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## Sentences for fraud after tragedies must be a deterrent

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**T**he cost of the human tragedy at Grenfell Tower is incalculable. Money after a fire is no substitute for investment before one occurs, but ever since Band Aid in 1984 this country has shown great capacity for compassion and concrete action to help those suffering at home and abroad. The immediate chaos that follows such events, however, often combined with a lack of the usual scrutiny, allows fraudsters the opportunity to take advantage of the grief of others.

When people abuse such a situation by seeking to benefit fraudulently, we are rightly shocked by their cynical manipulation of public generosity and kindness. Charges have now been brought by police relating to allegedly false claims after the Grenfell disaster.

In such cases, sentencing is likely to involve not merely punishment, but deterrence of any others contemplating such scams. The relevant sentencing council guidance requires the court to consider “culpability” (high, medium or lesser) and “harm”. Cynical claims on disaster-relief funds may well be regarded as in the high category.



Police have brought charges relating to alleged false compensation claims made after the Grenfell fire  
WILL OLIVER/EPA

These types of case are serious and distressing on various levels. First, there is only a finite sum available for genuine victims and so illegal claims diminish the pot for the deserving. Second, they deeply offend our sense of justice and humanity.

But it would be wrong to think this is a new phenomenon: in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the FBI investigated 15 fake websites purporting to be legitimate American Red Cross appeals for donations. After Hurricane Sandy in 2012, a “charity” called the Hurricane Sandy Relief Effort raised \$600,000 purportedly for storm victims – but the whole exercise was a con. The problem is so prevalent in the US that they have established a nationwide disaster fraud task force that reports annually to the attorney-general.

The support at Grenfell is being co-ordinated by the British Red Cross. Lessons learnt from previous disasters have allowed these claims to be swiftly identified and investigated. Where fraudulent claims are proven and – where appropriate – prison sentences are imposed, this will act as a proper deterrent to others seeking to benefit illegally and opportunistically. It is hoped this will also encourage the generous-hearted to continue to contribute in the future when the next disaster, natural or otherwise, occurs.

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