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'It's disgusting that they can get away with this': here's how eviction can affect tenants' lives

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For people relying on rental properties to keep a roof over their heads, there are few things more scary than the possibility of being evicted from their home.

The paucity of official statistics makes it difficult to know exactly how common evictions are. In 2019–20, 13.8% of private renters moved due to their lease being terminated or not renewed.

Besides a report or two, we know little about what happens when households face the possibility of being evicted, or are actually evicted.

Our research examines these consequences. Through in-depth interviews with 53 private tenants in New South Wales and Queensland, we found these experiences negatively shaped people's lives well into the future. Here are four themes we identified.

1. Poor mental health

The ease with which landlords can terminate a tenant's occupation evoked persistent anxiety for most of the interviewees (the interviews were conducted prior to the scrapping of no-grounds eviction in NSW, though such evictions are still allowed in other states and territories).

This was especially so for low-income tenants.

When interviewed, Susan* had recently been evicted from her apartment in Sydney. She was reliant on the Disability Support Pension for her income and lived in constant fear of being evicted and rendered homeless. She felt that having a disability and being from a non-English-speaking background made her precarity worse:

if you are somebody who comes from a non-English-speaking background, or you have a disability, or have no ability to enforce [the legislation], it's on the tenant to take up the laws and to do something about it. And if you don't have any of those abilities, you're just going to be on your way to homelessness very, very soon [...]

Grace lived by herself in Sydney. She had been given a no-grounds termination and was convinced it was linked to her landlord's realisation that he could raise her rent considerably once she moved out. Her mental health was seriously affected by the eviction:

It was just like out of nowhere [...] so that was horrific [...] I'm still trying to settle into this new place with that trauma of being uprooted all of a sudden [...] I think it's probably going to affect me for a while and particularly in terms of just the power that real estates and landlords have to be able to do that.

2. Financial hardship

For many of the low-income tenants, the financial implications of being evicted were severe.

Sarah, her husband and their three children had been renting in Sydney since 2013. She estimated that since 2014, they had had to move at least six times. Most of the moves were not voluntary. She found the financial implications of evictions extremely distressing:

It's the finances of it that's the hardest [...] when you get asked to move, you need to have a bond ready to go at the next place before you receive your bond back, which is a killer [...]

She outlined all the expenses that came up each time she moved from one rental to another: professional cleaners, removalists and maintenance deducted from the bond.

After her rented accommodation was condemned, Brenda, a single mum of two children, had 48 hours to move from her rental property in regional Queensland. The move consumed her savings:

I had \$200 after paying all my bills to move. So once I moved that was it. So I struggled the following week for everything. For food, [...] getting my son to school, my daughter. It was just horrible.

3. Reluctance to complain

The knowledge that, at some point, the rent could be increased to an untenable level or they could be asked to vacate evoked silent compliance. This created a reluctance to complain or request basic maintenance.

Alice was convinced she was evicted after complaining about the poor condition of the rental property she, her son and grandson had been renting for eight years in regional NSW. Her grandson's bedroom was unusable due to excessive mould.

However, her low income and the threat of eviction meant she held off complaining for an extended period:

[...] it's just disgusting that they [landlords] can get away with this shit while charging top dollar, and [...] that's why I didn't complain because I said to everybody, "as soon as I complain he'll kick us out." [...] If I hadn't complained, we'd still be there [...]

Sarah described how, despite feeling harassed and stressed by her landlord's unannounced and constant intrusions, she felt the family had to accept the situation and not protest:

I was petrified of being kicked out if we fought back and so [...] we let him onto the property 16 times in 10 months and said nothing.

When they couldn't take it any longer and complained, they were given notice, the landlord claiming he needed to do maintenance that required the property to be vacant.

Tenants' Union of NSW

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Lifelong renting needs to become a genuine option through stable, safe and fair tenancy law to prevent renters from feeling unsettled and insecure in their homes. Homes aren't bought and sold. Homes are made by the people who live in them. Article here: tinyurl.com/yckypb4x

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4. Ending up in a worse home

A common consequence of eviction is having to move to unsuitable, lower-quality accommodation.

Jan and her partner were older renters and reliant on government benefits for their income. The flow-on effects of being evicted from their accommodation in Queensland, where they had been living for ten years, were devastating. Her partner attempted suicide, her relationship with him ended, and she was forced to live in a tent on a piece of land her mother had bought several years prior:

our rental accommodation was sold out from under us to developers and we had to be out with nowhere to go. We looked around for somewhere else to rent and there was absolutely nowhere we could afford at all.

It's clear that eviction, or the threat thereof, can have devastating effects on people's lives.

Although there has been some movement around improving the lot of private renters, such as legislation abolishing no-grounds eviction in some jurisdictions, and rent increases being allowed only once a year, a lot more needs to be done to ensure tenants have acceptable security of tenure.

**All names in this article have been changed to protect participants' privacy.*