

Unlawful or just awful?

Young people's experiences of living in the private rented sector in England

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Abstract

Young people increasingly comprise the key demand group for private rented accommodation in England and are overrepresented in the sector. For many young people this is their first experience of independent living, managing a tenancy and dealing with a landlord. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with young people, this article focuses upon their experiences of living in the private rented sector in England. The article explores how young people's experiences of independent living are often spoiled as a result of poor property conditions and management practices. The article raises issues about the quality of accommodation and repairs services provided in the private rented sector in England, as well as highlighting ineffective legislation and regulatory controls and insecurity of tenure. The article questions whether the private rented sector as it currently operates in England, is an appropriate housing solution for young people given the risks and nature of the conditions with which they often have to live.

Keywords

landlords, legislation, private rented housing, tenants, young people

INTRODUCTION

It is well documented in the youth studies arena that the processes by which young people typically reach adulthood have become more complicated and protracted as traditional life course patterns, family ties, household structures and labour market opportunities have become fraught with uncertainty and risk. These changes are prominent across Europe, even though this article is confined to an English context. Since the mid-1980s in England, young people have been subject to a number of statutory provisions and policy regimes that have eroded their civil and social citizenship rights (Marshall, 1963), transformed their social and economic circumstances, and diminished their status in society by virtue of age grading. In these ways young people individually 'have to negotiate a set of risks that were largely unknown to their parents' (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 1). Furthermore, the diverse personal circumstances of young people in England, for example, social class, financial circumstances and family backgrounds, in addition to individual characteristics, such as shyness, have a profound influence upon the ways in which they respond to and deal with the risks they face in everyday life. The decrease in financial support for young people through housing and welfare benefits and educational grants for students also contributes to a greater sense of insecurity about both the present and the future. For these reasons and others, young single people are viewed as occupying a position in a highly individualized 'risk society' (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991) where they are increasingly forced to make choices in circumstances of insecurity and uncertainty. Contingency and uncertainty are now part of everyday life and these factors have a profound influence upon young people's transitions into adulthood (see, for example, Furlong and Cartmel, 1997) and their experience of independent living.

One area of research in youth studies that has received little attention is that of the housing situations of young people who have left home and are living independently and the risks they are subject to on a daily basis. The relevance of young people's housing situations should not be overlooked as their experiences of independent living are an overall qualitative component of their transition to adulthood and can contribute to their success, or lack of, in other spheres of their lives, such as educational attainment, personal relationships and performance in the labour market, as well as their likelihood of becoming homeless. This article seeks to contribute towards filling this gap in knowledge and focuses on the position and experiences of young people in private rented accommodation in England. The first part of this article outlines related research into the private rented sector (PRS) and young people in England and provides a context for the research before moving on to describe the motivations for carrying out the study and how the study addresses the gaps in knowledge about young people and their experience of independent living in the sector.

The PRS in England is a small, residual sector comprising only 10 per cent of all households and, for the most part, the sector accommodates young and vulnerable households. This compares with 70 per cent owner occupation and 20 per cent social renting. The tenure structure in England is very much dominated by a home owner ethos (see, for example, Kemeny, 1981) and these figures are interesting in comparison with other European countries where different government subsidies and policies, as well as private finance initiatives, have produced markedly different tenure structures. For example, in Germany where affordable housing has been a pronounced feature of policy and owner occupation is more difficult to access than in England

(Balchin, 1996), the PRS is the largest sector comprising 49 per cent and provides accommodation for all types of households rather than only marginalized groups. The social rented sector is very small at only 6 per cent. However, in Sweden the PRS comprises 24 per cent, and social renting is in similar proportions at 21 per cent, with owner occupation comprising the remainder, whereas in the Netherlands the PRS is of a similar scale to that in England comprising 12 per cent but as a result of public subsidies there is a much larger social rented sector of 35 per cent. These comparative figures and the consequent tenure structures and public/private subsidy elements of each tenure across countries provide only a brief insight into the nature of the different tenures and a more in-depth look at the PRS in England is inevitably required.

In recent years the PRS in England has become a key sector in which young people live. Although the sector is small (about 10 per cent) it performs a crucial role in accommodating young people as they make the transition to adulthood. In 2000/1, 410,000 young people aged 16–24 years old lived in the private rented sector in England, comprising 18 per cent of all private renting households in England (Bates et al., 2002). In comparison with other tenures in England, a far higher proportion of household heads are under 25 in the PRS. One in six heads of PRS households are under 25, compared with about one in 20 social tenants and one in 100 owner-occupiers (Kemp, 2004: 115). The tendency for young people to use the PRS as the first port of call when leaving home or institutional settings is well established not only in England but also in northern European countries (see, for example, Iacovou, 2001; Rugg and Burrows, 1999) and the reasons for their concentration in the sector in England have been well documented. These reasons may differ from other European countries and include owner occupation and the social rented sector becoming less accessible or desirable and the postponement of home ownership (see Anderson, 1999; Ford, 1999; Rosser, 1997). Other reasons for increased use of the sector in England include the growing student population (Christie et al., 2002; Kemp and Keoghan, 2001) and the greater use of the sector to house vulnerable young people particularly those leaving institutional settings, such as Young Offenders Institutions and children's homes (see Broad, 1998).

A number of key policy and legislative changes have affected relationships between landlords and tenants in the PRS in England over the last decade and a half. The processes by which landlords and young people became enmeshed in a range of policy regimes began with the introduction of the 1988 Housing Act, which transformed the letting environment in the PRS. The Act weakened rent controls, security of tenure and tenants' rights, providing an environment where there was 'greater freedom for the parties to sort out their affairs by negotiation and contractual agreement' (The Earl of Caithness, HANSARD, House of Lords, 21 July 1988, col. 1518). Further deregulation brought about by the 1996 Housing Act, in conjunction with the introduction of the Single Room Rent (SRR), changed the specific nature of relationships in the PRS between landlords and tenants under the age of 25. One of a succession of restrictions on young people's entitlement to welfare benefits, the SRR restricted housing benefit entitlement of young single people, who are predominantly concentrated in shared accommodation, to that of the cost of a single room, placing further stress upon them to negotiate a reduced rent with landlords or otherwise pay the shortfall.

Underlying the aim of reducing housing benefit expenditure was the belief that housing benefit entitlement provided an incentive for young people to leave home

before they would otherwise do so and that they also chose to live in better quality accommodation that was more expensive than they could afford if they were working (Kemp and Rugg, 1998). This perspective ignores the situations faced by many young people in England who cannot live at home with parents due to domestic conflict, and those young people who have been living with foster parents or in residential care. As a consequence of deregulation of the sector, negotiations between landlords and prospective tenants became a focal point. Classical liberal conceptions of contractual relations underpinned the return of the PRS to free market conditions, as each party is assumed to be able to negotiate on equal terms and enter into relationships as legal equals, having reached a mutually satisfactory agreement. This perspective clearly ignores imbalances of power between the parties as a result of, for example, high market demand and inequality of bargaining skill.

Further issues affecting young people's experiences of living in the PRS are management standards and physical conditions. Historically, it has proved difficult for the PRS to divest itself of a poor image associated with substandard property conditions and poor management standards. The PRS is a diverse sector and there is considerable variation in the levels of professionalism adopted by landlords towards property letting and this is particularly significant in relation to attitudes towards the legal framework, levels of attachment to property, and the manner in which they regard their tenants (Bevan et al., 1995; Crook and Kemp, 1996; Thomas et al., 1995). In comparison to social renting and owner occupation, the PRS has some of the worst housing conditions in terms of facilities and services, and levels of disrepair and unfitness (Crook and Hughes, 2001; Leather and Morrison, 1997). The 2001 English House Condition Survey found that the incidence of 'non-decent' dwellings was much higher in the PRS than in the other main tenures. About half of all PRS dwellings were non-decent compared with a third of dwellings in the stock as a whole (Kemp, 2004: 85). Damp, condensation, overcrowding, and inadequate cooking and heating facilities are widespread in the sector and not only simply cause inconvenience but also have an effect upon the health and well-being of tenants. Poor property conditions are also associated with tenant dissatisfaction in the PRS. Tenants reporting poor relationships with landlords were most likely to do so as a result of unsatisfactory property conditions and conflict over repairs. This article explores these issues in more detail below.

Moreover, in spite of contractual arrangements between the parties and numerous pieces of legislation, the sector currently lacks regulatory standards relating to landlords' general accountability to tenants. There is currently much concern about the quality of physical standards, management practices and the levels of service provided by landlords across the PRS. The Government is concerned with promoting 'a healthy private rented sector' by improving 'poor conditions' and ensuring that landlords provide a 'proper service' to tenants (DETR, 2000). The achievement of these aims relies largely upon regulatory controls in the PRS and, despite some existing regulation, considerable problems persist. There is a general understanding that there is much to be done to improve the quality and image of the sector and legislative reform of the sector is in progress (Law Commission, 2002, 2003). However, there is little clear consensus about how the sector can be regulated effectively given its diversity and the threat of landlords retreating from the market as a result of further regulation (Leather, 2001; Rugg and Rhodes, 2003).

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

Previous studies of young people and housing in England have focused upon leaving home or care (Broad, 1998; Iacovou, 2001; Jones, 1995) or the circumstances of specific groups, such as homeless young people (Pleace and Quilgars, 1999), young professionals (Heath and Kenyon, 2001), housing benefit claimants (Kemp and Rugg, 2001) and students (Christie et al., 2002). There has been little research carried out into the environments and conditions young people live in (but see Christie et al., 2002) and, although it is tacitly acknowledged that living in far from ideal conditions can be part of a character building experience for young people, there is a gap in knowledge about the types of circumstances young people experience, the situations they are confronted with and how they manage these issues.

In addition, the property conditions, quality of services provided by landlords and the extent of regulation in the PRS are contingent upon, for example, the extent of rent control, security of tenure, tenants' enforceable legal rights and landlords' financial benefits. As discussed above, in England there is no rent control, only a minimum period of security of tenure – typically six months. Law and regulations governing the sector are difficult for both parties to understand and tenants experience real difficulties in enforcing their rights given their lack of security of tenure and the threat of eviction if complaints are made. All of these factors are important in contributing to the overall regime or atmosphere in which young people reside in the sector and they are particularly important in England, where, unlike in other EU and commonwealth countries, there is no recognition of a consumer element in relation to the rights of private tenants. Furthermore, private tenants' rights groups do not represent a sufficiently mobilized force to have a significant impact upon the government and landlords in general. The consumerist ideal in relation to the PRS in England clearly conflicts with legal assumptions of equality between contracting parties, as described above, and the *lack* of a consumer element in contemporary landlord/tenant contractual relationships still remains bound up in these notions (see, for example, Carr, 1997). The situation for private tenants still remains the same today in spite of the lapse in time since this apt description was made:

... the consumer movement has lobbied effectively for measures dealing with trade descriptions, trading standards, unfair contractual terms, the regulation of credit terms, and the like. These legislative measures are supported by a range of official bodies ... By contrast, housing has not formerly been perceived in this way. There are still extraordinary gaps. For example, 'there is no law against letting a tumble down house' – a similar proposition in relation to a motor-car or other consumer goods would not be regarded as acceptable. (Partington, 1993: p. 42)

It is this atmosphere of insecurity and lack of regulation that young people are faced with in the PRS in England. This article explores conditions in the PRS in England from the perspectives of young people and questions whether it is suitable for accommodating young people who are likely to be living away from home for the first time, lack knowledge in relation to their legal rights as tenants and who are inexperienced in dealing with private landlords.

THE RESEARCH

The research on which this article is based was prompted by concerns about the increasing numbers of young people in the PRS in England, the lack of information about young people's experiences of living in the sector, the risks that they are subject to and the circumstances in which they live. To understand the nature of young people's day-to-day experiences in the PRS and the risks they face, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 15 young people living in the sector. Fifteen landlords letting accommodation to young people were also interviewed. The material presented here is confined to the perspectives of young people (see also Lister, 2004). The perspectives of the landlords interviewed are beyond the scope of this article and are explored elsewhere (see, for example, Lister, 2002).

The research was conducted in a northern English city with a competitive and diverse PRS with rents higher than the national average (Rhodes et al., 2001). To capture the experiences of the different types of young tenants living in the sector, a 'quota' element was built into the selection process and interviews were conducted with five students in higher education, five housing benefit claimants, and five in full time employment but with relatively low incomes. This composition of tenant types was sought to ascertain if there was differential status between the groups and whether this had an impact upon their experiences.

Experience of living in the PRS varied from first tenancy to fourth tenancy with some tenants exhibiting high levels of mobility over relatively short periods of time. Seven males and eight females were interviewed with an age range of 20–24 years. It proved particularly difficult to access the 'youngest' young people, however; this partly reflects the age distribution of young people across the PRS. All of those interviewed shared accommodation with the exception of two tenants, one male and one female, who were both working full-time. The interviews were conducted face-to-face using an interview schedule and interviews lasted, on average, for an hour. They were taped and subsequently transcribed and coded for detailed analysis using a range of key themes.

To enable realistic conclusions to be drawn, the research, although small scale, was detailed and its focus was upon the typical day-to-day experiences of young people and their landlords. In this respect the study differs from previous research into the PRS in England that tended to focus upon extremes of behaviour (Burrows and Hunter, 1990; Marsh et al., 2000). The study explores the types of circumstances, physical conditions and the risks young people are routinely faced with. In this way the research moves away from identifying young people's skills and resource deficits as factors that create difficulties in their ability to maintain their tenancies, but instead focuses upon the conditions they live in as factors that can spoil their enjoyment of independent living and affect other areas of their lives. The remainder of this article explores these issues.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF LIVING IN THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR IN ENGLAND

Tenants in the PRS are reliant upon landlords to provide a reasonable standard of accommodation, safe conditions and repair services. Although classical liberal

conceptions of the law render landlords and young tenants as legal equals, the scenarios described by young people presented below do not support this assumption of equality. Instead young people as tenants in the PRS are shown to have a greater dependence on their landlords for safe accommodation and the provision of services, giving rise to the manifestation of unequal power dynamics between them. This can often arise for a number of reasons: for example, as a result of lack of clarity about the law and difficulties in enforcing rights, as well as lack of private tenant representation and, consequently, a lack of a consumer perspective in English law.

Power in relationships is derived from one party's greater dependence upon another and manifests itself either consciously or unconsciously via unilateral exchange (Blau, 1964; Molm, 1997) even where there is an assumption of equality between the parties. Here the conscious and unconscious 'distancing' of landlords from tenants and property is explored to highlight how young people's rights are either overridden by landlords *actively* withholding or *passively* failing to provide services and perform contractual obligations. Regardless of whether failure to provide services is active or passive, conscious or unconscious, interference with young people's continuing use and enjoyment of property is evident. A number of different manifestations are described below which give rise to *awful* conditions and experiences for young people, some of which are also *unlawful*.

Awful conditions

The way in which landlords set up tenancies, and the nature of the implementation of the tenancy can have an influence upon young people's initial experiences of their new environments and the development of problems and the subsequent success of the relationship. For example, some young people were not given an adequate induction into the running of their new home and problems were also experienced in relation to the condition of the property, in particular to repairs. Difficulties often arose as a consequence of inadequate exchange of information or lack of clarification about a range of issues at the setting up stage of the tenancy. Landlords are not legally obliged to provide tenants with information about, for example, the running of heating systems, and these sort of 'mechanical' issues proved problematic for a number of both experienced and inexperienced renters. These initial problems inevitably interfered with their comfort and enjoyment, creating a bad impression and setting the relationship off to a bad start. Although these issues may appear trivial, the lack of care shown towards tenants, whether as a result of forgetfulness or inadvertence, nevertheless, indicated landlords' 'disinterest' that was interpreted by young people as being symptomatic of them 'just wanting our money'. One young person described a situation faced by a number of tenants, that is, not being able to use the heating and hot water systems when they first moved into property, which was particularly unpleasant in the winter months:

I moved in first and no-one had showed me how to put the boiler on or how to get hot water or anything, so for the first two days I just didn't have any hot water. I was freezing cold and I thought there's got to be something here that, (a) gives me heat and, (b) gives me hot water . . . It's a case of you flick a switch and if something happens it happens and if it doesn't you move onto the next one. So I had to do all that myself. It's all been like trial and error in the house, completely. (Tenant 2, 21-year-old female, working full-time)

Problems also arose at the beginning of the tenancy in situations where young people moved into a property and inherited a problem from the previous tenant(s). This was perhaps due to the outgoing tenant failing to report the problem or due to inadequate checking and poor maintenance by the landlord once the tenant moved out. The most common problem, experienced at the outset of the tenancy, by five of the 15 tenants interviewed was discovering the shower was broken or leaked. A female student described a particularly unpleasant chain of events:

We moved in and we ended up with water pouring out of the light fittings downstairs in the hallway because there was something wrong with the shower, which was dangerous obviously because water and electric don't mix. I mean the light blew downstairs and we didn't have any lights and we had saucepans underneath it to catch it because it was horrible and the carpet was starting to smell. It was a bit of a nightmare. (Tenant 9, 20-year-old male student)

Landlords can exert considerable power in the quality and safety of the physical condition of the property they provide, in addition to the range of services they provide to maintain the property throughout the tenancy. Although a substantial amount of legislation exists in relation to repairs, maintenance and safety standards of property, extraordinary gaps are evident (Partington, 1993), most notably in relation to the precise nature of the landlords' obligations and the discretion they have over, for instance, the level of service tenants can reasonably expect, how this service will be delivered, planned response times for repairs and how the property will be maintained during the course of the tenancy. In the absence of landlords' accountability to tenants for the terms and conditions of services and expenditure on maintaining property, tenants have no powers to compel landlords to maintain and repair the property without resorting to legal action. Therefore, landlords have the power to withhold services and fail to adequately maintain property conditions without a real or meaningful threat of sanctions.

Tenants frequently complained about 'sub-standard' and 'fairly run down' property conditions. The most common complaints were of 'mould' and/or 'damp' with 11 out of 15 tenants experiencing these problems, but none of their landlords responded to complaints. Young people also complained about the constraints imposed on their environment by long delays with repairs, where 'it's sort of finally done after as much time has been elapsed as possible' or non-existent repairs services. The data suggests that although landlords possess a vested interest in their property, there was evidence from only four of the young people interviewed that they felt their landlords were interested in providing them with 'somewhere nice to live'. There was also a feeling among the young people interviewed that respect for tenants was associated with the general condition of the property and the quality of services provided, hence poor quality accommodation and inadequate maintenance was associated with lack of respect for tenants. In addition, young people's overall levels of satisfaction with tenancy relationships appeared to be closely linked with the standard of services landlords provided.

Routinely withholding, for instance, repairs services has a profound effect upon young people's experiences of living in the PRS, and, although they have basic legal rights to these services, they often experience considerable difficulty asserting their rights as they are expected to deal with these issues on their own, irrespective of their bargaining position, capabilities or skills. Landlords readily adopted the strategy

of withholding services, in order to convey their disapproval to tenants, particularly when tenants had caused problems or failed to fulfil contractual obligations. This was occasionally done directly, by explaining to tenants why services were not being delivered, but more commonly by simple non-performance without explanations. A tenant described his landlord's response when he asked for some non-urgent repairs to be carried out:

... the units were all falling apart and grotty, he hasn't done anything about that. I was kind of really nagging him about it and then he brought up the subject of how much rent I owed him so I shut up about that for a bit. (Tenant 6, male, 21-year-old housing benefit claimant)

This situation highlights the differing priorities of each party and the ease with which landlords can attribute non-repair to tenants' failure to pay rent. The landlord's perceived discretion rather than obligation to supply services reflects not a legal relationship but a social relationship where favours are performed in the expectation that they will be returned at some future date. In contrast, landlords often failed to specify their reasons for withholding services to tenants. This was a problematic technique to employ as it relied on young people understanding why landlords were behaving in a particular way and it potentially created bad feeling between the parties. In some circumstances it gave rise to a destructive 'no win situation', especially when tenants adopted similar 'stubborn' tactics, reflecting the game-like aspects of social interactions (Goffman, 1972), rather than those associated with a contractual relationship. These 'tit-for-tat' situations were also extremely difficult to resolve, given that both parties feel that they are owed 'a favour' by the other and do not want to 'give in', highlighting the power differentials arising between the parties.

Unlawful conditions

A worrying part of the research was the extent to which young people lived in poor or potentially unsafe conditions, often with a risk to health. The main areas of concern were electrical and gas appliances and the risk of fire, notwithstanding that statutory requirements relating to these specific issues have been in place for some time to protect tenants. A student describes the risks of having electricity sockets that were 'way over 30 years old' and although there was only one other similar case throughout the 15 tenant interviews, this one is noteworthy because the landlord *literally* exerts 'power over other people's lives' given the potentially serious consequences:

All our electricity sockets are very out of date and don't look like they've been rewired or checked for a few years in the kitchen here and that's obviously very dangerous ... In fact, the washing machine is hired and when the bloke came to fit it he said they were death traps and really he shouldn't let us have the washing machine. (Tenant 1, male, 24-year-old student)

This situation reflects the 'amateur' nature of property management (Kemp and Rhodes, 1997) and the ease of non-compliance with statutory regulations in the absence of enforcement or monitoring activities to uphold tenants' rights to a safe environment. In addition, the data suggests that young people simply accept these sub-standard and unsafe conditions as 'normal for rented property' and appear to be unaware of the potential risks they face, particularly in relation to gas and electrical

safety, unless it is brought to their attention. It is evident that some landlords fail to operate at safe or acceptable standards; nevertheless these standards are endured by tenants. However, such standards in relation to other consumer goods would not be tolerated or regarded as acceptable.

Although three tenants lived in properties with electricity only, it was not apparent from the data that all 15 tenants were aware of the landlords' legal duty to carry out an annual gas safety test. Five tenants stated that they had a gas safety certificate or had problems acquiring one from the landlord, whereas the remainder did not mention this issue. As tenants were not asked directly but were presented with scenarios and also asked to discuss issues from a list of which gas safety was a topic, it was not assumed that failure to mention it equates with lack of knowledge. However, irrespective of levels of awareness of safety requirements, it was evident from the data that some tenants remained unaware of the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning as opposed to gas leaks, of which the majority appeared to be aware. One tenant revealed his potential lack of awareness of the dangers:

Gas safety issues, yeah, we always wondered, but it was reassuring the other week when the boiler man came and we got another certificate. It's in the kitchen so it's quite away from anywhere where we sleep, the gas unit, but even so it's one of those things you always worry about. (Tenant 1, 24-year-old male student)

Only one tenant actually experienced a problem with gas safety. However, the problem could have been averted if the letting agents had acted earlier and replaced the appliance. The tenant describes the events leading up to the defective appliance's replacement:

The chap who came out and did the gas safety said the cooker was safe but that it was on its last legs and he would suggest they [landlord] replaced it and it did pass its gas [safety] certificate . . . none of the ignition actually worked properly and we'd got a rather wobbly valve on it and it was sort of getting rusty as well. We asked them [landlord] about that in August, we then kept asking about that . . . it comes to the last day of the Autumn term [December] and we actually ended up ringing Transco because we'd got a gas leak which was found to be coming out of the cooker. So they ended up paying for Transco to come out and giving us a new cooker. (Tenant 8, 21-year-old male student)

Tenants' experiences revealed that landlords were reluctant to repair and replace, for example, defective appliances and wiring, if there was no likelihood of danger. It was only once the appliance became dangerous or the regulatory authorities were involved that it became a safety issue and the landlord was forced to comply. This inevitably raises serious concerns about the effectiveness of self-regulation and highlights the need for landlords' activities to be closely monitored. A student describes this process:

There's a fire alarm, but there's no smoke alarm, but he's just been pulled up on that. The Fire Brigade have been round, new fire things or something, fire regulations, because it's split into flats and all sorts he's got to replace all the doors and have three hinges on them and all sorts. (Tenant 4, 21-year-old male, working full-time)

A further cause for concern was the extent to which young people were prepared to accept risks in their accommodation as a result of inadequate safety measures. There was a strong sense among those interviewed that there was very little they

could do to force landlords to take responsibility for safety issues and minimize risks. This was particularly significant in accommodation falling outside of statutory requirements to provide safeguards, for example, property that was not classified as a House in Multiple Occupation (HMO), for which there are special regulations, but had similar features. However, it is pertinent to highlight that tenants' perceptions of how responsive their landlord will be influenced whether they approached him/her or not. One tenant, living in a second floor bedsit with one exit, falling outside of the HMO regulations to provide fire precautions, explained the nature of her risk:

Fire, yeah, no fire escape, bit of a shame. We either break our legs or burn to death . . . I honestly don't think he would do anything and it's more hassle than it's worth. I probably should do something about it, but I don't know. (Tenant 3, 23-year-old female, working full time)

In addition, safety issues arose where tenants compromised their own safety while making their accommodation more secure. This invariably involved make-shift security measures and blocking off exits. A particularly alarming case, although isolated, is noteworthy, concerning the precautionary measures a young person takes when a nearby property is burgled:

We were frightened about the back door but we just put a wardrobe in front of it so that even if they [burglars] force it they couldn't get in . . . probably not, no, we couldn't get out. We could get out via those windows, they're double glazed, but they'd easily be opened from inside. (Tenant 5, female, housing benefit claimant)

Although the safety issues discussed primarily relate to the condition of the property, a further risk to health experienced by one tenant was vermin. The tenant explains how an inadequate, make-shift solution to the problem was adopted on the advice of her landlady:

We had two rats that were coming up from the cellar and it was quite horrible. We phoned them [landlady] and said 'We've got rats' and they said 'How many?' and we said 'Two' and they said 'Well block up the hole and it'll be all right' and we were like 'Pardon?' thinking they'd come and do something about it and they never did. . . . they said there wasn't *enough*, there wasn't enough of a problem. One housemate shoved a bit of gravel in and hoped they wouldn't come back . . . (Tenant 2, 21-year-old female, working full-time)

Age and status were mentioned by young people as factors contributing to requests not being taken 'seriously' as landlords assumed 'they can wait a bit longer' because they are not 'older or someone with a family'. Landlords' attitudes and lack of responsiveness towards young people inevitably affected the quality of their environment and their ability 'to be able to feel happy and comfortable in your own home'. Young people often described landlords as 'unapproachable' and this effectively atrophied their ability to 'voice' their concerns (Hirschman, 1970), preventing them from reporting repairs because they were 'afraid to phone up' or were 'worried about having arguments'. This left young people feeling powerless and anxious, as landlords not only exerted power over the quality of their accommodation but also over the quality of personal contact as a result of a social rather than a business interface between the parties. A female tenant described the nature of her overall experience of living independently for the first time:

There's nothing more miserable than not having any heating and not being able to sort out the situation because you're being ignored and fobbed off and just feeling like you're constantly battling, you know, and you are constantly reminded of that because you're living there, aren't you? You can't ever forget about that. (Tenant 10, female, 20-year-old student)

Overall the data revealed the range of problems tenants face during the tenancy and shows that a degree of uncertainty and confusion for the tenant is a feature of most relationships. The data also highlight the extent to which tenants are aware of safety issues and that lack of awareness on the part of tenants conceals potential hazards. Nevertheless, young people take responsibility and/or risks in the property, often as a consequence of the landlord's inactivity, as such inactivity can exert control and a powerful influence over the lives of tenants. In these situations the tenants actions control a specific problem but are not tantamount to taking control of the relationship or forcing the landlord to take appropriate action.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings presented here, although from a small-scale study, show the risks young people can face in their housing environments and relationships with private landlords, as well as the awful and unlawful conditions experienced in the PRS in England. Although it is acknowledged in youth studies literature that young people face a wide variety of risks and choices in their day-to-day experiences and social interactions, this article has highlighted the difficulties associated with independent living. This aspect of young people's lives, although important, is often understated in general youth studies literature. Although this piece of research did not have as its main focus the knock-on effects experienced by young people in other areas of their lives as a result of the difficulties they experienced in their housing environments, a number of issues emerged from the study. The extent of stress, frustration and fear as a result of the awful and unlawful conditions experienced by young people was evident. The types of experiences described in the home environment also had the potential to impact negatively on young people's health, their studies and relationships. Furthermore, dealing with problems and landlords was often costly in terms of time.

The data show that in the absence of direct enforcement mechanisms, such as consumer, legal principles or tenant activism, there is very little that young people can do to assert their rights. The data highlight that the main difficulty young people experience is securing a 'proper service' in relation to repairs and safety issues. Although there is concern about the overall quality and safety of property and service provision in the PRS (DETR, 2000; Law Commission, 2002, 2003) the idiosyncratic behaviour of landlords is difficult to regulate, especially given the diversity of the sector. The difficulties and risks young people experience over repairs service, safety issues and property conditions fall outside the scope of the legal definition of harassment, even though some of the safety conditions described were in breach of safety regulations and, therefore, unlawful. These situations, despite their unlawfulness, still prove difficult for young people to deal with if landlords are only prepared to exercise their discretion. The situations described by young people above can have a significant impact on their health, happiness and the overall quality of their experiences.

Furthermore, these situations can be reasons for the high levels of mobility in the PRS in England that young people demonstrate (Lister, 2004) and the data expose the PRS as an unrealistic long term housing solution for young people.

Inadequate maintenance of property and the approachability and accessibility of landlords when problems arise inevitably influence tenants' ability to enjoy the property. These circumstances reflect the power the owner has over the renters' home in a relationship which is socially constructed in the absence of strict regulatory control. It is evident from the data that the parties are left to regulate their own affairs and imbalances exist in the inter-personal relationships, with tenants having little power over the services they receive or the quality of their environment. In addition, given the risks that young people are forced to accept in the situations described above, there is little evidence to suggest either that they participate in a fair and equitable relationship or that they are protected as consumers against an unsafe and unhealthy environment. Although there is currently much policy and legislative concern about the predicament of young people in the housing market and the condition of the PRS it is unlikely that speedy resolutions will be reached that will adequately protect tenants in the sector, or young people in particular. For the time being young people must deal with these situations as best they can.

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