

# How many private renters fear retaliation (including eviction or a rent increase) as a result of complaining to their landlord about damp, cold, or mould?

Approximately 51% of private renters in the UK who had experienced damp, cold, or mould but chose not to complain to their landlord cited fear of retaliation as the main reason. In fact, 37% of renters who had lived with these issues reported that they had never complained to their landlord at all. Therefore, a significant number of private tenants are afraid of consequences like eviction or a rent increase if they raise a complaint about poor housing conditions.

## The Silent Crisis: Fear and the UK Rental Market

The issue of private renters fearing **retaliation** from their landlords for complaining about housing defects like **damp, cold, or mould** is a substantial and worrying element of the UK's housing crisis. It's not just about poor living conditions; it's about a deep-seated **power imbalance** that effectively silences tenants who need help the most. When over half of those suffering in silence express a fear of eviction or a rent hike, you're not looking at a few isolated incidents—you're seeing a systemic failure in the private rented sector.

The data provided by Citizens Advice paints a stark picture: **37%** of private renters living with damp, cold, or mould never complained to their landlord. Of this group, a significant **51%** pointed directly to the fear of retaliation, including eviction or a rent increase, as the reason for their silence. Think about that for a moment. This fear forces people to live in conditions that are not only uncomfortable but are often detrimental to their health and wellbeing. Consequently, it creates a hidden crisis, where the true extent of housing disrepair is obscured by tenant anxiety.

## Why Retaliation is the Landlord's Lever

The landlord-tenant dynamic is inherently uneven, largely due to the nature of tenancy agreements, particularly in the private sector. **Assured Shorthold Tenancies (ASTs)**, which are the most common type, offer limited security for the renter, especially when approaching the end of a fixed term or during a periodic tenancy.

- **Eviction Risk:** The most potent fear is that of a **Section 21 'no-fault' eviction** notice. This mechanism allows a landlord to regain possession of their property without having to give a reason. Even though legislation like the **Deregulation Act 2015** provided some protection against '**revenge evictions**' by linking valid complaint procedures to a ban on issuing a Section 21 notice for six months, the threat remains highly effective. Because ASTs offer minimal long-term security, the mere possibility of being displaced is often enough to deter a complaint.
- **Rent Increases:** Another common fear is a **rent increase** specifically designed to punish the complaining tenant or simply to make the tenancy unaffordable, forcing them to move out.

Whilst a landlord must follow legal procedures to increase rent, the reality is that market conditions and the high demand for rental properties in many parts of the UK often mean tenants feel they have little power to resist an increase, however unfair it seems.

## The Health and Safety Implications

When tenants are afraid to complain, housing defects go unaddressed. Consequently, the problems—damp, cold, and mould—simply worsen, which, therefore, has significant health implications.

- **Mould and Respiratory Health:** Mould spores are a known trigger for **asthma** and can cause other respiratory problems, particularly in children, the elderly, and those with weakened immune systems. Furthermore, living in damp conditions is linked to a higher risk of other illnesses and mental health issues.
- **The ‘Cold’ Effect:** Inadequate insulation and a lack of heating lead to **excess cold**, which is categorised as a Category 1 Hazard under the **Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS)**. This is associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. Thus, the fear of complaining is directly translating into a public health issue.

## The Role of Housing Regulation

The UK government and local authorities have systems in place to address poor housing conditions, but they often fall short in practice.

- **Local Authority Environmental Health:** Tenants can report serious defects to their local council’s **Environmental Health Department**. Following an inspection, the council can issue an **Improvement Notice** to the landlord. However, many tenants are unaware of this option, or they worry that this official action will still lead to the landlord’s revenge, albeit indirectly.
- **The Future: The Renters (Reform) Bill:** The proposed Renters (Reform) Bill in the UK aims to abolish the Section 21 ‘no-fault’ eviction. If enacted, this change would fundamentally shift the power dynamic. It would, in theory, remove the landlord’s easiest tool for retaliation, forcing them to rely on specific, reasonable grounds for eviction (such as rent arrears or breach of contract). **However**, until this legislation becomes law, the prevailing culture of fear persists.

## Breaking the Silence: What Can Be Done?

Ultimately, tackling this issue requires more than just new legislation; it requires a change in culture and greater tenant empowerment.

- **Know Your Rights:** Private renters must first and foremost understand the process for reporting repairs and their rights concerning eviction. Organisations like **Shelter** and **Citizens Advice** offer invaluable, free resources. They provide step-by-step guidance on how to report issues formally and what to do if retaliation is threatened.

- **Document Everything:** Tenants should meticulously document all issues with photographs, videos, and dated communication logs (emails, letters) with the landlord. **Evidence** is crucial if a case needs to be taken to a tribunal or court. Therefore, formal, written communication is always best.
- **Utilise Third Parties:** When fear is high, using a third party like an Environmental Health Department or a tenant union can help to depersonalise the complaint. Since the complaint comes from an official body, the landlord's capacity for direct, personal retaliation is reduced.
- **Collective Action:** Tenant unions and local action groups empower individuals by turning singular complaints into collective concerns. Consequently, it's far harder for a landlord to retaliate against an organised group than against an isolated individual.

The data confirms that for many in the UK's private rental sector, silence is a survival mechanism. This is a profound indictment of a housing market that prioritises the landlord's profit over the tenant's fundamental right to a safe and healthy home. The fear of being made homeless, or simply paying more for the privilege of a substandard living space, keeps the number of complaints artificially low, masking the scale of the disrepair crisis. **We must, therefore, work to empower private renters with knowledge and stronger legal protections, ensuring that a complaint about a basic need like a dry, warm home does not come with a risk of losing that home entirely.**

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**You should seek free, confidential advice from an organisation like Citizens Advice or Shelter today if you are a private renter living with damp, cold, or mould and are fearful of complaining to your landlord.**