

Fuel Poverty Research Network conference: 'Putting
Energy Poverty Research into Practice'
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The social production of energy vulnerability in England's private rented sector

Dr Neil Simcock

Geography & Environmental Science Research Group,
Liverpool Research Institute for Climate and
Sustainability, Liverpool John Moores University



Energy poverty and housing conditions in the PRS

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

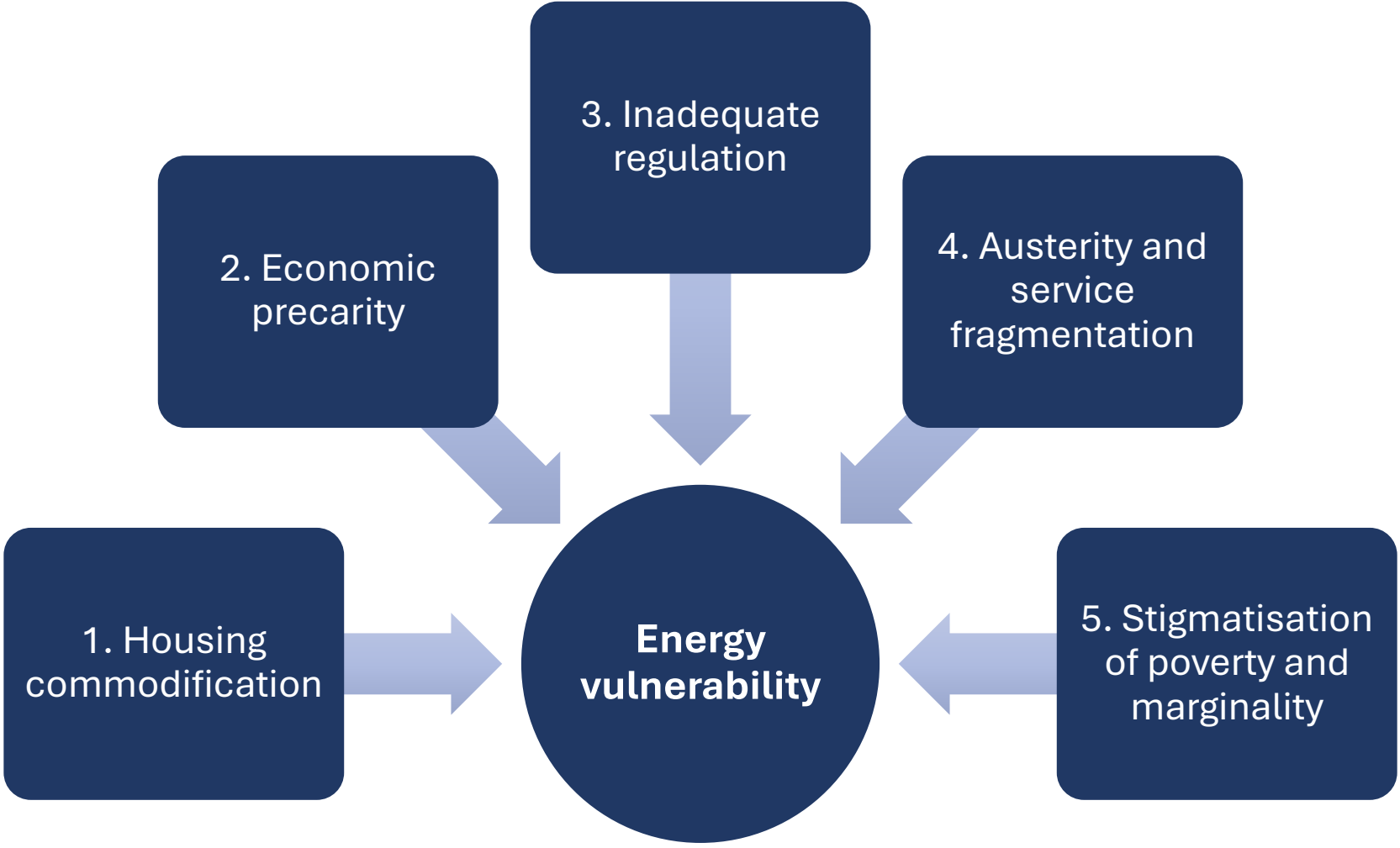
(Ambrose et al, 2016, DHLUC, 2022)

- Houses increasing numbers of disadvantaged people
- Barriers to retrofit in the PRS
- **Aim:** to understand the conditions creating energy vulnerability and poor housing conditions in the PRS

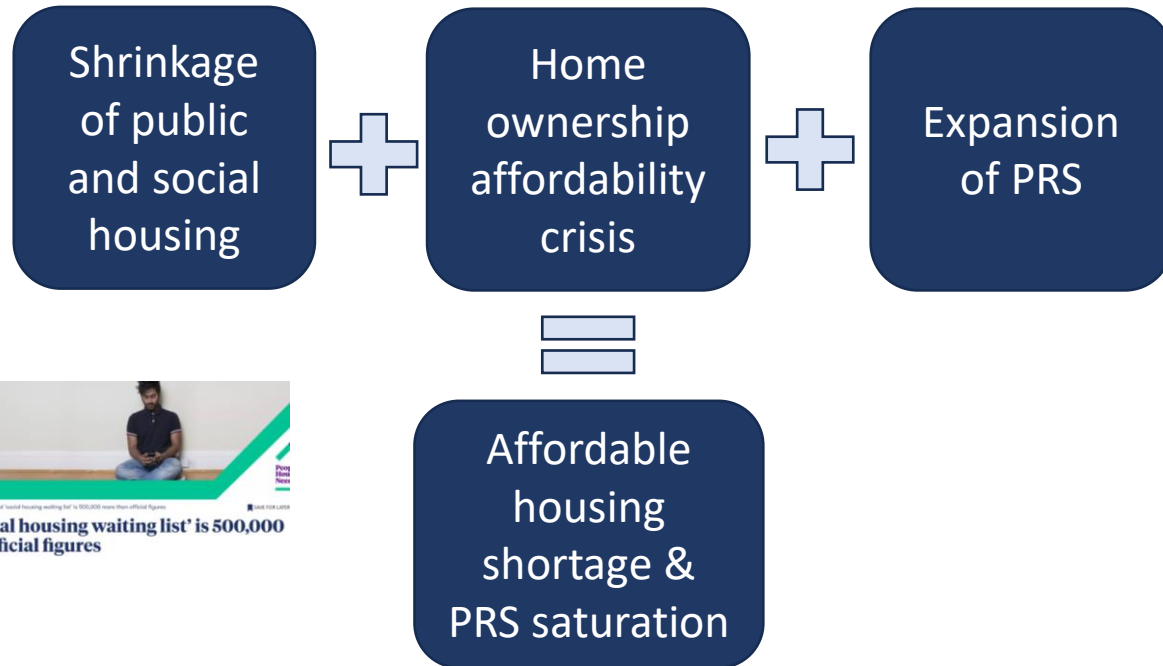
Socially produced vulnerability

- Rejects technocratic and neoliberal framings of vulnerability focusing on characteristics and ‘resilience’ of individuals (Carraro et al., 2021)
- Vulnerability as a systemic phenomenon produced and mediated through socio-economic processes and political decisions (Carraro et al., 2021; Klinenberg, 2002; Sapkota et al., 2016; Watts and Bohle, 1993)
- Centres analysis on the historical, social and political-economic conditions that render individuals vulnerable to harm

5 systemic conditions producing energy vulnerability in England's PRS



1. Housing commodification



A “seller’s market” in the PRS and power imbalance in favour of landlords over tenants

“It’s very rare that there’s a property that no-one else wants, is there, because there’s such a huge demand. Because the bottom line of all of this is there’s not enough properties.”

(Interview with housing advisor)

“[The PRS] it’s not a free market. It’s a situation where, very often, people have to accept whatever they are offered. [...] So there isn’t an exercise of choice. I think landlords don’t have to do any more than they feel they need to.”

(Interview with energy efficiency policy expert)

2. Economic precarity

“There wasn’t much of a choice on the income that we had. The rule that most letting agencies have is they want to see triple the rent in your income, which can be pretty fucking difficult a lot of the time. That meant that I had to pick somewhere that was under £400, or something like that, a month [...] It was mostly a financial decision, which is why we rushed into a place that we knew was not going to be great [quality].”

(Interview with PRS tenant working freelance)

- Deregulation of labour market and growth of ‘gig economy’ (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019; Standing, 2011; Shildrick, 2018; Wacquant, 2016)
- Welfare cuts and expansion of conditionality (Bell et al., 2020; Brewer et al., 2022)
- Low-income people have the least power in the rental market – accept poor accommodation
- Economic precarity can mean “people move at a time and to a place over which they have limited control” (Mullen et al., 2020: 10)

3. Inadequate regulation of the PRS

Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS)

- Reactionary (requires tenant complaint)
- Cuts to EH teams (austerity)
- Limited protection from retaliatory eviction

Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018

- Reactionary (requires tenant complaint)
- Favours tenants with economic security and cultural capital
- Cuts to legal aid (austerity)

Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards (MEES)

- Low “cost cap” and numerous exemptions
- Lack of funding for enforcement (austerity)
- EHOs tend to default to HHSRS
- LAs may not know which properties are privately rented

4. Austerity and service fragmentation

- Severe cuts to public expenditure post-2010 (Hall, 2019)
- Fragmentation of support services relating to housing, energy, mental health and legal rights

“it’s things like access to suitable mental health treatment. [...] **access to help, all the services, they've either been cut or stretched to get an appointment.**”

(Interview with housing advisor)

“Because we’ve got targets to hit, we need to get 500 visits in a certain space of time so you’re driven by targets [...] You can see that, many a time, you’re just touching the surface with a lot of people.”

(Interview with energy advisor)

5. The stigmatisation of poverty and marginality



“They [the landlord] want the person that’s got the most, know what I mean. [...] They see that these people have got a lot of stuff, so they let them in ‘cause they look alright. Respectable. If you’ve just got one bag and you look scruffy, they don’t want you doing anything. They don’t want to help ya, you know what I mean.”

(Interview with tenant living in temporary accommodation)

“My contact at X City Council said that they have got a particular landlord who has really crap properties but he’s also prepared to let them to people who nobody else will take on as tenants. She said, ‘He won’t put a new X, Y, Z in because he knows that if he puts it in the tenants will rip it out.’”

(Interview with energy advisor)

Some concluding thoughts

- The role of **non-energy policies** (Butler, 2022) in producing energy vulnerability
- Energy poverty research needs to consider the process of **finding a home** as well as experiences when people are living in a home
- **Class (and other intersecting inequalities) matter** (Curran, 2013; MacDonald et al., 2005; Savage et al., 2014)
- Need for holistic, cross-departmental, transformative policies

Thanks for listening!

n.d.simcock@ljmu.ac.uk

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