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Energy vulnerability in private-rented housing: applying Bourdieu to unpack the systemic drivers of vulnerability

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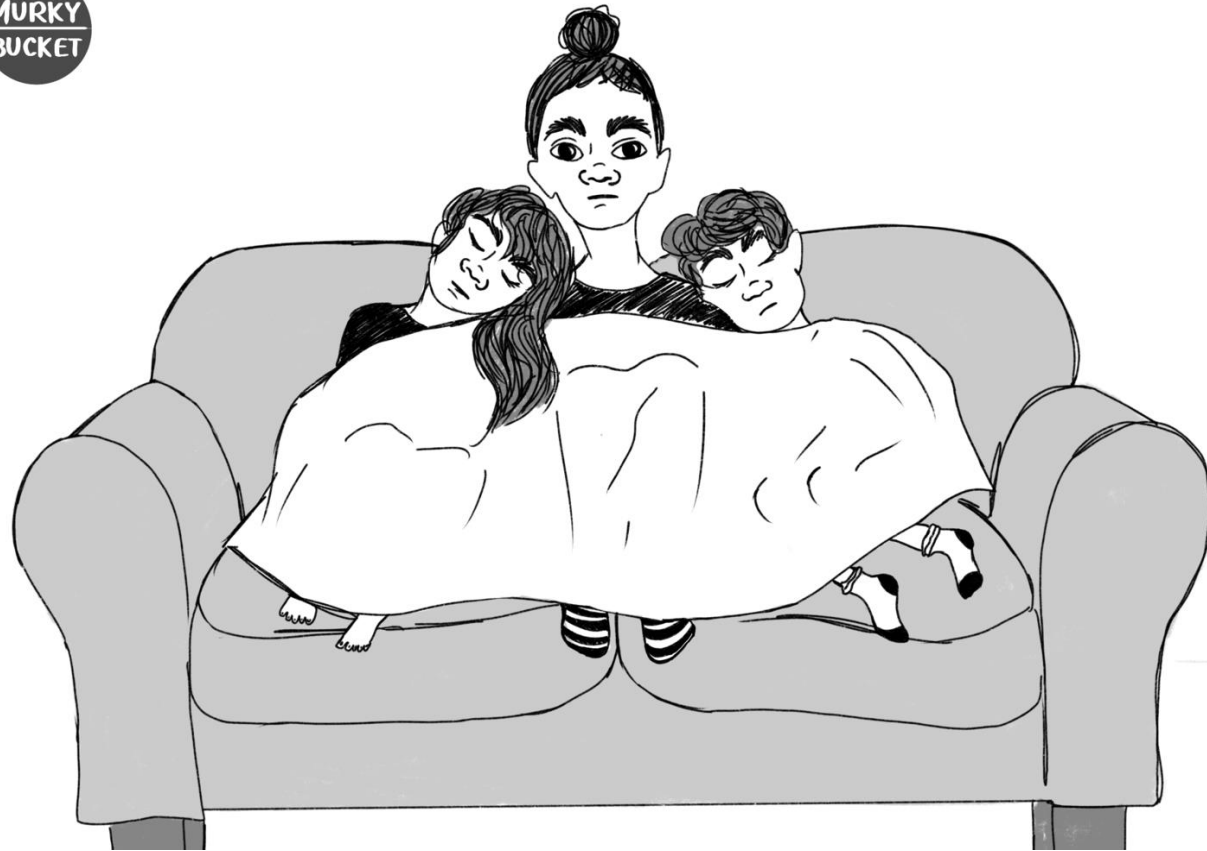
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Energy poverty and energy vulnerability



- **Energy poverty:** being unable to attain an adequate level of energy services in home
- **Energy vulnerability:** an increased risk or propensity of experiencing energy poverty

Starting points: housing conditions in the PRS

- In the UK, the private rented sector (PRS) of housing has:
 - Greatest prevalence of fuel poverty
 - Highest proportion of “non-decent” homes
 - Highest proportion of homes with EPC rating of F or G
 - Highest proportion of homes with damp

(Ambrose et al, 2016, DHLUC, 2022a)

- Some groups at greater risk:
 - people in receipt of housing benefits
 - ethnic minorities
 - those living in small terraces or multiple occupancy housing

(DHLUC, 2022b; Rhodes and Rugg, 2018)



Aims

- What are the social and institutional conditions that produce energy vulnerability in the PRS?
- Through what mechanisms are people made vulnerable?

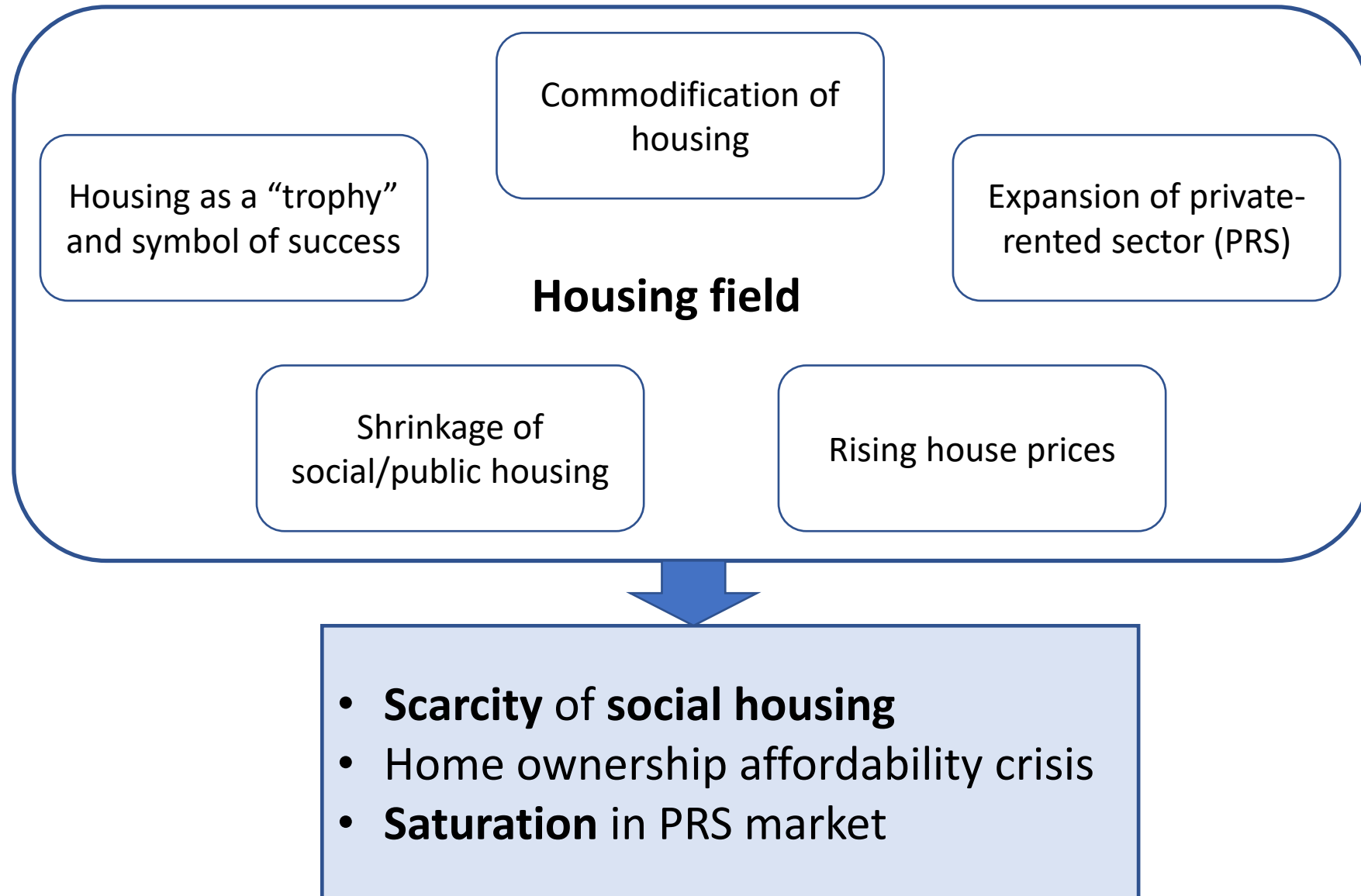
Method: in-depth interviews with housing advisors (n=25) and tenants (n=19), along with analysis of policy documents and grey literature

Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital

- **Field:** Socio-spatial environment in which people compete for positions, resources, power
- Governed by a set of rules
- An actor's position in a given field is a product of their **relative** stock of various forms of "**capital**"
 - Economic – income and wealth
 - Cultural – knowledge, skills, dispositions
 - Social – knowing the right people
 - Symbolic – prestige, honour and legitimacy

(Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Savage et al., 2014)

The UK housing 'field'





**NO
DSS**

Finding a home

- Saturated market = risk distributed across socio-economic spectrum to some degree
- Those with limited **economic capital** most vulnerable
 - Cuts to housing benefit, under-35s only entitled to shared room rate
- **Social capital** can partially offset or mediate a lack of economic capital
- (Negative) symbolic capital and stigmatisation

Inequality in finding a (decent) home

In the areas that we're talking about, you know, the places with the low EPC ratings, the tenants don't care that it's got a low EPC rating. They need somewhere that's going to keep the rain off [...] you've got lots of people that are under duress and need to move soon, so they make selections, you know, sometimes moving into places that have outstanding electrical hazards just because they need to go in.

Environmental health officer

Living in energy poverty in a PRS home

- **Inadequate regulations:** reductions in environmental health teams, gaps in MEES regs, cuts to legal aid
- Tenants fear either eviction or rent increases if they complain – especially **low-income** tenants
- Inequalities in cultural and social capital can exacerbate economic disadvantage
- Stigmatisation and dehumanisation of tenants

“When we moved in, the house was not even cleaned. It should have been ready, it should be cleaned for somebody to be able, super clean, but it wasn’t. It was absolutely filthy. [...] do they just expect, ‘Oh, they’ve just come from the streets so they don’t give a fuck’? That’s how I felt.”

Interview with tenant, formerly homeless, living in damp and cold housing

To conclude

- Energy vulnerability in PRS produced through interaction of structure (design of housing field), and relative agency (determined by access to capitals)
- In a housing field where decent quality dwellings are scarce, those with limited access to multiple capitals face intensified vulnerability
- Beck (1999) posited that exposure to risk has become more unpredictable and individual
- But vulnerability still strongly influenced by social position - class (and other intersecting inequalities) still matter (MacDonald et al., 2005; Curran, 2013; Savage et al., 2013)

What needs to be done?

- Equalise the distribution of capitals (i.e. challenge inequality)
- Alter structure of the housing field so that a decent home is available to all – regulation, enforcement, rent controls, expansion of social housing, national landlord register, housing as a human right

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Thanks for listening!

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