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Tougher action on criminal landlords needed to overhaul failing system

New research involving a criminology expert from Northumbria University has found councils and police forces across the UK are failing to crack down on criminal landlords operating at the margins of the private rented sector.

Four new reports – covering enforcement, illegal eviction, landlord-perpetrated tenant abuse and criminality in the rental market – suggest current laws and enforcement systems leave vulnerable tenants exposed while repeat offenders operate with little fear of repercussions.

The research, funded by UK Research and Innovation's Economic and Social Research Council and published by the University of York, in collaboration with Northumbria and Sheffield universities and the London charity Safer Renting, highlights that civil penalties are quicker and have high fines. However, criminal prosecutions, which are required to secure banning orders to force criminal landlords out of the market, are too slow, under-resourced and often result in minimal penalties.

In some cases, courts issued fines as low as £100 for illegal eviction offences, and, under the Housing and Planning Act 2016, less than 40 landlords have so far been subject to Banning Orders in the past decade.

Councils described repeat landlord offenders involved in hazardous housing, harassment or eviction offences, but that they were almost impossible to remove permanently from the sector under current law.

Researchers say there have been times when the police have inadvertently assisted unlawful evictions due to unclear procedures and lack of collaboration and oversight.

Dr Julie Rugg from the University of York's School for Business and Society said: "The deterrent for these crimes are so weak that criminality, such as rent-to-rent scams, slum rentals, cannabis farms, and money laundering have become embedded in the rental system. Stronger and consistent collaboration between agencies can stop this cycle, but local authorities and the police lack resources to investigate and skills to prosecute.

"It causes unimaginable harm to those who have no choice but to rent housing in the shadow private rented sector, where criminals operate with impunity. To come home one day, perhaps as a single parent, working shifts, to find the locks have been changed, is terrifying. Illegal eviction often robs victims of their home and all their belongings.

"Renters are told by the council and the police that it is 'not their area' to intervene. We have seen cases where the police have actually helped the landlord evict someone. The legislation that offers protection from illegal eviction dates from the 1970s, it is now time for a change."

Researchers argue that the lowest end of the private rented sector has

become “fertile ground” for abuse, with some tenants living in dangerous homes or being coerced into criminal activity.

The charity Safer Renting, which contributed to the project, said some tenants were trapped in situations where challenging their landlord could leave them destitute.

One tenant cited in the research described arriving home to find all her belongings in black bags on the pavement. She said: “My landlord told me he’d thrown it out the front door because I’d ‘asked too many questions’. The police said it was a civil matter. I had nowhere to go.”

[Georgios Antonopoulos](#), Professor of Criminology from the [School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Northumbria University](#), said: “This research demonstrates that the current system enables criminality, with multiple points at which offences can occur - whether through informal letting arrangements, power imbalances between landlords and tenants, high demand that allows poor standards to persist, patchy enforcement, or inadequate sanctions.

“The private rented sector offers affordances that can be exploited. Changing a single element will not be enough. The findings point to the need for coordinated interventions across the whole system: strong, targeted enforcement for criminal landlords, alongside better support for those who may only occasionally breach regulations.”

The researchers are urging councils to adopt more proactive strategies, including using Banning Orders and Interim Management Orders to remove the worst offenders from the market.

Among the recommendations are:

- a review of the Protection from Eviction Act to strengthen safeguards for vulnerable tenants
- simpler pathways for councils to prosecute offenders
- improved support for victims, including easier access to Rent Repayment Orders
- mandatory inspection of any property before a tenant is placed there by local authorities

Dr Xavier L'Hoiry, from the University of Sheffield, said: "Our report shows distinct patterns of exploitation. We have slum landlords who rent out unsafe or overcrowded accommodation; scam landlords that often illegally convert properties into multiple occupancy or use fake tenancy agreements; and criminal letting agents, who may facilitate illegal activities such as cannabis farms.

"At the more extreme end we have organised crime groups in the rental market that includes human trafficking, benefit fraud and modern slavery. We have criminal connections across the sector that are far more widespread than we expected."

While new legislation such as the Renters Rights Act is expected to improve standards, researchers say it will have limited impact without adequate funding for enforcement teams. Future policy must focus on protecting the most vulnerable renters, who find it impossible to escape from the shadow private rented sector and access legitimate properties.

David Scully, Deputy Head of Service for Safer Renting said: "This report details the psychological, physical and financial scars carried by renters who have experienced shocking levels of abuse at the hands of their landlords and agents. It exposes a shadow private rented sector where people behave as if they expect never to face accountability for their actions and, as the report illustrates, this is a reasonable assumption for them to make.

"Now is the time for the whole sector to work together to puncture this atmosphere of impunity and exploitation. Tenants who report abuse should be supported effectively by professionals and the perpetrators of abuse must be held accountable using the full range of powers available."

Discover more about this research and access the four reports by visiting criminalityintheprs.org

Press release adapted with thanks to the University of York.

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--- Please contact media.communications@northumbria.ac.uk with any media enquiries or interview requests ---

Contacts



Andrea Slowey

Press Contact

Head of Corporate Communications (interim)

andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk

07708 509436



Rachael Barwick

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk

07377422415



James Fox

Press Contact

Student Communications Manager

james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk



Kelly Elliott

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk



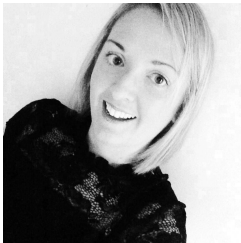
Ruth Lognonne

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

ruth.lognonne@northumbria.ac.uk

07923 382339



Gemma Brown

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk