Experiences of 'home' in the Irish private rental sector: a qualitative research study of the experiences of tenants during the COVID-19 pandemic

Dr. Michael Byrne
(School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice, UCD)

Juliana Sassi
(Department of Geography, Maynooth University)

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had impacts across housing systems; indeed there is scarcely any aspect of housing which has remained untouched. Housing has been central to the public health response under the various lockdowns, quarantines and curfews that have been in place since March 2020. For households, it gave a new urgency to 'home' as a refuge, shelter and place of safety. Activities carried out at home also multiplied: homes became workplaces, schools, leisure centres and gyms. There was also, of course, a huge increase in the sheer quantity of time spent at home. In many different ways, we have gained a new awareness of the importance of home for wellbeing. It was not just the positive aspects of home which received greater attention, however, with domestic violence surges reported in many jurisdictions, for example (Kofman & Garfin, 2020).

Housing markets were also significantly impacted by the pandemic. Across many different countries, all manner of policies, including mortgage forbearance, rent subsidies, eviction bans, rent freezes, emergency homeless interventions and new construction incentives, have been introduced over the past year. The private rental sector (PRS) was subject to particularly radical interventions. In liberal/Anglo-phone countries, for example, policy changes advocated for decades by some researchers, such as enhanced security of tenure, rent controls, and support for tenants in arrears, were introduced overnight. Housing markets were also subject to rapid change. In terms of supply, some countries, including Ireland, saw a reduction of output due to the cessation of construction activity during periods of 'lockdown'. In terms of demand, household preferences shifted rapidly, with core urban areas losing out to suburbs and more rural locations, for example (Byrne, 2021a). Tourist demand subsided, leading to the shift of some stock from the short-term tourist letting sector to long term private rental.

The impact of the pandemic on housing systems and on experiences of home is of particular interest to researchers as it unfolded in a context in which many housing systems were already facing significant challenges. Affordability concerns characterise many housing markets, but this is particularly true for the PRS which houses many low income households. Affordability issues in the PRS are related to stagnant wage growth since the last economic crisis (Elfayoumi et al., 2021), precarity in some labour market segments (Arundel & Lennartz, 2020; Pembroke, 2018), and rent increases (Elfayoumi et al., 2021). The issues in the PRS have been of particular interest over the last decade or so as this sector has grown remarkably, with the share of households doubling in many countries over the last two decades, including Ireland, Spain and the UK (Byrne, 2020a). This is associated with the decline of homeownership and the 'generation rent' phenomenon, now widely addressed in the literature (Hoolachan et al., 2017; McKee et al., 2017). The growth of the PRS raises numerous challenges. In some countries high rents are a particular issue. Insecurity of tenure, evictions, poor standard dwellings, lack of autonomy for tenants and the high costs of rent subsidies (such as Housing Benefit in the UK and the Housing Assistance Payment in Ireland (Hearne, 2020) are all concerns. Finally, there is now a strong body of qualitative research highlighting

the difficulties tenants face in creating real homes in PRS housing (Bate, 2020; Easthope, 2014; Soaita & McKee, 2019).

For all these reasons, there is an urgent need for researchers to get to grips with the impact of COVID-19 on housing and home, particularly in the PRS. This paper is based on qualitative research into the experiences of tenants in Ireland's PRS, based on interviews carried out in April/May 2021. The research focused specifically on a number of key aspects of the tenant experience, including the impact of COVID-19 on incomes and employment, the affordability of rent and the impact of emergency policy changes. However, the present article focuses on tenants' experiences of 'home' during the pandemic. It asks to what extent tenants experienced their dwellings as 'homes' and identifies the factors which undermine the experience of home. It also looks at the specific impact of emergency policy measures introduced during the pandemic with regard to this experience. In particular, it looks at the moratorium or ban on evictions in Ireland, which has been in place for much of the year to April 2021, in terms of how it impacted tenants' ability to experience, and indeed create, secure homes in the PRS.

This article focuses on two important sets of questions for housing research. First, it contributes to the challenge of documenting, analysing, and understanding the experience of tenants during the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted above, home has never been more important (Byrne, 2020), and research has already indicated the many ways in which the pandemic can enhance existing inequalities in the experience of and access to home, as well as generate new ones (Brown et al., 2020; Byrne, 2021; Horne et al., 2020). However, there is limited in depth qualitative research examining the experience of home during the pandemic as experienced by private rental tenants, and how it relates to housing inequalities. Second, by examining the particular context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated emergency measures, the paper contributes to the wider, or more long-term, question of the nature of home in private rental housing. This is a topic that has been of significant recent interest to researchers, as more qualitative research emerges which identifies the challenges faced by tenants in their access to an experience of home, and the impact this has on numerous levels (Bate, 2018; Soaita & McKee, 2019).

The paper develops on a rich vein of recent research on the PRS, specifically with regard to the issue of home and of security. In recent years, conceptual innovations have given us a much clearer understanding and a more specific vocabulary through which to understand home in the PRS. Conceptualisations of home, for example, have focused on the importance of ontological security and social reproduction (Easthope, 2004). The literature on security of tenure has also developed in recent years in ways which help us understand what it means to make a home in rental housing. In particular, the concept of 'secure occupancy' (Hulse & Milligan, 2014) has broadened our understanding of security of tenure, focusing on the multidimensional nature of security and the ways it is shaped by the domains of legislation, markets, and culture (see also Van Gelder, 2010). The

present research draws on and contributes to this body of work on home and secure occupancy in the PRS.

The research draws on 35 qualitative interviews carried out remotely (as per public health restrictions at the time of data collection). The research finds that many tenants did not enjoy access to a secure decent home during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main reasons for this are the absence of secure occupancy, poor quality dwellings, and the inability to control or personalise dwellings. For some tenants, the pandemic experience, and the consequent increase in the amount of time spent at home, exacerbated these challenges. The research also finds that the blanket eviction ban had a limited impact on tenants' perceptions of security. This is due to three factors: the temporary nature of the ban; the belief among some tenants that landlords may not comply with legislation; and the way in which the relationship between landlord and tenant impacts tenants' experiences. The research supports early concerns about the impact of the pandemic on PRS tenants (Brown et al., 2020; Horne et al., 2020). It draws attention to the complex ways in which home is undermined for tenants in the PRS and the particular importance of this during the COVID-19 pandemic. This raises important questions about tenure inequality; i.e. the ways in which access to and experience of home is particularly difficult for PRS tenants. It also emphasises the urgency of addressing this issue in the post-pandemic context.

The article is structured as follows. The next section provides a review of recent literature on home and security in the PRS. It also reviews the small but important body of research looking specifically at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the PRS and provides a background to the Irish PRS. Section three outlines the research methodology, while section four sets out a detailed analysis of the research findings. The final section provides further analysis and concludes the article.

Home, secure occupancy and the COVID-19 pandemic

While there are a number of different ways of theorising home (Blunt & Dowling, 2006), at its core home can be conceptualised as a place of shelter which provides ontological security. Ontological security 'identifies the interrelationships between the physical dimensions of housing (such as basic safety and security) and the psycho-social dimensions of home such as privacy, emotional security and identity' (Hulse & Milligan, 2014: 638). Ontological security does not emerge spontaneously from the fact of inhabiting a dwelling, but rather through *practices* through which we construct a sense of ownership, control, stability, privacy and safety (Soaita & McKee, 2019). Recent research in relation to private rental housing tends to emphasise the importance of security, stability, privacy (controlling who enters the dwelling), and autonomy (control over the physical space, i.e. decoration) (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Byrne, 2020; Byrne & McCardle, 2020; Easthope, 2004; Easthope, 2014; Hulse & Milligan, 2014; Soaita & McKee,

2019). It has been argued, however, that the PRS is 'the least conducive tenure for establishing feelings of home within Anglophone societies' (Bate, 2018: 10).

As noted above, security and stability are two features of particular importance with regard to home. At a policy or legislative level, these features have typically been addressed in terms of 'security of tenure'. However, in recent years conceptual advances have provided a more comprehensive understanding of security as an aspect of home. Of particular importance here is Hulse & Milligan's (2014) concept of 'secure occupancy'. Secure occupancy is a 'multidimensional concept' which focuses on the ways in which the actual security experienced by tenants is 'shaped by the interaction of legislation/regulation in a variety of domains, government policies, market factors and the everyday practices of various actors, underpinned by cultural norms about rental housing…' (Hulse & Milligan, 2014: 643). The secure occupancy framework is particularly useful in that it does not privilege the legislative and policy basis for security of tenure, instead focusing equally on the often-neglected issues of market context and cultures. The concept of secure occupancy suggests that tenants' experience of security cannot simply be deduced or assumed on the basis of rights and obligations set out in legislation, policy or lease agreements. As noted in the introduction, the COVID-19 pandemic has placed a spotlight on home in the sense discussed here (Byrne, 2020b, 2021b). The core components of home – security, stability, safety, privacy, autonomy – have all been central to the ability of households to manage the impact of the pandemic.

The pandemic emerged at a time in which the PRS in many countries was already undergoing change and facing a variety of issues and challenges. PRS tenants are often most exposed to some of the major issues in housing systems, for example lack of affordability, insecurity, poor quality dwellings and overcrowding. In addition, PRS households typically disproportionately face challenges associated with precarious employment (Arundel & Lennartz, 2020; Bone, 2014), and are often concentrated in the service sector and indeed in frontline sectors, such as healthcare (Byrne, 2021b). In response to these challenges, widespread emergency measures have been introduced across many jurisdictions. These measures can be categorised in three key policy areas: eviction bans; rent regulation; and financial support for tenants. The OECD (2020) provides a useful summary of measures adopted internationally. Within a sample of 37 OECD countries and nine non-OECD countries, 17 countries introduced measures to suspend evictions in the PRS. This measure was in fact the second most common measure across housing policy in general, the most common being mortgage forbearance, which was introduced in 20 countries. Rent subsidy payments were introduced in 6 countries, while seven countries either froze or reduced rents (see Byrne, 2021b for a wider discussion).

Despite the widespread introduction of additional protections for tenants, there is evidence to suggest that tenants experienced issues in relation to 'home' and secure occupancy during this turbulent period. In the UK, Generation Rent (2020) found that a majority (58%) of renters were worried about eviction despite the

Government's ban. Similarly, only half of private renters felt safe in their home during pandemic, according to a Shelter (2020) poll in England. Qualitative research in Australia has also pointed out that '[l]ow-income private renters, whose ontological housing security is least protected, may also experience anxiety about possible rent arrears and the threat of eviction, despite temporary tenant-protection laws' (Horne et al., 2020: 11).

In addition to the issue of secure occupancy, a further set of issues relate to overcrowding and poor quality housing conditions. Prior to the pandemic, poor quality housing was a perennial issue in the PRS. In England, one in four homes in the PRS does not meet the Government's Decent Home Standard (Shelter, 2020). In Ireland the issue is also well documented (see National Oversight and Audit Committee, 2016). The PRS is also the only housing tenure in which house sharing is widespread (Nasreen & Ruming, 2020), and this poses particular problems from the point of view of COVID-19 transmission and of confinement (Barker, 2020; Public Health England, 2020). Due to public health restrictions many individuals and households have been spending the overwhelming majority of their time at home. Consequently, the importance of the quality of housing has become a matter of significant concern (Barker, 2020). Overcrowded and poor quality accommodation can, moreover, have significant impacts on mental and physical health and on wellbeing (Amerio et al., 2020). *Lockdown, Rundown, Breakdown* (Brown et al., 2020), an in-depth report on housing conditions in the North of England during the pandemic, found that issues such as damp, faulty electricity etc. became more difficult for tenants during lockdown as they were spending so much time at home (see also Soaita, 2021). In addition, the same report found that tenants were more reluctant to contact their landlord to report repairs etc. due to 'fear of possible revenge evictions or deliberate rent increases' (Brown et al., 2020: 7).

As in other countries, tenants in the Irish PRS were particularly vulnerable in the context of COVID-19. On the one hand, Ireland's tenant protections are relatively week. Under the Residential Tenancies Act (2004), tenancies are for a duration of six years. However, there a number of grounds under which landlords can terminate tenancies. In addition to rent arrears and anti-social behaviour, these include if the landlord intends to sell, use or refurbish the property. Tenancies can also be terminated without any grounds within the first six months (Byrne & McArdle, 2020b). Consequently, tenants have little security in practice. Moreover, over the last decade rent prices have increased markedly, further undermining stability for tenants. There is also evidence of high levels of non-compliance in the sector, including retaliatory evictions (Byrne & McArdle, 2020a). Indeed, loss of a private rental tenancy is the largest cause of homelessness in Ireland (Gambi et al., 2018).

The economic implications of COVID-19 and associated public health measures also impact particularly on tenants in the PRS. In Ireland, 15% of workers living in the PRS are employed in the accommodation and food sectors; three times the figure for mortgaged households (O'Toole et al., 2020). Byrne et al. (2020)

estimate that 44% of households working in the sectors of the economy most impacted by the pandemic and associated public health measures were private tenants. O'Toole et al. (2020:11), in their examination of the impact of the pandemic on rent arrears, note that 'the relatively high proportions of workers in the most at-risk sectors indicate that households in the PRS are likely to be disproportionately affected by the shock to the labour market and the resulting impact on household incomes'. On the other hand, we should also note that O'Toole *et al*.'s examination of the potential economic impact of the pandemic on PRS tenants finds that increased income supports (in the form of emergency pandemic payments), and decreased household expenditure, may mean that many tenants experienced minimal effect on their incomes.

In terms of policy measures, in March 2020 a rent freeze and a prohibition on evictions were introduced for an initial emergency period of three months, later extended until the end of summer 2020 (Ahern & Roy, 2020). These measures offered more or less complete protection for tenants, in particular from any form of eviction. Subsequently, in Autumn 2020, as Ireland moved out of its first 'lockdown', the initial emergency measures were replaced by a more targeted, if significantly more complex, set of measures. Legislation was enacted to tie a complete eviction ban to the introduction of Ireland's highest level of public health restrictions. In Ireland, once the government introduces a five kilometre limit on mobility, the blanket tenant protections kick in. A travel limit was in place between January and May 2021. The eligibility criteria for Rent Supplement applicants was also expanded.

Moreover, under Part 3 (Residential Tenancies) of the Planning and Development, and Residential Tenancies, Act 2020 (PDRTA), specific protections have been put in place for tenants whose income has been impacted by COVID-19 and whose tenancy is at risk (referred to as 'relevant persons'). These provisions, however, require a tenant to submit a declaration to this effect both to the RTB and to their landlord, and must also serve a notice on their landlord seeking to negotiate in relation to their rent arrears. These provisions, which last until July 2021, are complex and this complexity may be off putting for some tenants. Moreover, the landlord can also declare themselves to be a relevant person, for example if non-payment of rent on the part of their tenant would lead to undue financial hardship, such as being unable to pay a mortgage attached to the rental property in question. Where a landlord declares themselves a 'relevant person', the protections will not apply to the tenant (Ahern & Roy, 2020). The limited take up of this measure is also concerning: at the time of writing approximately 500 tenants have registered

Research methodology: investigating tenants' experiences of home

The research project adopts a qualitative approach using in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Our interest is primarily in the experiences of tenants during the pandemic, and how different aspects of the challenges associated with the pandemic and emergency policy measures interacted to shape tenants'

experiences of housing and home. Tenancies in the PRS are shaped by economic, political (i.e. policy/legislation) and cultural processes, as discussed above. These processes, however, manifest and interact with one another at the level of the tenant's subjective experience, rather than as discrete areas of policy or legislation. Qualitative research is ideally suited to capturing this set of complex interactions via the analysis of tenants' experiences. Qualitative research is also best placed to examine three further issues that are central to this research. First, the experience of 'home', understood as a place or locus which is continually constructed, interpreted and invested with meaning by residents, and thus must be analysed at the level of subjectivity (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). Second, tenants' experiences of their relationship with their landlord, and how it impacts their experience of home. Third, the ways in which tenants have *interpreted* the eviction ban, i.e. what it has meant to them and their experience of security and of home.

The research is based on three case studies, one of which is a geographic area while the other two are based on social cohorts which are over-represented in the PRS. The geographical case study is Wicklow. Wicklow is part of the Greater Dublin Area and thus an area of high demand for rental housing. Most importantly, it contains a variety of local rental markets with contrasting characteristics. For example, Bray is characterised by moderate rent levels and good connectivity to Dublin; Greystones has high rent levels and moderate connectivity to Dublin; Wicklow Town has low rent levels (in the context of GDA) and relatively poor connectivity to Dublin. The selection of this area thus allows us to capture different sub-markets and, consequently, a variety of income levels.

The second case study is lone parents. Lone parents are over-represented in rental housing, with 46.7% of lone parent families renting. Lone parents' experience of housing issues, as discussed above, is well documented, and many of these relate specifically to the PRS (Hearne & Murphy, 2017; Murphy, 2020). Lone parents are more likely to experience poverty and deprivation, and in terms of housing affordability, 45% of lone parents report a heavy financial burden due to housing costs, whereas the figure is 30% for two-parent families (Roantree et al., 2021). The insecurity and instability sometimes associated with PRS housing is of particular important to lone parent families (Hearne & Murphy, 2017). There is also some evidence internationally that lone parents were particularly impacted by the pandemic in terms of loss of employment and income (in the UK context see Brewer & Handscomb, 2021).

The final case study is Brazilian migrants in Dublin. Migrants are strongly overrepresented in the PRS; the proportion of non-Irish born households who are renting privately is 66% for non-EU 28 households. This is dramatically higher than the figure for Irish-born households, at just 12.7% (CSO, 2016). As is the case internationally (Auspurg et al., 2019), there is evidence of racial/ethnic discrimination in the Irish rental market (Grotti et al., 2018; Gusciute et al., 2020; Pillinger, 2009). Experimental research published in 2020, for example, suggests that both EU-born and non-EU born households experience discrimination in

terms of their ability to access rental accommodation (Grotti et al., 2018; see Gusciute et al., 2020).

Interviews were semi-structured using a number of survey type questions combined with more open ended questions, and typically lasting between 30 and 50 minutes. Tenants were asked about their housing and employment/income situation prior to COVID-19 and how it had changed since the onset of the pandemic. They were asked specific questions on a number of issues, such as their relationship with their landlord, their experience of home, their sense of security, their view of the eviction ban, whether they found it difficult to pay rent or had ever missed a rent payment, and so on. Interviews were conducted on an anonymous basis and over the phone or on Zoom and were recorded for further analysis[1]. Wicklow participants were recruited via Wicklow specific social media groups and local representatives. Lone parent participants were recruited with the assistance of the campaign and advocacy group Single Parents Acting for the Rights of Kids. Brazilian participants were recruited via community specific social media groups as well as organisations providing support to the Brazilian community.

Further details on the characteristics of research participants is provided in Table 1 below. Our sample is generally in alignment with the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of renters as a whole. For example, 43% of our sample are non-Irish born, which is roughly the same as the figure for the population of renters in general (CSO, 2016). Similarly, 20% of our sample were in receipt of HAP or Rent Supplement at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is similar to the proportion of supported households in the PRS generally. The only category which is significantly over-represented is female participants, which make up 83% of our sample. This is in part due to the fact that one of our cohorts, lone parents, were exclusively made up of female participants. However, even excluding this cohort, men were under-represented, with just 2 participants in the Wicklow cohort and 4 in the Brazilian cohort.

---

[1] Interviews with Brazilian participants were conducted in Portuguese by one of the authors, who is a native speaker.

Table 1 Sample characteristics		
	Number	**Proportion (to nearest whole)**
Total sample size	35	
Interviewees – Wicklow	10	29%
Interviewees – Lone parents	13	37%
Interviewees – Brazilian community	12	34%
Non-Irish born	15	43%
Female	29	83%
Male	6	17%
Parent	19	54%
Lone parent	16	46%
Not employed (prior to COVID-19)	2	6%
HAP or rent subsidy recipient (prior to COVID-19)	7	20%
Average age	37.5	
Average properties	5.3	
Average years renting	9	
Average tenancy duration	3.3	
Average rent	€1024	

Home and secure occupancy during the COVID-19 pandemic: research findings

Research participants expressed a mixture of experiences with regard to the twin issues of 'home' and 'secure occupancy'. 60% of our research participants described their current property as 'feeling like home', while 23% said their current property did not feel like home (the remainder gave ambivalent answers). However, further analysis reveals a more complex picture. For example, the number of tenants who did not feel secure was significantly higher – only 54% described themselves as feeling secure, while a significant portion (40%) described themselves as not feeling secure at all. Moreover, some tenants who described themselves as feeling at home went on to describe ways in which they struggle to create a home in the rental sector. For example, Bray1[2], a 29 female tenant living with her partner and two year old son, stated she felt at home in her property, but went to say that she had continual concerns about being evicted, and for this reason was afraid to contact her landlord. Similarly, Bray3, a 39 year old living with his partner and young daughter, described himself as feeling 'somewhat at home', but felt extremely insecure in his property, describing himself as living on a 'knife edge'. LPClare1, a lone parent in her 50's living in the west of Ireland, demonstrated a similar mix of feelings. While she described her property as feeling

---

[2] Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

like home, she went on to say: '[i]t's our home…it bothers me that I can't have security here'. This suggested that in some respects she felt at home, but that feelings of insecurity undermined this sense of home. LPCavan1, likewise, described her property as feeling like home but also felt insecure and stated that she felt her tenancy was 'always temporary'. The complex nature of tenants perceptions and experiences of home and security highlight the complexity of these issues and the ways in which different aspects of tenancies interact to shape tenants' experiences. We now turn to a detailed analysis to unpack these issues further.

<u>Experiences of home</u>

Analysis of the data reveals a number of ways in which the experience for home was undermined for a large portion of the research participants. Three particular themes emerged: poor quality accommodation and minimum standards violations; insecure occupancy; and lack of control over the dwelling (inability to personalise/decorate). These issues are discussed in turn.

From the sample as whole, 13 tenants experienced minimum standards issues. In some instances, these were very significant. Arklow 1, a single woman in her 40s, for example, described her property as 'derelict': 'With the mould and the fungi I have often itchy eyes and cough. And also, it's very cold in there, I just stay in bed under a mountain of blankets'. These issues, unsurprisingly, undermined this participant's experience of home. Minimum standards issues also had an impact on LPSandyford1's (a 42 year old lone parent with two children) ability to create a home:

> I don't feel comfortable inviting people over, because I know the paint is coming off the walls, there's mould in the bathroom.. It is embarrassing to invite people over to a place, when there are obvious maintenance issues. So from that regard, you know, it's not like my home, it is a rental place, you know.

LPMayo1, a lone mother or three, described the condition of her property as 'an absolute nightmare', reporting issues of chronic mould and damp, pest infestation, and faulty plumbing and appliances. This meant that she in no way felt at home during the pandemic, something which affected her mental health and caused her to spend as much time outside of her home as possible. Indeed, she reported spending a lot of her time at her place of work, which was closed and empty due to the pandemic, solely to avoid being at home. LPWaterford1, a 33 year old lone parent, reported a similar experience. She also described her property as 'a nightmare', experiencing problems including damp, lack of insulation, no central heating, leaking roof, and a long period without a washing machine during the pandemic. She also noted that she believed her landlord was using COVID-19 as an excuse no to deal with some of these issues.

The chronic issues with LPWaterford1's property were exacerbated during the pandemic due to the amount of time she and her daughter spent at home. When asked if the last year had changed the way she felt about her home, she replied:

> I think it has. I actually view this place more negatively. You're spending more time here and you're very aware of all the problems that would grate on you and drive you crazy… It's a more constant feeling of entrapment almost…There was a real pressure on me, I have to somehow get out of this house. I don't want my daughter to grow up here… It really put a real onus on me to try and better her life, to find a better home for her, that we're not living this all the time. It [COVID] really compounded it.

D11, a 24 year Brazilian-born participant, also felt issues related to the quality of her home were exacerbated by spending much more time at home: 'I always worked a lot. I had a very busy routine... But there are things that you only notice when you stay at home for a long time… Like the importance of having hot water in the kitchen tap, for example. Or simple things, when you're at home all the time, using everything, electricity, heater, boiler, various things…'

Turning now to the issue of 'secure occupancy', many participants made the point that awareness of insecurity of tenure impacts ability to create a home. WT1, a separated parent of two, noted that her current home was 'just a stepping stone, as it always is'. This reflected her long experience as a renter: in 26 years of renting she had lived in at least 20 properties. Rathnew1, a 40 year old woman living with her husband, who has been renting for 22 years and lived in 29 different rental properties, noted 'I've learned not to think of anywhere as home… I tend not to get attached to places… it's not worth the heartache. I don't ever feel secure in a rental property… you can't make somewhere your home…' She also said that, as a result of frequent moves between rental properties, she had 'learned to travel light, I've thrown out a lot of possessions over the years'.

LPGalway1, a lone parent with three children, when asked if she felt at home in her current property, replied, 'It's funny that. It's my home, I've been there fifteen years, he's a great landlord, but you're never secure'. LPClare1 made specific reference to the importance of this for her child: 'It is, it's our home…it bothers me that I can't have security here. It bothers me more for [daughter's name]'. LPWaterford1 also noted concern that her landlord would terminate her tenancy in order to sell her property, as this was something she had experienced in her previous property. When asked if she felt at home in her current property she said 'Underneath it all I'd feel uncomfortable because I am renting, at any moment the landlord could turn around and sell…There's no security renting in Ireland'.

For Rathnew1, the experience of persistent insecurity in the rental sector resulted in a deep sense of uncertainty that pervaded her experience of home: 'It took me two years to put a flower pot outside because I had this weird thought in my head, if I start to make it look like a home then something bad would happen'. Similarly, Bray 3 stated 'there is a little voice in your head that says, 'no, "don't improve it", because you will be gone soon'. LPGalway1 argued that due to the insecure nature

of rental housing, 'You're reluctant to put money into the house to make it more appealing'. LPTipp1, a 48 year old lone parent with three children, shared similar sentiments:

> It's your home, but it's not your home. Its where you live and you try and keep it nice, but at the same time you're not going to invest a lot of money in it, like sometimes if you're getting something for the garden you think, am I wasting my money here?

The third major obstacle to tenants ability create a home was the their lack of control over their dwelling, in the sense of an inability to decorate, 'personalise' or otherwise make changes to their dwelling. Rathnew1 stated that tenancy rules, such as not being able to put pictures on the wall, impacted her ability to create a home in a rental property. Similarly, LPBalbriggan1, a 37 year old lone parent with a toddler, also felt that inability to decorate impacted on her experience of home. When asked if her current property felt like home, she replied: 'Not 100%... I would love to buy my own place so I could decorate it'. When asked, 'would you describe your current property as feeling like home?' LPSandyford1 replied:

> Probably not, I can't actually paint the wall and decorate, to make it more homely… Even though I have been here for 10 years, at this stage, there isn't any decoration that I have put in there, if you know what I mean. At one stage we had to replace the carpet, I didn't get to choose the colour or anything. It's not my taste, if you know what I mean. It's not what I'd call home.
>
> [Interviewer] Why can't you personalise it?
>
> They [the landlord] don't allow it, we're not allowed to paint the place ourselves.

GS1, a 46 year old mother with two teenage children, also emphasised the importance of control over her dwelling as something she had become more conscious of during the pandemic:

> It doesn't feel like a home, and in the back of my head I'd always like to have a home where, you know, you could paint your own walls and you can feel more relaxed in, and you can do things to. And I guess it's always in the back of your head with rentals, especially if the landlord is very… Like [my current] landlord has a 20 page itinerary of things you can and cannot do. You can't even hang pictures on the wall… It has affected more negatively the way I would feel about my home.

For many tenants, the issues of security and the ability to decorate and personalise a space were often linked together:

> I don't actually ever feel secure in a rental property because nine times out of ten they'll be sold, or something will happen. So there's no security of

tenure in Ireland anyway for most renters, and that's one of the really horrible things about it. You can't make somewhere your home, when you know it's never going to be. You know the lease here, there's a stipulation in the lease that says you can't even hang a picture, so it's very hard to make somewhere home when you can't even hang a bloody picture (Rathenew1).

Rathnew1 also mentioned the issue of pets: 'And in a lot of rental you can't have animals even, you can't even have a cat, there's no sense of home and that.'

Conversely, some tenants specifically mentioned decoration and personalisation as part of what made them feel at home. Bray1, for example, when asked if she felt at home in her property replied, 'Yeah we do feel at home, yeah like we have pictures on the wall, and all our own stuff and all.'

The above data indicates that poor quality standards, insecure occupancy, and lack of control over the dwelling, can all undermine tenants' experience of home. Moreover, it also reveals the ways in which these three dimensions are closely linked. For example, feelings of insecurity can make tenants reluctant to decorate or personalise their dwellings or gardens, which in turn impacts the standard of the dwelling. For many tenants, the impact of these issues on their experience of home intensified during the pandemic due greatly increased importance of home during this period.

Secure occupancy and the eviction ban

The available evidence suggests that the immediate objectives of the eviction ban were largely successful. The ban's main focus was to prevent evictions and to limit the movement of households during periods of lockdown. Complete evidence that would allow us to assess this fully does not exist, but many commentators have pointed to the marked decline in homelessness that directly followed the introduction of the eviction ban. Within our sample, no tenant experienced an eviction or termination of tenancy (although several received notifications once the ban had expired in Spring 2021). The focus of the present research, however, is on tenants' experience of home and secure occupancy, and in analysing the impact of the eviction ban in this regard. Given the importance of security to home, as indicated above, it is reasonable to assume that the introduction of the blanket ban on evictions across the PRS would enhance both security and the experience of home. However, an analysis of the data reveals that, for the most part, this was not the case.

Some tenants perceived that the eviction ban offered an additional sense of security. GS1, a 46 year old mother of two, was one of a small number of tenants who reported such a positive impact. She received a notice of termination during level 5 restrictions. She noted that while her teenage children were upset when she told them about the eviction, it was helpful to be able to tell them an eviction ban was in place at that time:

I'm honest with my kids, so I told them (about notice of termination). My daughter asked loads of questions and went off and processed it, and the other one burst into tears. And to be able to say to them, 'well look there's an eviction ban until X time'… It was a massive security for them. Because they are worried… So being able to say to them, 'look, we'll get to the summer now at least'.

GS1 also noted that the eviction ban gave her greater security when it came to applying for housing supports during the pandemic: 'I think that it [the eviction ban] would have given me more confidence in applying for the rent supplement, knowing that there are slightly more protections in place for tenants'. Similarly, LPWaterord2, a 49 year old lone parent, stated that the eviction ban had impacted positively on her feeling of security during the pandemic. When asked if this impacted how confident she would feel to contact or negotiate with her landlord, she replied: 'I'd feel like the law was on my side, that nothing is going to change while the ban is there'. LPWaterford1 said that the eviction ban 'did provide some sense of security', while LPSandyford1 said, 'It did [give security], I guess, it's comforting to know it's there'.

Nevertheless, only 20% of participants reported that the eviction ban had a positive impact on their sense of security during the COVID-19 pandemic. The two principle reasons participants cited when explaining why they did not feel the eviction ban impacted them were its temporary nature and the suspicion that landlords would not comply with legislation in any event.

For many participants, the temporary nature of the eviction ban meant it did not lead to an enhanced sense of security. LPBalbriggan1, for example, stated that the ban had not made her feel secure: 'No, I know my own landlady, she'd just wait to sell until the first day after the 5km is lifted[3]. It's only temporary, a couple of months. That's nothing in the life of a family'. LPTipp1 described the ban as merely 'kicking the can down the road'. LPCavan1 also reported that the eviction ban did not provide her with additional security, 'I thought, OK great. But then I thought, the COVID thing is getting sorted out… It's a temporary measure, it doesn't give you a sense of security'. Bray 3 also felt that the temporary nature of the eviction ban undermined any additional security it may have offered: 'It is not a protection because it is a very, very short term solution'. Similarly, WT1 said, 'you're just prolonging what's going to happen in the long-run. It made no odds, to be fair'.

Some participants did not believe that their landlords would necessarily comply with the eviction ban, and therefor felt it provided little additional security. Bray 3, for example, had previously experienced a very acrimonious eviction which influenced his perceptions of security of tenure. Similarly, Arklow 1 had previously experienced non-compliance on the part of a former landlord leading to an illegal eviction: 'So I know for a fact that the law means nothing… They can just ignore an

---

[3] Under Irish legislation, as noted above, the eviction ban was tied to the imposition of 5km travel restrictions. Thus, when these restrictions are lifted, the ban automatically expires.

eviction…There's nothing I can do about it'. LPBlackrock1 had a similar response: 'I've seen throughout the years that LLs tend to find loopholes to get around it'.

Secure occupancy, home and the landlord-tenant relationship

The above discussion of the impact of the eviction ban highlights the significance of the landlord-tenant relationship. Indeed, this emerged as an important issue throughout the research. This relationship is particularly important for two reasons. On the one hand, it is closely related to secure occupancy because it impacts the extent to which tenants feel they can exercise control and autonomy in relation to their home. On the other, dealing with minimum standards involves interacting with the landlord, and many tenants do not feel comfortable doing this. Both these issues (secure occupancy and minimum standards) are key to 'home', as argued above.

One way in which tenants' experience of their relationship with their landlord often presented in the research is in relation to fears tenants have around contacting their landlord. The idea of 'keeping a low profile' and 'not wanting to hassle' was common among tenants. LPSandyford1, for example, when asked if she would feel confident contacting her landlord, replied:

> Probably not, because I've asked for several things to be fixed, and I'm just quite aware that they can say no and if I push too hard I may well be asked to move out, so I don't feel that confident in approaching them about quite a lot of things I guess….I kind of don't want to ruin the relationship either… I don't want to cause any hassle for them either.

LPBalbriggan1 described her relationship with her landlord as 'not positive at all': 'I contact her as little as possible. She's very confrontational. If I say there's a problem, she gets annoyed at me'. This again indicates a level of fear for tenants associated, in some cases, with virtually any form of contact with their landlord. In the case of LPBalbriggan1, this undermined her ability to negotiate with her landlord: 'I feel like if I ask her for anything I'd run the risk that she'd say she's going to sell [the property]'. This was also the case for LPTipp1. When asked if she would feel confident contacting her landlord she replied:

> That's hard to give a yes or no answer to because they are very good people, they seem to be happy with me, but I worry that if I maybe have to negotiate with them it might make them think twice.. like I almost don't want them to think about me, I just want to be here, and I want them to be happy, and I don't want to rock the boat.

Several participants explicitly interpreted the significance of the eviction ban within the context of their relationship with their landlord. Kilpedder1, a 41 year old mother of one, noted that although the eviction ban may protect the tenant from eviction, it could not protect the tenant from conflict with their landlord:

'You mightn't be evicted but the in-between part would be fairly stressful, emails back and forth and they [the landlord] might be asking for money'. This reflects findings of previous research that tenants find conflict with landlords extremely stressful, and will thus try to avoid it (Byrne & McCardle, 2020). Like Kilpedder1, LPGalway1 highlighted the potential for a conflict between landlord and tenant in relation to eviction to become very difficult for the tenant:

> I think it would make the relationship very poor, because if they did want you out and you were digging your heels, they could make life very, very difficult for you if they wanted to, you know. I am not really sure if that [eviction ban] offers anyone any real assurance….I'm sure there would be landlords there who would make your life miserable.

Analysis and conclusion

The above analysis reveals that many tenants did not have access to secure homes during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland. The research thus corroborates early concerns about the impact of the pandemic on tenants in the PRS. Many tenants endured the pandemic without a sense of security, without decent quality dwellings, and without control over their home. This represents an extremely difficult experience for many, the full impact of which we will perhaps not know for many years to come. The primary reasons tenants did not feel at home, as indicated above, related to a lack of secure occupancy, the standard of dwellings, and a lack of control over their dwelling. In this regard, the research supports research on the experiences of PRS tenants during the pandemic in the UK (Brown et al., 2020; Soaita, 2021) and Australia (Horne et al., 2020).

The research builds on empirical and conceptual advances in recent research. By conceptualising home in terms of ontological security and by integrating the conceptual framework of secure occupancy into how we think about home, the research is able to capture the complex, and multidimensional nature of tenants experience of home in the PRS. Qualitative research informed by this approach sheds light on the ways in which different dimensions of home interact with one another to shape tenants' experiences. For example, the absence of security shapes how confident tenants feel in their relationship with their landlord. This in turn impacts their ability to advocate for themselves in relation to minimum standards issues. Further, the nature of their relationship with their landlord impacts the extent to which they feel they can create a secure home. At the conceptual level, it is important that we move towards an understanding of home for private rental tenants which captures this bundling of diverse elements and how they reciprocally impact one another.

The research found that while the blanket ban on evictions appears to have been relatively successful with regard to its most immediate objectives, many tenants continued to feel insecure. Tenants identified a number of reasons for this. First,

the temporary nature of the ban meant it did not deliver what tenants viewed as meaningful security. Second, some tenants worried about non-compliance on the part of their landlord. Third, the relationship between landlord and tenant impacted how tenants experienced the eviction back. Once again, the multidimensional nature of security and home is evident, as well as how these different dimensions interact with one another. In order to provide meaningful secure occupancy, policy needs to address security in a more holistic fashion. The simple legislative moratorium on the termination of tenancies, while of huge importance, did not address the wider context, such as the nature of the landlord-tenant relationship, within which tenants experience security and insecurity.

This research adds to our understanding of the importance of home and the extent to which home, in the full sense of the term, is not available to all private tenants in the Irish context. This is very likely relevant for countries which have a similarly structured PRS. This is on the one hand, the result of the long-term failure of policy in the PRS to ensure access to secure homes for tenants. On the other hand, it reflects the failure of emergency policy measures introduced in the context of COVID-19 to provide a more holistic set of measures targeted at granting tenants access to home, in the broader sense. There is, the research suggests, a lesson here in terms of the need to put home at the centre of policy in the PRS. This necessitates a clear and defined understanding of home, something which is typically absent from policy, certainly in the Irish case. As discussed above, recent research on the PRS internationally provides very important insights in this regard and can help us to develop an appropriate concept of home upon which policy in the PRS can be based (Bate, 2018, 2020; Easthope, 2014). Moreover, it requires policy to tackle the multidimensional processes, dynamics, and relationships that may undermine access to home and secure occupancy.

References

Ahern, D., & Roy, S. (2020). *Law and policy responses to COVID-19 in Ireland: Supporting individuals, communities, business and the economy*. COVID-19 Legal Observatory School of Law, Trinity College Dublin.

Amerio, A., Brambilla, A., Morganti, A., Aguglia, A., Bianchi, D., Santi, F., Costantini, L., Odone, A., Costanza, A., Signorelli, C., & Serafini, G. (2020). Covid-19 lockdown: Housing built environment's effects on mental health. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(6), 5973.

Arundel, R., & Lennartz, C. (2020). Housing market dualization: Linking insider–outsider divides in employment and housing outcomes. *Housing Studies*, 35(8), 1390–1414.

Auspurg, K., Schneck, A., & Hinz, T. (2019). Closed doors everywhere? A meta-analysis of field experiments on ethnic discrimination in rental housing markets. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(1), 95–114.

Barker, N. (2020). The housing pandemic: four graphs showing the link between COVID-19 deaths and the housing crisis. *Inside Housing*. https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/the-housing-pandemic-four-graphsshowing-%0Athe-link-between-COVID-19-deaths-and-the-housing-crisis-66562

Bate, B. (2018). Understanding the influence tenure has on meanings of home and homemaking practices. *Geography Compass*, 12(1).

Bate, B. (2020). Making a home in the private rental sector. *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 1–29.

Blunt, A., & Dowling, R. (2006). *Home*. Routledge.

Bone, J. (2014). Neoliberal Nomads: Housing Insecurity and the Revival of Private Renting in the UK. *Sociological Research Online*, 19(4), 1–14.

Brewer, M., & Handscomb, K. (2021). *The debts that divide us: flash findings from a survey of families claiming Universal Credit*. Resolution Foundation.

Brown, P., Newton, D., Armitage, R., & Monchuk, L. (2020). *Lockdown. Rundown. Breakdown.: The COVID-19 lockdown and the impact of poor-quality housing on occupants in the North of England*. The Northern Housing Consortium.

Byrne, M. (2020a). Generation rent and the financialization of housing: a comparative exploration of the growth of the private rental sector in Ireland, the UK and Spain. *Housing Studies*, 35(4), 743–765.

Byrne, M. (2020b). Stay home: Reflections on the meaning of home and the Covid-19 pandemic. *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 28(3), 351–355.

Byrne, M. (2021a). *Institutional investment in the private rental sector in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic: a review of international 'grey literature' and reflections on the Irish context*. Geary Public Policy Institute.

Byrne, M. (2021b). *The impact of COVID-19 on the private rental sector: emerging international evidence*. Geary Public Policy Institute.

Byrne, M., & McCardle, R. (2020). Secure occupancy, power and the landlord-tenant relation: a qualitative exploration of the Irish private rental sector. *Housing Studies*, 1-19.

Byrne, S., Coates, D., Enda, E., McIndoe-Calder, T. Corcoran, D., Cronin, H., & Brioscú, A. (2020). *The Initial Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Ireland's Labour Market*. Economic and Social Research Institute.

Easthope, H. (2004). A place called home. *Housing, Theory and Society*, 21(3), 128–138.

Easthope, Hazel. (2014). Making a rental property home. *Housing Studies*, 29(5), 579–596.

Elfayoumi, K., Karpowicz, I., Lee, J., Marinkov, M., Mineshima, A., Salas, J., Tudyka, A., & Schaechter, A. (2021). *Affordable Rental Housing Making It Part of Europe's Recovery*. International Monetary Fund.

Gambi, L., Sheridan, S., & Hoey, D. (2018). *Insights into family homelessness no. 16: Causes of family homelessness in the Dublin Region during 2016 and 2017*. Focus Ireland.

Grotti, R., Russell, H., Fahey, E., & Maitre, B. (2018). *Discrimination and Inequality in Housing in Ireland*. Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.

Gusciute, E., Peter Mühlau, P., & Layte, R. (2020). Discrimination in the rental housing market: a field experiment in Ireland. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 1–22.

Hearne, R. (2020). *Housing shock: The Irish housing crisis and how to solve it*. Policy Press.

Hearne, R., & Murphy, M. P. (2017). *Investing in the right to a home: Housing, HAPs and hubs*. Maynooth University.

Hoolachan, J., McKee, K., Moore, T., & Soaita, A. (2017). 'Generation rent' and the ability to 'settle down': economic and geographical variation in young people's housing transitions. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(1), 63–78.

Horne, R., Willand, N., Dorignon, L., & Middha, B. (2020). *The lived experience of COVID-19: housing and household resilience, AHURI final report 345*. AHURI.

Hulse, K., & Milligan, V. (2014). Secure occupancy: A new framework for analysing security in rental housing. *Housing Studies*, 29(5), 638–656.

Kofman, Y. B., & Garfin, D. R. (2020). Home is not always a haven: The domestic violence crisis amid the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*.

McKee, K., Moore, T., Soaita, A., & Crawford, J. (2017). 'Generation rent' and the fallacy of choice. *Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 41(2), 318–333.

Murphy, M. (2020). Dual conditionality in welfare and housing for lone parents in Ireland: Change and continuity? *Social Policy & Administration*, 54(2), 250–264.

Nasreen, Z., & Ruming, K. J. (2020). Informality, the marginalised and regulatory inadequacies: a case study of tenants' experiences of shared room housing in Sydney, Australia. *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 1–27.

National Oversight and Audit Committee. (2016). *Rented Houses Inspections*. NOAC.

O'Toole, C., Slaymaker, R., McQuinn, K., Coffey, C., & Corrigan, E. (2020). *Exploring the short run implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on affordability in the Irish private rental market*. Economic and Social Research Institute.

OECD. (2020). *Housing Amid Covid-19: Policy Responses and Challenges*. OECD. https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=135_135322-lju8yj5sib&title=Housing-Amid-Covid-19-Policy-Responses-and-Challenges

Pembroke, S. (2018). *Precarious work, precarious lives: how can policy create more security*. TASC.

Pillinger, J. (2009). *Making a Home in Ireland: Housing Experiences of Chinese, Indian, Lithuanian and Nigerian Migrants in Blanchardstown*. Focus Ireland.

Public Health England. (2020). *Beyond the data: Understanding the impact of COVID- 19 on BAME groups*. Public Health England.

Roantree, B., Maître, B., McTague, A., & Privalko, I. (2021). *Poverty, income inequality and living standards in Ireland*. Economic and Social Research Institute.

Shelter. (2020). *Building our way out: investing in social housing to boost the economy and level up the country*. Shelter.

Soaita, A. M. (2021). *Renting during the Covid-19 pandemic in Great Britain: the experiences of private tenants*. UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence.

Soaita, A., & McKee, K. (2019). Assembling a 'kind of' home in the UK private renting sector. *Geoforum*, 103(148–157).

Van Gelder, J. L. (2010). What tenure security? The case for a tripartite view. *Land Use Policy*, 27(2), 449–456.