

House It Going in the PHAs? Comparing Public Housing Nationwide to Inform Eviction Policy

Introduction and Existing Research

Why are eviction rates outstandingly high (up to 50% in some cases) in American public housing?¹ In trying to answer this question, how can the management and policies of an individual Public Housing Authority (PHA) help researchers understand which policies encourage or discourage evicting tenants from their homes? Given that the very purpose of public housing, as determined by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), is to “provide decent and safe rental housing for eligible low-income families, the elderly, and persons with disabilities,”² it is surprising - and concerning - that vulnerable residents are losing their homes in public housing, often at a high rate.

Although scholars have previously investigated instances of eviction from public housing, existing literature has not yet embarked upon a comparison of PHAs with the goal of analyzing which administration policies correlate with higher and lower eviction rates. Research has tended to focus on using a single PHA, or several PHAs in one state, as a case study. For instance, Monsma et al. (1992) studied public housing evictions in Hawaii,³ Keene et al. (2016) interviewed public housing residents in Atlanta,⁴ and Smith et al. (2013) analyzed the effects of

¹ Desmond, M., Ph.D. (2019, July 12). Lecture presented at Princeton University, Princeton.

² HUD's Public Housing Program. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.hud.gov/topics/rental_assistance/phprog.

³ Monsma, K., & Lempert, R. (1992). The Value of Counsel: 20 Years of Representation before a Public Housing Eviction Board. *Law & Society Review*, 26(3), 627-667. doi:10.2307/3053740.

⁴ Keene D. E. (2016). "We Need to Have a Meeting": Public Housing Demolition and Collective Agency in Atlanta, Georgia. *Housing policy debate*, 26(1), 210–230. doi:10.1080/10511482.2015.1043837.

public housing demolition in Chicago.⁵ Looking at one city or one PHA in depth has its advantages: the ability to truly get to know a PHA and its residents, and to analyze it in its own unique context. However, one big disadvantage of this approach is the resulting inability to compare PHAs across the country against each other, and consequently, to recognize any patterns or trends among them and their eviction practices.

While the limits of single-city or single-PHA research have restricted what scholars can learn about eviction patterns in public housing, some scholars have nevertheless chosen to focus on a single policy that has been implemented at more than one location. Thereby, they managed to analyze the effects of certain policies relating to eviction, regardless of location (by focusing on the policy rather than the place) - even if they used a single PHA for their research. One such group of scholars is Rohe et al., who studied the effects of work requirements on eviction rates among public housing residents. Rohe et al. did not find a telling correlation between “work requirement sanctions” and eviction rates,⁶ which may suggest that the policy of requiring public housing residents to work neither decreases nor increases their chances of being evicted.

Another scholar who has researched a specific policy is Lauren E. Burke, who explored the disproportionate negative effect of “One-Strike” eviction policies on black public housing residents.⁷ “One-Strike” evictions allow a PHA to evict a whole household if one member commits a crime, or if someone hosted by the tenant commits a crime, regardless of whether the

⁵ Janet L. Smith (2013) The end of US public housing as we knew it, *Urban Research & Practice*, 6:3, 276-296, DOI: 10.1080/17535069.2013.846009.

⁶ William M. Rohe, Michael D. Webb & Kirstin P. Frescoln (2016) Work Requirements in Public Housing: Impacts on Tenant Employment and Evictions, *Housing Policy Debate*, 26:6, 909-927, DOI: 10.1080/10511482.2015.1137967.

⁷ Lauren E. Burke, One Strike - Evictions in Public Housing and the Disparate Impact on Black Public Housing Tenants in Washington, D.C., 52 *HOWARD L.J.* 167 (2008).

tenant knew about the crime.⁸ By studying the effects of this policy on an especially vulnerable part of the public housing population, Burke was able to analyze its potential effects on the residents of PHAs nationwide.

This existing studies by scholars are impressive and valuable, but there is a gap in this research formed by their not having compared the individual policies of PHAs around the US. This is where my research aims to fit in, by gathering the specific policies of individual PHAs throughout the country in order to compare them and, hopefully, reveal some information about which policies help decrease eviction rates and which make evictions easier or more likely.

Research and Methods

In order to gather these policies in one place, I sent emails to over 2500 PHAs which ask them for the answers to several questions (relating to the management of the PHA), and also for their ACOPs (Admissions and Continued Occupancy Policy) and a copy of their lease. As responses from PHA administrators come in, I organized their answers to our questions in a spreadsheet and saved all of the documents they sent in organized folders. Now that most of this information has been gathered, my supervisor (the project's leader) and I plan to - with the help of machine learning - work on a code that will automatically search the ACOPs for the answers to key questions. If this project goes smoothly, the members of the Eviction Lab will be able to clearly see the differences and similarities among the policies of almost all of the nation's PHAs,

⁸ Hornstein R. Litigating around the Long Shadow of Department of Housing and Urban Development V. Rucker: The Availability of Abuse of Discretion and Implied Duty of Good Faith Affirmative Defenses in Public Housing Criminal Activity Evictions. *University of Toledo Law Review*. 2011;43(1):1-51. <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=70126053&site=ehost-live>. Accessed July 15, 2019.

and to compare these policies with the goal of analyzing their effects on eviction rates in public housing.

Preliminary Results

Although this research project is still in its beginning stages - continuing to gather as much data as possible and considering which questions to ask when comparing policies - preliminary results available so far include the number of PHAs who have sent us the requested documents and the number of states in which they are located. Out of 2,545 PHAs I contacted, 197 have sent us at least one of the requested documents (as of August 5, 2019). This is a small minority of the PHAs I contacted, but it is worth noting that these PHAs come from 38 different US states. Therefore, this study has not only the benefit of a fairly large sample size, but also that of samples which span across the nation and therefore cover diverse regions (urban and rural, North and South, East and West, coastal and non-coastal).

In (very temporary) conclusion, I have high hopes for this research project and its ambitious goal of going beyond existing research to compare Public Housing policies across PHAs all over the US, with the subsequent goals of finding potential correlations between various policies and evictions from Public Housing and eventually contributing to policy suggestions that aim to minimize such evictions. Having a large amount of regionally diverse policy data will help minimize bias and allow for better-informed ideas about future policy, based on the advantages and flaws of current policy.