnerable as a consequence of poverty or other forms of disadvantage (Rugg, 2026), and the ongoing cost of living crisis in England and Wales is likely to have pushed more vulnerable people into unsuitable PRS accommodation in recent years. Some individuals may have an uncertain migrant status and ‘no recourse to public funds’, rendering them reliant on precarious housing. These same individuals may be unfamiliar with their legal rights and unwilling to engage with statutory authorities when they experience victimisation, further exacerbating their vulnerability. In the ‘shadow’ PRS, threatening behaviour and outright criminality for personal and financial gain often occur (Spencer et al., 2020), with landlords frequently positioned at the centre of these exploitative activities.

While landlords can themselves be victims of crime through misuse of their properties by tenants, letting agents or other actors (see L’Hoiry et al., 2025), this article focuses on the criminal and, at times, exploitative behaviours of landlords. Landlord criminality has been documented in England and Wales and internationally (Kupka et al., 2021; Spencer et al., 2020; Vols and Belloir, 2019). However, research on this topic remains limited and, critically, no studies have engaged directly with landlords to explore why they break the law or how they justify such behaviours. To address this gap, the article draws on neutralisation theory, applying Sykes and Matza’s (1957) techniques of neutralisation to qualitative accounts from landlords to examine how narratives of justification are constructed. Rather than treating neutralisation theory as a theory of criminal aetiology, techniques of neutralisation are understood here as cognitive strategies (Maruna and Copes, 2005) that play a role in the persistence of criminal activity.

The article makes several original contributions. First, the data are entirely original given the absence of engagement with criminal landlords in existing literature, offering the first insights into how such landlords perceive and rationalise their own offending. More broadly, the article advances understanding of offending within the PRS, a pressing issue recognised in policy (DLUHC, 2022) and charitable discourse (Shelter, 2023) but under-researched academically. It also extends the application of neutralisation theory to a new group of offenders, offering fresh insight into how this framework can illuminate criminal landlords’ moral decision making.

The article is structured in five parts. First, it outlines how the PRS provides opportunities for criminality and reviews the regulatory framework in England and Wales. Second, neutralisation theory is discussed with reference to key scholarship. Third, the methods underpinning the study are detailed. Fourth, primary data are presented to demonstrate how criminal landlords draw on techniques of neutralisation to rationalise illegal and exploitative behaviours. Finally, the article concludes by situating landlords’ accounts

within neutralisation theory, reflecting on how these techniques enable actors to reconcile their behaviour with normative values.

Modes of criminality in the PRS

Attention has been directed to the ethical and moral status of private landlordism, particularly in housing studies and environmental and planning literature (see Gil et al., 2025; Sayer, 2023). The centrality of housing to an individual's sense of security and worth and the increased financialisation of residential property create tensions around conceptions of a decent, secure home as a moral good and a human right, which sits uneasily with financial values assigned to residential property as a globally traded asset (see, e.g. Byrne, 2020; Nethercote, 2020). Landlords may be regarded as morally reprehensible actors that benefit from power and asset imbalances in the housing market. For example, Grohmann (2020) notes that images of 'parasitical' landlords have in recent years in the United Kingdom been particularly associated with the easy availability of 'buy-to-let' mortgages, since 'it gives those with the means to obtain a mortgage the option of having those without such means buy them a property' (Grohmann, 2020: 457).

This perceived inequity paints the landlord as a predatory individual who is likely to take advantage of other affordances for exploitation or sharp practice that exist within the letting arrangement. For example, letting informally can benefit both landlord and tenant in terms of reduced bureaucracy and perhaps a below-market rent. However, such practices could also signal less benign intent, including deliberate tax evasion and the desire to side-step regulations that protect tenant rights or relate to property quality. Highly informal, and so problematic, practices are in evidence in Central and Eastern Europe, and parts of Italy and Spain (Bargelli and Bianchi, 2018; Hegedüs et al., 2014).

A presumption that landlords are innately morally compromised actors within the housing system has obscured the fact that some landlords are involved in active criminality. For example, Kupka et al. (2021: 240) detail the predatory practices of landlords in Czechia, explaining that the renting of over-priced and substandard properties has led to the exploitation of vulnerable (mainly Roma) communities and the 'creation and reproduction of disadvantaged neighbourhoods'. In England, a similarly strong association between criminal landlordism and the exploitation of vulnerable groups is in evidence. Market and policy drivers have created a set of arguably 'subaltern' renters, unable to access the mainstream market. Excluded renters include tenants whose migration status creates a risk for landlords who are apprehensive about falling foul of punitive 'Right to Rent' legislation (Cheetham, 2025). Landlords can also be unwilling to let to tenants in some way reliant on Universal Credit, whose housing support has been capped at some way below market rents (Rugg and Wallace, 2021). At the same time, local authorities are using private landlords to discharge homelessness duties, funnelling clients with heightened vulnerabilities into the lowest-cost rentals (Rugg, 2026).

In these ways, the housing market creates criminal opportunities for landlords seeking to exploit tenants who have limited access to 'mainstream' private rentals. Kupka et al. (2021: 241) argue that, in Czechia, such practices may be described as forms of illicit entrepreneurship and organised crime since they involve a 'focus on profit, continuity,

division of labour, illicit activities and the use of violence', features considered to be key elements of organised crime groups. In England, Spencer et al.'s (2020) work has evidenced landlords' involvement in criminal activities within what they have termed the 'shadow' PRS. Here, landlords may partake in illegal evictions, intimidation of tenants, trespassing and generally exploitive behaviour against vulnerable tenants. This behaviour may also extend to organised criminal activities, including human trafficking, cannabis cultivation and large-scale financial fraud (see L'Hoiry et al., 2025).

No work has so far estimated the scale of involvement for organised crime actors in letting property in England or for criminal landlords more broadly. The proportion of lettings in the 'shadow' PRS is similarly difficult to establish, since tenants and landlords in this particular black market are unlikely to be visible within standard housing datasets such as the English Housing Survey or the English Private Landlord Survey. The 2022 White Paper *A Fairer Private Rented Sector*, which outlined government measures to improve the PRS, indicates that there is evidence of a 'small number of criminal landlords' in the PRS, but 'the exact number is unknown' (DLUHC, 2022). The article draws on data from the EPLS to estimate that 35% of landlords in England are 'likely to be compliant with most legislation, though less likely to be compliant with good practice indicators'. On the other hand, the article estimates that 11% of private landlords are 'least likely to be compliant with either legislation or good practice indicators'. It is worth noting too that EPLS data are based on a survey of landlords who have lodged deposits with a deposit protection scheme and are therefore already likely to be a fairly compliant group of landlords. Based on these findings, the white paper introduced measures that substantially scaled up local authority powers to tackle the problem.

In England, the regulatory framework in response to landlord-perpetrated criminality is fractured: separate enactments focus on quite specific behaviours. For example, recent legislative intervention has aimed to tackle practices deemed to be morally questionable, including evicting tenants who request property repairs (retaliatory eviction), or on a whim ('no fault' eviction), or imposing discriminatory practices in tenant selection ('No DSS').¹ The Housing Act 2004 and the Housing and Planning Act 2016 created a mechanism for evaluating property quality, frameworks for ensuring landlord compliance, and sanctions for non-compliance. This regulation includes the option of local authorities serving improvement notices directing the landlord to rectify the problems specified in the notice; failure to respond to a notice within a given timeframe constitutes an offence. This legislation also permits local authorities to issue banning orders, which prohibit landlords from letting property for a defined period. The Protection from Eviction Act 1977 specifically defines harassment and illegal eviction as criminal offences: the Act protects tenants from actions intended to make a tenant surrender their tenancy and requires that eviction can only take place through due process of the law. This includes the serving of the required notice, a court hearing finding in favour of the landlord and the issuing of a warrant of eviction (Arden et al., 2012).

Prosecution data relating to these offences does not offer an indicator of their incidence. Local authorities operate a broad range of strategies in response to poor property quality, including 'soft' enforcement measures that aim to persuade landlords into compliance rather than seeking prosecution (Cowan and Marsh, 2001; Harris et al., 2020).

As a consequence, use of improvement notices has been found to be piecemeal: a 2018 study drawing on Freedom of Information data found that 18% of responding authorities had served no notices at all (Simcock and Mykkanen, 2018: 9). Limited use has been made of banning orders: fewer than 40 have been issued since the introduction of the regulation (Colliver and Hunter, 2025: 57). Prosecutions for illegal eviction have also been low: a recent review of the operation of the Protection from Eviction Act found an average of around three prosecutions a month across England between 2011 and 2023 (Carr et al., 2025: 69).

In summary, the idea of landlord-perpetrated crime associates active criminality with a sector that is already regarded as being morally compromised, and where the imbalance between landlord and tenant relations creates opportunities for exploitation. Fractured regulatory frameworks cause uncertainty around the behaviours deemed to be criminal, and patchy enforcement at the local authority level frames a 'postcode lottery' risk of prosecution. This is the context in which individual landlords can define their own willingness to engage in criminal activity.

Neutralisation theory and techniques of neutralisation

Discussions of neutralisation of deviant behaviour can be traced back to the work of Sutherland (1941) and Cressey (1953) on white collar crime and embezzlement, respectively. Both authors argued that offenders consciously create narratives to justify their offending, engaging in 'vocabularies of adjustment' (Cressey, 1953) which allow them to rationalise their criminal behaviours. Sykes and Matza's (1957) subsequent work expanded on these discussions, proposing five techniques of neutralisation which they argued allow offenders to suspend, temporarily, normative values to justify deviant acts. Their work, which represents the foundation of neutralisation theory, was in part a response to explanations of juvenile delinquency that portrayed offenders as having inverted normative values within a delinquent subculture opposed to law-abiding society (Cohen, 1955). Instead, Sykes and Matza (1957: 666) argued that delinquents are aware of and adjust to 'the demands for conformity', treating societal norms and values as 'qualified guides for action' within which there is flexibility to rationalise behaviour according to specific circumstances. They further suggested that this flexibility mirrors criminal law itself, where violations may be defended through explanations such as self-defence, necessity or insanity. As such, 'much delinquency is based on what are essentially an unrecognised extension of defences to crimes' (1957: 666), allowing individuals to remain committed to normative values while rendering violations 'acceptable' if not 'right' (1957: 667).

Sykes and Matza (1957) proposed five techniques of neutralisation, often referred to as the 'famous five' given their subsequent influence in criminological research, which they argued allowed offenders to neutralise and justify their illegal behaviours. First, *denial of responsibility* 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 outside of the individual and beyond his control' (1957: 667) such as upbringing, schooling, or other circumstances. Second, *denial of injury* 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. Third, *denial of the victim* 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 'transforming [the victim] into a person deserving injury' (1957: 668). Sykes and Matza (1957) also acknowledged that victims may be denied simply by virtue of not being physically present at the time an offence is committed or being unknown to the offender. Fourth, *condemnation of the condemners* sees offenders reject claims of condemnation from others and instead 'shift the focus of attention from his own deviant acts to the motives and behaviours of those who disapprove of his violations' (1957: 668). Condemners may be accused of hypocrisy, jealousy or of engaging in worse instances of deviance themselves. Fifth, *appeal to higher loyalties* involves offenders reframing the normative values of society as less important than the needs of a smaller, specific social group. This technique, importantly, is not a rejection of society's norms and values but involves a balancing act between societal demands and those of a group to which the offender may have a deep attachment. In this sense, 'the delinquent may see himself caught up in a dilemma that must be resolved, unfortunately, at the cost of violating the law' (1957: 669) but the delinquent does, ultimately and outside of specific personal circumstances, accept the importance of the law.

Sykes and Matza's (1957) original work has spawned many scholarly attempts to apply techniques of neutralisation to a wide range of deviant (and non-deviant) contexts. White collar and corporate crime have often been explored with reference to neutralisation theory (see Piquero et al., 2005; Schoultz and Flyghed, 2020), but this framework has also been applied to forms of deviance as diverse as ticket touting (Moretti, 2023), computer hacking (Chua and Holt, 2016), drug dealing (Sikorska, 2017), human trafficking (Antonopoulos and Winterdyk, 2005), rural criminality (Eliason and Dodder, 1999), animal rights activism (Liddick, 2013), non-compliance with COVID rules (Cullen et al., 2021), paedophilia (De Young, 1988) and genocide (Alvarez, 1997) to name just a few. Scholarly work has also sought to build on Sykes and Matza's (1957) original conceptualisation, with research from Ashforth and Anand (2003), Schönbach (1990), Bryant et al. (2018) and others seeking to refine and extend the famous five techniques. Kaptein and Van Helvoort (2019: 1279) have proposed what they describe as 'the most comprehensive model of neutralisations in the sense that it covers more (sub)techniques than other proposed models of lists of neutralisations'. Their model consists of four broad categories which are subdivided into 12 techniques, which are themselves further broken down into 60 sub-techniques. The four categories (and their relevant techniques) are: (1) distorting the facts (by nuancing facts; denying facts; and inventing new facts); (2) negating the norm (by reducing norms to facts; appealing to another norm; and relativising norm violation); (3) blaming the circumstances (by blaming limited options; blaming the limited role; and blaming the limited choice); and (4) hiding behind oneself (by hiding behind imperfect knowledge; hiding behind imperfect capabilities; and hiding behind imperfect intentions) (Kaptein and Van Helvoort, 2019).

The primary data presented below draws on the existing canon of neutralisation theory scholarship to advance new understandings of the behaviours of criminal landlords and the ways in which they seek to neutralise and justify their own law-breaking.

Methods

This article is part of a wider study that was designed as a qualitative exploration of the experiences of various actors in the PRS, including landlords, tenants and those tasked with regulating or intervening in the PRS, such as local authority representatives and the police. This article only presents data from interactions with criminal landlords, given that the aim of the article is to explore how such landlords themselves understand and rationalise their criminal behaviours.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to target participants who identified as landlords and who were aware they had committed illegal or potentially 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 who had previously worked with the police following his arrest for being complicit in cannabis cultivation taking place in his rental property. The research team also reviewed media reports of landlord prosecutions and contacted over 20 of these landlords via social media to invite them to the interview. This was not successful and indeed 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 United Kingdom. Wording these invitations was a careful exercise and potentially loaded terms such as 'criminal' and 'exploitation' were omitted to avoid putting off potential participants at the outset. Instead, landlords were invited to discuss 'the pressures landlords face in relation to adhering to legal and regulatory obligations' – a major point of interest of the wider project this article is part of – and the research was framed as wishing to speak to 'landlords who may have broken the law, deliberately or inadvertently, or have broken the law as a result of the challenges of following certain rules'. 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 that the study was focused on landlords' illegal behaviours. In total, 17 interviews were carried out as seven potential participants did not respond following the initial exchange of emails/messages. One interview was subsequently discounted for the purposes of this article since it was clear that the participant had not broken the law. This article therefore presents data from 16 interviews. Interviews were conducted between March and July 2024. As per Table 1, participants ranged from 'amateur' landlords operating a single property or a small portfolio, to professional landlords with large property portfolios. Participants owned properties in England and Wales. As per Table 1, some participants' illegal activities had been investigated and prosecuted (by local authorities or the police) while other participants had not been subject to any intervention at the time of interviews.

Table 1. Participant information.

Landlord	Property portfolio ²	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
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 licencing breach	Some offences enforced; others not discovered/enforced
12	Medium	HMO licencing 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

Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews were used, and landlords were initially asked about their property portfolios and the circumstances of becoming a landlord before exploring their criminal behaviours. Interviews were not hostile but, in some instances, researchers challenged landlords' accounts when it was felt that these were inaccurate or incomplete. Interviews at times elicited long and somewhat unstructured conversations, which went far beyond the remit of the study. Neutralisation theory was not explained to interviewees, and they were not asked specifically about this. Instead, interviewees were asked to describe their illegal activities and asked open-ended questions about why they behaved in the ways described. Answers to these questions elicited attempts by landlords to justify and rationalise their criminal activities and this was

identified as a repeated pattern across all interviews. As a result, neutralisation theory emerged during data analysis (see further explanation below). All interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent, and transcripts were produced. Participants were assured that all necessary steps would be taken to mitigate the possibility of personal identification, and the primary data below have been redacted or changed with this in mind. It was made clear to participants in information sheets and during pre-interview discussions that interviews would seek to explore their law-breaking behaviour, to understand why they had undertaken such activities, and how they reflected on them now. In doing so, the research sought to be as overt as possible and the authors drew on previous experience of conducting overt research with offenders, paying particular attention to transparency on matters of how participants' accounts would be analysed and where findings would be published.

Interview data provided information-rich, subjective reflections of participants' experiences as landlords, and thematic analysis was deployed to identify common trends in their experiences. An inductive approach was taken to the analysis, seeking to identify data-driven themes from participants' transcripts. The analysis followed structured steps drawing on Clarke and Braun's (2013) phases of thematic analysis. First, familiarisation with the data was undertaken by listening to audio files once and reading transcripts several times. Second, several themes were identified from the data and, relevant to this article, the theme of justifying and rationalising criminal behaviours was recognised as a common pattern across all interviews. Transcripts were then re-analysed several times to review the identified themes and split these where necessary. Here, sub-themes were identified such as different justifications offered by landlords for their criminal behaviours and the research team at this point used the frame of techniques of neutralisation to code the data. Participants' data were then extracted to provide compelling accounts of ways in which landlords rationalise and justify their criminal behaviours.

Like all research, this study has some limitations. The nature of our recruitment materials (which avoided pejorative content and implicitly invited participants to rationalise and justify their own behaviours) and the reliance on self-selection for participants arguably raises questions about the types of landlords who did and did not participate. It is likely that many landlords do not engage in neutralisation techniques following criminal and/or exploitative behaviours simply because they feel no need to draw on such justifications. Indeed, there may be other landlords too ashamed to discuss their criminal activities with researchers. As a result of these unknown landlords who chose not to participate in the study, the findings are naturally limited in their generalisability, and the data speak only to landlords who feel compelled to somehow justify their law-breaking behaviours. Further, a sample of 16 participants evidently limits the generalisability of the findings. Criminological research tends to favour big samples (Maruna and Matravers, 2007), although the size of sample that can support convincing conclusions varies from situation to situation (Clark et al., 2021). Arguably, what counts is information power, a concept indicating that 'the more information the sample holds, relevant for the actual study, the lower number of participants is needed' (Malterud et al., 2016: 1759). We believe this to be the case in our sample. Our participants constitute a relatively rare, and certainly un(der)explored, type of offender, who naturally possess knowledge that is specifically

suited to addressing the aims of the research. More broadly, the purpose of the article is not to generalise findings but rather to offer subjective accounts of the ways (some) landlords understand their own circumstances and how these are framed to justify law-breaking. It should further be noted that this study is the first to engage directly with criminal landlords and the data presented here are therefore entirely original. Given the absence of extant literature which has engaged with criminal landlords to understand their experiences, even a relatively small sample offers new and insightful data, limitations on generalisability notwithstanding. Moreover, criminal landlords proved to be an exceptionally hard-to-reach group. Unlike many criminal entrepreneurs who can often refer researchers to additional participants through snowballing (Hobbs and Antonopoulos, 2014), criminal landlords operate within more embedded, institutionalised, and legal structures such as the housing market. Their criminal behaviour is therefore less visible and often perceived as part of the 'normal' functioning of the housing market. This lower visibility, combined with inadequate data collection by the authorities and limited strategic law enforcement against many housing offences (see Colliver and Hunter, 2025), helps explain why recruiting criminal landlords was more difficult than engaging with other offenders, and underscores the embeddedness of landlord criminality within housing market structures. Thus, while a sample of 16 participants may seem small, we argue that it provides a solid basis for presenting the original data below.

Findings

This section is framed around Sykes and Matza's (1957) famous five techniques as a framework around which to explore the primary data. However, the discussion below also draws on scholarship which has subsequently expanded beyond Sykes and Matza's (1957) original focus on youth delinquents.

Denial of responsibility. Participants frequently denied their own roles in the context of law-breaking taking place in or in relation to their properties, often referring to their 'limited role' (Kaptein and Van Helvoort, 2019) in illegal activities or by outright blaming others to fully deny their responsibility. Actors identified as being *more* responsible for law breaking than landlords themselves included letting agents, portfolio managers and local authority representatives:

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

I set one person to manage my properties. A Polish guy who ... had a lot of connections ... In the end he was stealing money ... And then he got into drugs and some of the houses were turned into drug houses. He was taking money from me, from drug people, all sorts of stuff. (Landlord 11)

Landlord 13, prosecuted for cannabis cultivation, neutralised his offending by pointing to his limited role in this enterprise, and dispersed responsibility towards the other actors

involved who, unlike him, were hardened criminals. Landlord 1, who failed to declare that her property was used for the purposes of cannabis cultivation, blamed the local authority's housing officers who, she claimed, lied about their knowledge of tenants' drug use in order to find accommodation for them, an omission which in her eyes had led to the tenants' use of the property for cannabis cultivation purposes:

All [the tenants] were drug users, all denied it, went through support housing association workers who lied and they wouldn't take responsibility. (Landlord 1)

The same participant also assigned blame to the local authority for allegedly giving her incorrect advice on housing standards following an inspection of her property. Minimising one's role due to receiving incorrect information and advice has been identified elsewhere as a common technique to neutralise offending (Rhodes and Cusick, 2002). Alongside denial of responsibility, Kaptein and Van Helvoort (2019: 1276) have termed such narratives as 'hiding behind imperfect knowledge', which allows actors to rationalise that 'they cannot bear (full) responsibility' for wrongdoing since they are given incorrect advice or are ignorant of relevant information.

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)

Similarly, Landlord 9 dispersed responsibility for financial irregularities linked to her properties by pointing to incorrect tax advice she had received. The same participant minimised her responsibility in the context of carrying out an illegal eviction by claiming to have been put in a difficult position by the local authority when she was forced to house a tenant who ultimately was not suitable to be accommodated in the PRS:

I was between the devil and the deep blue sea ... the hospital, they can't get people out of beds because there's no social housing, there's no council housing, so they try to push landlords, and this is what happened to me ... But they were pushing, the hospitals are pushing him back into the private sector ... What can a landlord do? (Landlord 9)

This account may also be understood as 'blaming limited options' (Kaptein and Van Helvoort, 2019) or the creation of a 'false dilemma' (Geva, 2006) whereby an individual presents a narrative which depicts them as having to make an impossible choice when other options were in fact available. Other participants did not identify specific actors upon whom responsibility should be placed but they more broadly sought to absolve themselves of blame for illegal activities, using phrases of absolution such as '*it's not my fault*' (Landlord 12) and '*[I] never done anything but cared and loved people*' (Landlord 14) in their accounts to deny responsibility for their offending.

Denial of injury. Rather fewer participants drew on denial of injury or harm to rationalise their law-breaking although this technique was used by some criminal landlords. Landlord 10, who admitted illegally evicting a tenant who had been accused of (but never prosecuted for) using drugs, appeared to engage in distortion of the facts (Kaptein and

Van Helvoort, 2019) and minimisation of the damage (Schönbach, 1990) incurred by his tenant in arguing that circumventing legal eviction processes had actually helped the tenant since it meant their drug-taking would not be revealed to authorities.

I visited her, and I said ... please be aware that you have legal rights in this, you might want to research them, but 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)

Elsewhere, Landlord 16, who trespassed into a property and disposed of a tenant's possessions illegally, denied harm by explaining that the tenant was in receipt of state benefits and, therefore, had not suffered any financial detriment. Her justifications for this incident also extend to another technique, denial of the necessity of the law (Liddick, 2013), as she described trespass laws as a '*technicality*' that she was willing to ignore.

It was 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. So, because [the tenant] is fully funded, he doesn't care. (Landlord 16)

Denial of victim. Denying the victimhood of tenants was a rather more prolific technique employed by participants to rationalise and justify their illegal activities. Tenants were commonly described in negative and disparaging terms, as '*nasty people*' (Landlord 7) who '*choose to live in squalor and a pigsty*' (Landlord 12) and '*don't seem to care*' (Landlord 16) about upkeeping properties. These descriptions align with the denial of humanity (Alvarez, 1997), in which individuals incurring harm are dehumanised to render their injurious circumstances acceptable in the eyes of offenders. During interviews, every instance of illegal eviction was seen as justifiable by participants, often because the behaviour of tenants was considered to have deserved such an outcome. One participant blamed the excessive 'moaning' of his tenants for his failure to upkeep his properties to an acceptable standard, treating his tenants as 'suckers' (Anand et al., 2004) undeserving of his attention:

We didn't like going around the properties and if you go to a property 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. (Landlord 11)

Alongside drawing on specific examples of tenants' poor behaviour in the eyes of landlords, participants offered broader and more sweeping commentary on the attitudes and unreasonable expectations of tenants, linking this to lower social standards and expectations among some people.

I think the problem is quite a deep one in culture in the West at the moment, particularly in the UK, is that people are used to thinking that they're entitled to everything. You know, they're

entitled to living in a house or an apartment. The fact that somebody else should not limit their behaviour to do what they want with the place where they live ... It's completely ridiculous. (Landlord 4)

There is no sense of responsibility ... The younger ones, they have no sense of self responsibility. Everybody else is responsible for them ... they can live how they want. (Landlord 1)

Describing tenants in these terms appears to have allowed landlords to rationalise that any harms incurred by tenants have been brought on themselves either via their actions or, more abstractly, their poor attitudes and sense of entitlement (Alvarez, 1997).

Condemn the condemners. Participants repeatedly sought to condemn the condemners when reflecting on their own criminal behaviours. Local authorities, the police and central government were frequently identified for their poor practices, lack of knowledge of the rental sector and lack of interest in supporting landlords (Kaptein and Van Helvoort, 2019). Condemners were described as '*spiteful for the sake of being spiteful*' and '*totally riddled with jealousy*' (Landlord 7). Kaptein and Van Helvoort (2019: 1269) describe this as 'reducing the norm to the immorality of the accusers', during which 'people disparage and denigrate their accusers to show they do not have the right to accuse'. Participants described local authorities as '*hating landlords*' (Landlord 9), leading them to feel '*constantly attacked*' (Landlord 3). A common narrative among participants was what they perceived to be the hypocrisy at the heart of housing regulations in which the PRS is held to higher standards than 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)

Things are repaired. I mean, 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? I mean, it's disgusting. (Landlord 2).

Participants recounted many examples of turning to local authorities or the police for support when tenants committed offences in their properties and being met with disinterest or no response at all. This was frequently used as a justification for non-reporting of cannabis cultivation or for the use of illegal evictions and, in such cases, participants repeatedly blamed the circumstances and the lack of practical options to justify their conduct. Importantly, participants were clear that these limited options had been created by the ambivalence or poor practices of condemners themselves. More broadly, government policies and legislation designed to improve health and safety and living standards in private rented accommodation were disparaged in various ways by participants, including accusations of being ill-informed, biased, vindictive, and lacking competence:

The EPC [Energy Performance Certificate] requirements have been put together by somebody that doesn't really understand construction or construction technology, how houses are built or how they're heated. (Landlord 4)

It 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)

Charitable organisations such as Shelter, who are often critical of poor landlord practices, were also repeatedly criticised by participants as condemning landlords while offering no alternative solutions to the housing crisis in the United Kingdom. Their views were dismissed as those of '*the loony left*' (Landlord 2), ascribing extreme political leanings to organisations seeking to hold landlords to account.

Appeal to higher loyalties. Participants appealed to higher loyalties by identifying beneficiaries of their illegal activities for whom breaking the law was deemed justifiable. Landlord 15, for example, argued that financially supporting her son was a sound rationalisation for tax evasion on her rental income. More frequently, however, landlords sought to contextualise their law-breaking in light of broader exigent circumstances such as the housing crisis in the United Kingdom, the plight of victimised women, or the precarious lives of migrants. These discussions represented appeals to higher loyalties of sorts, in the sense that participants referred to their landlordism as making critical societal contributions, which were rationalised as more valuable than adhering to certain laws. This may also be understood as an appeal to higher goals or an appeal to a higher moral principle (Liddick, 2013). For instance, reflecting on her practice of housing undocumented migrants, Landlord 9 explained:

[I would] take somebody who was off radar, didn't have papers. Otherwise, they could be destitute and, in particular, women. I took a couple who were vulnerable to abuse from white people knowing they didn't have papers and ... forced into prostitution roles ... in order to give them some kind of safe base. And you know, if they worked on the black market and gave you some money, you certainly wouldn't turn that way. Unfortunately, the right to rent legislation put me in a very difficult situation on that, because if I did get found out doing that, I would end up in prison. (Landlord 9)

Elsewhere, Landlord 12, who has had a prohibition order served on his property for unsuitable living standards, referred to the vulnerable people he housed and reflected on his own childhood experiences as a key motivation.

We have taken ex-offenders, sex offenders, druggies, alcoholics. And people from all walks of life ... And we've had, I mean, women who have, are fleeing domestic violence. I've got a heart for domestic violence. My mother was one. She was a victim of that all those years ago. And we've lived in battered wives' homes as a kid. And I decided to accommodate those people knowing that they would be safe. (Landlord 12)

Landlord 5, who has carried out several illegal evictions, pointed to the additional employment opportunities created by her landlordism, which she framed as a valuable contribution to support other independent enterprises in a difficult economic climate:

I've got a part-time employee who manages the properties, but also all the maintenance. So, electricians, builders, plasterers, joiners ... I spend on maintenance every year and ... that's money that goes into someone else's business. So, you know, I create business for them as well. (Landlord 5)

Other participants referred more broadly to the government's failure to provide sufficient social housing for vulnerable (and otherwise) people, and the valuable contribution made by PRS landlords to address this critical societal issue. Landlord 3 claimed landlords are expected '*to fix all these societal problems*', while Landlord 5 described herself as having '*done the role of the police, the social worker, the Home Office*'; such is the perceived expectation on landlords to plug gaps in public services. Other participants echoed this sentiment:

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)

It's the system that's broken, but then it trickles down to landlords to fix it. And it trickles down to knife crime on the street. It trickles down to the mental people running around with knives and machetes, you know? And this is what it boils down to, because nobody actually deals with the base of the structure, the problem at the beginning. (Landlord 14)

These accounts demonstrate landlords' attempts to position their activities both as an appeal to higher goals than merely adhering to the law, but also to their good intentions in attending to the plight of vulnerable people, a technique described by Ferraro and Johnson (1983) as the appeal to the salvation ethic. Situating their own illegal conduct as a justified means in the wider context of challenging socio-economic conditions speaks to how landlords view themselves and their contributions outside of specific instances of law-breaking.

Relatedly, a repeated feature of interviews with landlords was their reference to their own strong morality and ethics, a technique which may be understood as an extension of appeal to higher loyalties or, more specifically, aligns with Bryant et al.'s (2018) technique of appealing to their good character. Participants often reported that they regularly housed tenants in receipt of state benefits (despite there being no obligation to do so); that they set the rent at lower than the highest permissible limit; that they had not increased the rent for several years despite being allowed to do so; and that their properties were maintained to the highest standards (even when they had been prosecuted for poor living standards). Landlord 12 (served with a prohibition order on his HMO property) explained that he worked in criminal justice and, therefore, had '*a very strong sense of justice and things that are legitimate and things that are fair*'. Landlord 10 meanwhile, who had previously illegally evicted a tenant and had been pursued by the local authority for failing to adhere

to health and safety regulations, described in the first few minutes of his interview that she had made one of his properties available free of charge for NHS staff during the Covid pandemic. Landlord 14, who was prosecuted for overcrowding and substandard living conditions, similarly explained that she had won community awards and had voluntarily delivered medicine to vulnerable people during the COVID pandemic. As part of these discussions, participants also frequently cast themselves in opposition to bad or rogue landlords. Research has referred to this variously as ‘relativizing the norm violation’ (Kaptein and Van Helvoort, 2019: 1271), or selective social comparison (Anand et al., 2004). So, even while discussing their own illegal activities, participants rejected negative labels ascribed to the worst types of landlords. Landlord 5, who carried out several illegal evictions, complained about bad landlord practices impacting the perception of other good landlords:

I’m not saying that every landlord’s good. There are bad landlords out there and it’s a shame that there are because they’re making the job of the good landlord much, much worse. (Landlord 5)

Landlord 6, who also carried out multiple illegal evictions, was supportive of a national landlords register to ‘*stop the scammers*’ and benefit what she perceived to be honest landlords like her. These sentiments suggest landlords have been so successful in neutralising their own illegal conduct that they are able to disassociate themselves completely from criminal labels and even support measures designed to target the very same activities they have carried out (Moretti, 2023).

Discussion and conclusion

Scholarly applications of neutralisation theory to various types of offenders have been prolific in the past several decades but this article is the first to attend to the accounts of criminal landlords, thus extending this conceptual framework to a new group. While we acknowledge that a sample of 16 participants makes generalisability difficult, the near complete absence of extant research which engages with criminal landlords means this article stands out as an original contribution to discussions of landlord criminality and the rationalisations these actors offer to account for their offending. In the accounts detailed in this article, a wide range of techniques are drawn upon by criminal landlords, going beyond Sykes and Matza’s (1957) original famous five and extending to techniques developed in subsequent scholarship. Criminal landlords’ accounts of specific incidents at times involve drawing on overlapping techniques as they engage with multiple mitigations for their behaviours. Particularly noteworthy in the data collected in this study is that only two participants explicitly expressed regret for their law-breaking (Landlords 13 and 15) but even in expressing regret, they minimised their offending by arguing that these behaviours were limited to a single, short-term incident, a neutralisation technique previously described as ‘first-time, only-time crime’ (Rosenbaum et al., 2011). For the remainder of the participants interviewed, criminal behaviours were seen as justified in the specific circumstances that they had been committed, or justified in the sense that those harmed by their activities were undeserving of sympathy. Landlords’

accounts show that while outright denial of harm is not common – it is perhaps difficult to deny the harm someone might suffer when they have nowhere to live following an illegal eviction, for example – other techniques such as denial of victimhood and condemning the condemners are used expansively and repeatedly. Tenants with whom relations had soured, often leading to illegal evictions, were described in dehumanising terms (Alvarez, 1997) by landlords who felt entirely justified in removing them by any means necessary. By disparaging and denigrating potential victims of harm, participants were able to deny victimhood and cast any injurious circumstances as somehow of a tenant's own making.

Landlords frequently blamed others for their offending, diffusing responsibility by portraying themselves as wronged by betrayal or incompetence, having limited roles in illegal acts, or citing hypocritical or ill-informed condemners (Rosecrance, 1988) who, in their eyes, contributed to the conditions that led to law-breaking. Many condemners were vilified, with the hypocrisy or ambivalence of local authorities and charitable organisations often used to neutralise landlords' responsibility. Landlords felt attacked by actors in central government and local administration, reflecting negative popular discourse around private-sector landlords in the United Kingdom (Grohmann, 2020). Far from being 'partners' (Cowan and Marsh, 2001) working alongside local authorities to deliver sustainable housing strategies, landlords often felt that they worked in opposition to local authorities and described these actors in disparaging and negative terms, identifying local authorities as perhaps the most hypocritical of all condemners.

It is worth noting, albeit from a modest sample, that specific neutralisation techniques are deployed in response to particular forms of law-breaking, especially where exploitative or harmful behaviours are clearly present and difficult to justify. During illegal evictions, where harm is hard to deny, landlords denied victimhood and described tenants in dehumanising terms, casting them as undeserving of due legal processes. Regarding financial irregularities, landlords rarely denied harm or victimhood but often minimised their responsibility and roles. Condemnation of condemners was frequently deployed in discussions of cannabis cultivation (and failure to report it) and substandard living conditions. In such cases, criminal landlords seek to deflect condemnation onto others. Notably, appeal to higher loyalties (and associated techniques) was deployed broadly and cut across accounts of landlords discussing different forms of law-breaking.

Parallel to this, criminal landlords readily cast themselves in positive terms, appealing to their own good characters (Bryant et al., 2018) and engaging with a salvation ethic (Ferraro and Johnson, 1983) which paints them as making critical contributions to societal crises centred on housing and vulnerability, even as their own actions exacerbate these issues. Here, it is perhaps worth noting that for most participants in this study (14 out of 16), landlordism was a secondary activity in that they held other (mainly professional) occupations. Many participants had inherited properties or invested in property as a secondary income stream. Critically, according to all participants, their offending was limited exclusively to their landlordism and they claimed to lead otherwise law-abiding lives. This arguably explains their ability to compartmentalise their law-breaking behaviours and locate specific neutralisations for these. Participants reject 'rogue' and criminal labels because they do not offend outside of their landlordism, and by drawing

on techniques of neutralisation, they are able to distinguish themselves from criminality in the broader sense. This is reminiscent of Klockar'' (1974) metaphor of 'the ledger' in that compartmentalising activities 'has the offender saying 'yes, I know this act is bad but look at all the good I have done', thus considering the individual's ethics to be accounted for by way of a moral balance sheet, in which individual entries are less important than the overall positive or negative balance' (Mackenzie, 2020: 49). So successful have landlords been in neutralising their illegal behaviours that they are able to seemingly completely dissociate themselves and their actions from those of 'rogue' or bad landlords, implicitly rejecting these labels (Moretti, 2023) and even, at times, casting themselves as the victims of circumstances which propelled them to (reluctantly) commit crime. These landlords view themselves as reluctant pragmatists (Sombart, 1967), who simply seek to 'get things done' in the midst of 'inherited' or artificially created circumstances, no matter how brutally unforgiving and uncompassionate they might be; and their rationalisation is facilitated by references to a reality that permeates socio-economic relations. Where Pitt's (2008: 39) 'reluctant gangster' views himself as a 'product of, and an actor in, a world demarcated by poverty and exclusion, and big city corruption' as well as a response to insecurity, the criminal landlords in this study view themselves as the product of the pre-emptive fear of losing control over their property one way or another. Criminal landlords therefore appear to accept normative values in the main, but in the specific context of their landlordism, they cast their circumstances as justifying the violation of these values. In doing so, and to return to Sykes and Matza (1957: 667), landlords are having their 'cake and eating it too', in the sense they can be 'committed to the normative system and yet so [qualify] its imperatives that violations are "acceptable" if not "right"'.

Policy and practice implications and recommendations

The findings presented in this article have considerable policy and practice implications. Criminal landlords' rationalisations may be understood as 'excuses' and Situational Crime Prevention (SCP) approaches have long advocated for the removal of excuses to address criminality (Cornish and Clarke, 2003). By drawing from SCP, a number of policy and practice recommendations emerge based on landlords' accounts in this article. First, simplification of regulatory obligations on landlords and greater availability of information about these obligations may help address denial of responsibility. Since denying responsibility often rests on landlords' claims that they lack guidance for their letting activity, local authorities should ensure that clear enforcement protocols and widely available sources of advice and information are available. Streamlining legal obligations for landlords and providing clear, accessible guidance may also help remove excuses for non-compliance. Second, early-intervention enforcement, such as improvement notices and/or formal warnings, should be deployed 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 exploitative practices and, therefore, removing rationalisations centred on lack of knowledge, responsibility, or denial of harm. Third, early mediation between landlord and tenant when tenancies start to become problematic may help avoid further escalation

of conflicts that can lead to illegal eviction (or other criminal behaviour). Such mediation may disrupt attempts by landlords to blame tenants for their injurious circumstances, thus denying harm or victimhood. Finally, efforts should be made to change landlord culture and move towards greater professionalisation of landlordism. Public campaigns and initiatives promoting professional standards among landlords may help shift public attitudes towards criminal landlord behaviours. These initiatives should focus on the importance of letting as a regulated activity and encourage landlords to view compliance as a professional/business responsibility. Future research may usefully explore the feasibility of these recommendations and their impacts on criminal landlords' attempts to neutralise their criminal activities.

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Notes

1. This includes the Deregulation Act 2015, and the Renters' Rights Act 2018. Note that the latter two measures are not yet in operation.
2. Property portfolio sizes: Small 1–2; Medium 3–9; Large 10+.

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