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Housing Insecurity Among the Poor Today

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Abstract

Recent events have brought attention to the millions of Americans who struggle to find and pay for housing. Housing has historically been of interest to sociologists, but it has long been subsumed within research on crime, residential mobility, and neighborhoods. In the past decade, there has been a surge of scholarship in an emerging sociology of housing that focuses on housing insecurity, forced moves, landlords, shared housing arrangements, and the stratification effects of housing policy. While other fields typically define housing insecurity as affordability, this new literature shows how housing insecurity is not only rooted in financial constraints but also situated within social relationships that create or dissolve housing arrangements, and is exacerbated or remediated by supply-side institutions and policy. This work makes clear that housing insecurity is not a one-time discrete event but a dynamic process, and that sociologists can contribute not only to measuring housing insecurity but also to understanding the social forces that shape it.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent social and economic upheavals like the Great Recession and the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic have focused the public eye on the struggle of millions of Americans to find, keep, and pay for housing, bringing attention to the topic not seen since the 1940s. As we write, there is a shortage of more than 7 million affordable homes for the nation's nearly 11 million extremely low-income families; 70% of all extremely low-income families are severely cost burdened, paying more than half their income on rent (Aurand et al. 2021). Housing—a place to call home—is a fundamental anchor of personal, family, and social life (Burton & Clark 2005). Housing has long been of interest to scholars of inequality and stratification because it structures social relations; determines access to resources; shapes exposure to racial and economic segregation, violence, and school quality; and is implicated in the unequal generation of wealth (Du Bois 1903, Gans 1962, Muller et al. 2018, Oliver & Shapiro 1995, Pattillo 2013, Rainwater 1970, Rothstein 2017, Taylor 2019). In all of these ways, housing directly shapes life chances. In this review we focus on housing insecurity: the loss of, threat to, or uncertainty of a safe, stable, and affordable home environment.

Housing was central to earlier sociological writings showing how the physical, economic, spatial, and political aspects of housing arrangements shaped the social world (Du Bois 1903, Wirth 1947) and later how public housing and slum neighborhoods organized social life before they were demolished (Gans 1962, Rainwater 1970). But the direct study of housing itself within sociology has since been, as Pattillo (2013) notes, “hidden,” subsumed within such subfields as neighborhoods, residential mobility, economic sociology, or urban theory (see also Desmond & Bell 2015, Zavisca & Gerber 2016). Spatial ecological research focused on crime, neighborhood characteristics, and economic circumstances has abounded over the past few decades, but housing itself has been on the sidelines (Logan 2012; Sampson 2012; Sampson et al. 2002; Sharkey 2008, 2013; Sharkey & Faber 2014). Meanwhile, much research on housing has been conducted outside of sociology, in urban planning, geography, public health, and urban economics. As we explore the question of housing insecurity, we draw from these fields, and we showcase a vibrant and growing new subfield: the sociology of housing.

The interdisciplinary literature on housing has defined housing insecurity primarily in terms of affordability. However, focusing solely on the cost of housing both empirically and theoretically limits our ability to measure housing insecurity, to understand how this insecurity shapes social relationships, and to explain why it increases social inequality. As sociologists, we view housing insecurity as rooted in resource constraints that stem from structural inequalities, but also as situated within social relationships which create and dissolve housing arrangements, and as exacerbated or remediated by supply-side actors and policy.

While it has become commonplace in public circles for discussions of housing insecurity to focus on hot-button topics such as eviction or gentrification, here we conceptualize these issues as part of a larger set of forced and reactive housing dynamics that create residential insecurity. We argue that housing insecurity can be neither adequately measured nor understood as simply financial constraints or discrete events such as eviction. Rather, with increasing housing costs and inadequate policy responses, housing insecurity is a pervasive, semipermanent feature of life among the poor (this is akin to the idea of a lifetime risk rather than a cross-sectional experience; Petit & Western 2004). Housing insecurity is a socially and structurally embedded dynamic process, seen most clearly when we examine how people must cope with it.

We also situate housing security within the context of institutional and supply-side actors. While sociology has given attention to housing instability and insecurity in the context of family life and child outcomes (e.g., Amato 2000, Fomby & Cherlin 2007, Osborne & McLanahan 2007, Wu 1996), only recently have scholars written about the people who provide housing, such

as landlords, property managers, building inspectors, real estate brokers, and developers (Bartram 2019a, Besbris 2020, Korver-Glenn 2018, Rosen et al. 2021). When it comes to understanding both housing insecurity and housing discrimination, great strides have been made in recent literature to better capture the role supply-side actors play in discriminatory selection, exclusion processes, and policy implementation.

While housing policy is typically thought of as a means of remedying housing insecurity, research increasingly points to the ways in which it exacerbates housing insecurity for certain groups (Baradaran 2019, Rothstein 2017, Taylor 2019, Trounstein 2018). We consider how housing insecurity is shaped by housing policy, both federal and local, aimed at reducing supply-side shortages that make finding and keeping a place to live difficult. As we discuss, historic and current US housing policy has favored homeownership, especially for White Americans, resulting in a renter class—especially renters of color—that is far more vulnerable to housing insecurity.

For this reason, we focus primarily on housing insecurity for low-income renters in this review.¹ As Dreier (1982) notes, renters are a categorically insecure class in a country focused so heavily on homeownership (see also Hulse & Milligan 2014). Renters are subject to their landlords' decisions and to the larger policy environment that provides them fewer protections than homeowners, making renters vulnerable to shocks such as urban renewal; to landlord-tenant law that provides landlords with far more protections than tenants; and to policy neglect, as embodied, for example, in the mortgage interest deduction. Indeed, we argue that American housing policy has largely failed to meet the needs of renters and has even caused harm in some cases, especially to renters of color and other marginalized groups. While research has documented some of the economic and political contributors to housing insecurity and affordability, such as income inequality (Foster & Kleit 2015), soaring construction costs that constrict housing supply (JCHS 2020), exclusionary zoning and land use regulations (Lens & Monkkonen 2016, Manville et al. 2020, Nelson et al. 2004, Pendall 2000a, Rothwell & Massey 2009, Trounstein 2018, Wegmann 2020), and other exacerbating conditions in the labor market and in other areas of social policy (Shlay & Rossi 1992, Mutchler & Krivo 1989), our focus is on recent developments in the sociology of housing that focus on measures, relationships, and individual-level housing policy.

DEFINING AND MEASURING HOUSING INSECURITY

While the sociology of housing is a relatively new field, the literature on homelessness stretches back decades. Other comprehensive reviews of the topic exist (Lee et al. 2010, 2021; Shlay & Rossi 1992), so we do not repeat the same material here. We think the broader term housing insecurity may be more useful than the distinction between housed and homeless, as it is a more dynamic concept that focuses less on subgroups (single men, “skid row” denizens, the formerly incarcerated) and snapshots (the number of families who seek shelter services on a given night) and more on housing hardship and housing risk as a continuum that affects a wider swath of the population. Some studies measure homelessness based on use of shelter services, but that risks missing households who are doubled up and does not consider people at risk of losing housing, such as victims of domestic violence and abuse who have not yet fled to a shelter, those a paycheck away from not being able to pay rent, and those with health issues that at any moment can force them out of their living situations and drain their resources (or for whom other shocks, like losing one of several jobs, might bounce them out of their housing).

¹Homeowners also face important forms of insecurity, especially those who had to foreclose on their homes during the subprime lending scandal and the Great Recession, though we do not discuss them in detail here (see Hall et al. 2015, Rugh & Massey 2010).

We conceptualize housing insecurity as the state of having difficulty acquiring housing, having minimal control over one's housing, being at risk of losing housing, being uncertain about tenure, or living in housing that does not meet basic household needs. This broad concept is informed by the literature in sociology, but also in urban planning, social work, and public health (see, in particular, Cox et al. 2016, Grier & Grier 1978, Lee & Evans 2020, Routhier 2018).^{2,3} Yet we find significant challenges in trying to measure the true extent of housing insecurity because the empirical operationalization of this concept is so varied in the literature, with no consensus on measurement (Leventhal & Newman 2010), and scholars rely on a number of different dimensions: the costs of housing, the characteristics of residential units, and the movement of households between residential units. Below, we provide a high-level review of the literature on the consequences and extent of housing insecurity as measured by these conventional metrics, and we note new scholarship, especially on credit and residential instability.

Affordability

Evidence from multiple fields points to the harmful effects of housing affordability constraints on parents' mental health, children's cognitive functioning, and adolescents' delinquent behavior (Gold 2020, Newman & Holupka 2015, Pollack et al. 2010, Sandel et al. 2018). For decades, the cost of housing has increased, the supply of affordable housing has shrunk, renters' incomes have stagnated, and federal spending for housing assistance has remained inadequate (CBPP 2021a, Collinson 2011, Desmond 2015). Across fields, the most commonly used and intuitive measure of housing unaffordability is rent burden: the cost of housing as a proportion of total income. A household that spends more than 30% of its income on rent is considered rent burdened (HUD 2018). In 2017, 48% of all renters—19.5 million households—were rent burdened, compared with 42% or 14.2 million households in 2001 (see table 15 of GAO 2020 for these calculations). These burdens grow more severe the lower a household's income: 72% of renters with incomes below 30% of their area median income (AMI) spent over 50% of their income on rent, and another 17% of these extremely low-income households paid between 30% and 50% of their income on rent (GAO 2020). Four in ten renters with incomes below 80% of their AMI—24 million renters—currently spend over half of their income on housing (CBPP 2021c). Rent burdens fall heaviest on Black and Latino renters, whose share of rent-burdened households is more than 10 percentage points higher than that of White renters (JCHS 2020).

Scholars have debated the utility of using rent burden, since some housing costs can be conceptualized as consumption choices made to achieve higher housing quality or better schools (Newman & Holupka 2015). Alternative measures of affordability include whether a household has fallen behind on rental payments or other financial hardships affected by housing costs. Recent evidence shows that more than one out of five renters earning less than \$25,000 has fallen behind on rent, and that moderately rent-burdened, low-income households with children spent 57% less on healthcare and 17% less on food than did unburdened households (JCHS 2020).

²Our work has also been informed by how the HEARTH amendment of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (2009) defines homelessness, which is a more comprehensive measure of housing insecurity—homeless individuals or families are defined in part as those who lack “a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. . . [who] will imminently lose their housing. . . have experienced persistent instability as measured by frequent moves over such period, and can be expected to continue in such status for an extended period of time.”

³We note that there are subgroups of people who are far more housing insecure than others, especially those who have recently exited foster care, prison, or mental health or addiction rehabilitation facilities (e.g., Geller & Curtis 2011, Geller & Franklin 2014, Lee et al. 2010, Stuart 2016).

Credit

While housing costs are a significant contributor to housing insecurity, new work shows that credit scores are also becoming a barrier to entry for low-income renters. Evidence of income (typically two to three times monthly rent) and reliable cash flow (from proof of employment) have long been common tenancy requirements, but increasingly, landlords are using credit scores to deem potential tenants worthy of a place to live (Desmond 2016, Galvez 2010, Reosti 2021, Rosen et al. 2021). Credit scores have long stratified access to homeownership, exacerbating inequality by race (Avery et al. 2009, Baradaran 2019, Wherry et al. 2019), but since the 2008 housing market crash, the credit histories of renters have also become increasingly available to landlords (Frazier 2021).⁴ Getting rejected from rental housing is a demoralizing and sometimes expensive experience because of repeated application or holding fees, which can channel families into lower-quality housing units in lower-opportunity areas (Bergman et al. 2019, DeLuca et al. 2013, Reosti 2021, Rosen 2020). Poor credit is a problem, but so is no credit. Almost 20% of the American population is considered credit invisible or unscorable. This is more common among residents of low-income neighborhoods, where 30% are credit unscorable (compared with 4% of residents in high-income neighborhoods), and Blacks and Hispanics have credit issues at nearly double the rate of Whites and Asians (CFPB 2015).

Only at the bottom of the rental market—among more amateur landlords who tend to have lower-quality housing stock and more frequent housing violations—are credit checks less common (Rosen et al. 2021). Furthermore, credit checks—frequently used as part of an algorithmic scoring process to rate tenants by third-party companies that lend their services to landlords—can act as a proxy for other stigmatized traits, such as race or housing subsidy status, allowing landlords to legally discriminate by proxy (Rosen et al. 2021). Like in other realms, such as criminal justice and hiring practices, these purportedly neutral algorithms tend to reinforce racial and class-based hierarchies (Brayne & Christin 2020, Dressel & Farid 2018, Fourcade & Healy 2013, Kiviat 2019, Starr 2014, Stevenson & Doleac 2020). Furthermore, evidence suggests that eviction itself reduces access to credit, creating a negative feedback effect (Humphries et al. 2019).

Housing Quality

A voluminous literature in public health, environmental science, and medicine has explored housing quality deficiencies and how they affect the behavior, health, and well-being of children and their caregivers (for reviews, see Evans 2006, Evans et al. 2003, Leventhal & Newman 2010).⁵ While space constraints do not allow a comprehensive review, we note some key findings. Lead poisoning has recently emerged as an area of interest for sociologists, given its deleterious effects on children's cognitive and executive functioning (Needleman 2004, Reuben et al. 2017) and how it perpetuates racial inequality (Muller et al. 2018). While research on the harmful consequences of lead paint spurred legislation and remediation in the 1970s, many homes, especially in low-income, majority-minority neighborhoods, still contain lead paint (Markowitz & Rosner 2013, Muller et al. 2018, Rosner & Markowitz 2016, Sampson & Winter 2018).

⁴As Frazier (2021) reports, “In 2011, Experian introduced RentBureau, a service that offers rent-payment history to landlords. . . . TransUnion debuted SmartMove. . . . Equifax also offered screening reports. Next came the rent-payment platforms. . . [that] track who has paid on time and funnels that data back to the credit bureaus, which aggregate it and sell it back to landlords.”

⁵Landlords may also fail the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Housing Quality Standards inspections by neglecting to make necessary repairs to quality deficiencies, which can increase the residential instability of subsidized tenants (DeLuca et al. 2013, Garboden et al. 2018, Rosen 2020).

Recent national estimates also find that nearly 15% of rental units (over five million) had significant quality issues (such as crumbling walls and vermin infestation) or lacked residential essentials, like heating equipment or running water (GAO 2020). Low-income renter households lived in almost two-thirds of the units demonstrating substantial quality issues and resided in almost 80% of the units lacking proper heating and water (GAO 2020). Research shows that residential exposure to substandard housing conditions, including dampness, poor ventilation, dirty carpets, and vermin dander and droppings, can lead to an increase in mold and other allergens that develop and aggravate respiratory diseases like asthma, the most common chronic health problem among children (Lanphear et al. 2001, Krieger & Higgins 2002, Matsui et al. 2006). Additional hazards, like electrical fires and unsafe structures, can cause injuries and make a housing unit uninhabitable (Gielen et al. 2012, Shaw 2004).⁶

Crowding is another housing quality concern, as it can affect sleep, infection, privacy, and adequate study space. Recent estimates from the American Housing Survey (AHS) put the percentage of crowded units at 10.5% among renters with incomes below 133% of the poverty rate.⁷ Correlational research in health fields finds that crowding may have a negative effect on health, but the scholarship on crowding in sociology is limited and has come to mixed conclusions, due in part to narrow measurement (Blake et al. 2007, Gove et al. 1979, Solari & Mare 2012). Typical crowding measures do not account for how cultural norms about what constitutes a comfortable number of people in a household may differ by subgroups (Myers et al. 1996), and research says little about how space is utilized in service of children's needs, which could help reveal additional mechanisms that connect crowding to children's outcomes.

Residential Instability

Classic research conceptualizes residential mobility as motivated by residential satisfaction, changes in family needs, and desires for upward mobility (Rossi 1955, Speare 1974), but a growing body of work shows that residential mobility among the poor is far less planned and typically involuntary (Bartlett 1997; Clark 2010; DeLuca et al. 2019; Fitchen 1992, 1994; McAllister et al. 1971; Newman & Owens 1982; Phinney 2013; Ross 1962; Schafft 2006).

Research on eviction as a significant source of housing insecurity has exploded in recent years. Evictions and eviction filings have been on the rise since 2000, nearly doubling between 2000 and 2016 (Eviction Lab 2018).⁸ The vast majority of evictions are due to cost burden: While we do not have national data on how many evictions were filed for nonpayment of rent, local estimates go as high as 82% in New York (Ellen et al. 2020) and 93% in Washington, DC (McCabe & Rosen 2020). In 2016, eviction notices were served on an estimated 6.1% of all renter households, and 2.3% of renter households were formally evicted (Eviction Lab 2018).⁹ However, informal evictions are not captured by these data. Some landlords regularly coerce, threaten, or incentivize tenants to move through so-called self-help evictions (Desmond 2016, Hartman & Robinson

⁶There are countless studies in public health and allied fields associating housing quality deficiencies and characteristics like noise with child and parent health and other behaviors, but comprehensive reviews suggest that many of these studies suffer from weak designs, rely on self-reported measures, and lack attention to mechanisms (for a review, see Evans 2006).

⁷We are grateful to Giselle Routhier for doing these calculations for us.

⁸The Eviction Lab attempts to track eviction records and rates across the entire country, though some scholars highlight the empirical limitations of comparing eviction across a range of legal and policy contexts (Aiello et al. 2018, Nelson et al. 2021).

⁹The Eviction Lab data may be underestimating both formal and informal eviction (Aiello et al. 2018).

2003). While these tactics are illegal, they are more common than formal evictions: Desmond & Shollenberger (2015) estimate that they are twice as common, and new estimates suggest that there may be more than 5.5 informal evictions for every formal eviction (Gromis & Desmond 2021).

Factors such as race, gender, family size, employment status, and neighborhood crime are important predictors of eviction (Desmond 2012b, Desmond & Gershenson 2017, Desmond & Valdez 2012, Greenberg et al. 2015, Hepburn et al. 2020). Black and Latino renters in general, and Black and Latina women renters specifically, are at greater risk of both the threat of eviction and actual eviction (Hepburn et al. 2020). An estimated one in seven children born in large American cities between 1998 and 2000 experienced an eviction for nonpayment of rent before the age of 15; this proportion is even higher among those born into poor households, at one in four (Lundberg & Donnelly 2019).

Increasingly, scholars find that eviction harms families and children by increasing material hardship and behavioral problems, while diminishing academic achievement and mental and physical health (Alexander et al. 1988, Cordes et al. 2019, Desmond & Kimbro 2015, Osypuk 2012, Leifheit et al. 2021, Ziolo-Guest & McKenna 2014; for a review, see Garboden et al. 2017). Eviction also has consequences for residential stability: Evicted families move more frequently and relocate to higher-poverty and higher-crime neighborhoods (Desmond & Shollenberger 2015, Desmond et al. 2015). Recent research also suggests that it is difficult to disentangle the effects of past eviction from other disadvantages that families may have experienced that also increase eviction and diminish well-being (Leifheit et al. 2020).

However, formal eviction is not the only source of housing instability. We see eviction as a subset of what scholars are more broadly calling reactive and forced moves that occur as a result of housing quality failure, neighborhood violence, foreclosure, policy changes, income loss, or family conflict (Boyd et al. 2010; DeLuca & Jang-Trettien 2020; DeLuca et al. 2013, 2019; Desmond & Kimbro 2015; Desmond et al. 2015; Harvey et al. 2020). Recent work suggests that the sum total of reactive mobility is even more common among the poor than formal measures of eviction suggest. For example, DeLuca et al. (2019) find that, when interviewing very low-income Black families in Mobile and Baltimore about why they decided to move, they almost invariably reported how they “ended up” somewhere else. They find that 80% of the households experienced a reactive move—relocating for reasons outside of their control, citing housing quality failures, landlords selling properties or going into foreclosure, and family conflict (for evidence of unplanned moves among Latino households in Chicago, see Carrillo et al. 2016). Desmond et al. (2015) find that 25% of renters in Milwaukee made forced moves in response to formal and informal eviction, and another 30% made moves that were in response to problems of housing and neighborhood quality. In a race- and income-diverse sample, Harvey et al. (2020) show that 55% of low-income families had a reactive move, compared with 17% of high-income families. Forced and reactive moves are made under duress and often quickly, and as such, families—assuming any move is unlikely to be permanent—end up settling for poor-quality units and similarly unsafe neighborhoods, putting them at risk for future housing insecurity and other disadvantages (see DeLuca et al. 2013, Desmond et al. 2015, Evans 2020, Rosen 2017, Wood 2014).

Gentrification and Displacement

For decades, scholars have been sounding the alarm about the potential displacement effects of gentrification and other urban renewal efforts. Concerns stretch back to the wave of urban renewal that occurred between the 1940s and 1970s, when hundreds of Black communities were bulldozed and several hundred thousand Black residents displaced (Gans 1962, Hyra 2012, Newman & Owens 1982). While scholars continue to write about the new urban renewal projects,

like the federal Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) program that demolished more than 20% of public housing stock in the United States, empowerment zones, or other growth and development strategies (Hyra 2008, 2012; Goetz 2013; Tach & Emory 2017; Vale 2013), the past 30 years of urban research have focused much more attention on gentrification in low-income urban neighborhoods and whether it displaces low-income—especially low-income minority—households.

While gentrification itself may be increasing (Hwang & Lin 2016), it is not clear that its displacement effects are (Zuk et al. 2018). Hwang & Sampson (2014) find that minority neighborhoods in Chicago were the least likely to gentrify, consistent with analyses of national data (Owens 2012) finding that only about 11% of metros that experienced significant socioeconomic change were majority Black. Other scholars across disciplines find little quantitative evidence of elevated displacement (Brown-Saracino 2017, Ding et al. 2016, Ellen & O'Regan 2011, Freeman 2005, Freeman & Braconi 2004, Martin & Beck 2018, McKinnish et al. 2010, Vigdor 2002).¹⁰ Some recent work suggests that gentrification may even benefit legacy residents through neighborhood changes (Agbai 2021, Brummet & Reed 2019, Dragan et al. 2020). However, while displacement effects are not as large as some anticipated, it does not mean that the displacement that is happening is inconsequential (Newman & Wyly 2006)—in some cities these effects may be large enough to change the culture and identity of entire neighborhoods (e.g., Hyra 2017). There is also growing evidence that even when gentrification does not displace, it may shrink the supply of available neighborhoods for low-income people to move to—a concern for social mobility (Hwang & Ding 2020)—and increase the cost of staying for legacy residents, through higher rents and overcrowded housing (Freeman 2005, Hwang & Shrimali 2021).

While this is still a new area of research, recent scholarship has pointed to the underexamined special risk of displacement among those who occupy manufactured housing (mobile homes), the largest source of unsubsidized affordable housing in the country. There are 1.7 million mobile home renter households and 5.3 million homeowners of mobile homes in the United States; these are split about half and half between rural and urban areas (Durst & Sullivan 2019). Households in mobile home parks are over twice as likely to be living in poverty (31%) than conventional renters (15%) and face a very particular form of housing insecurity in that while they may own their homes, they do not own the ground below and can be subject to mass eviction (Durst & Sullivan 2019, Sullivan 2018).

Finally, it is important to put gentrification and forced displacement in context as just one type of neighborhood change. What is notable about most research on gentrification is what it says about what does not change—most poor minority neighborhoods stay that way (Hwang & Sampson 2014, Sharkey 2013). Scholars have long pointed to the abandonment and divestment of poor Black neighborhoods, which lead to housing insecurity as concentrated poverty increases, housing stock deteriorates, population declines, and housing markets collapse (Desmond 2016, Sharkey 2013, Wilson 1996). Ultimately, this means that many poor and minority households end up, as Sharkey (2013) notes, “stuck in place,” living in declining neighborhoods with few alternatives. Housing security depends on the security of communities. A recent paper by Small et al. (2018) shows that, while the poor neighborhoods of many cities are no longer depopulated, in 25 cities the majority of poor neighborhoods in 2010 had lost residents for three decades—mostly in Black communities that never recovered from the exodus of the manufacturing sector.

¹⁰We thank Jackelyn Hwang for pointing out that most of this literature measures gentrification-induced displacement as moves or reported involuntary moves (for family transitions or health issues) and that the comparison is low-income nongentrifying neighborhoods, where residential instability may already be more common (see also Carlson 2020).

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

For poor renters or those without leases, social relationships can determine relative housing security. Scholars as far back as Stack (1974) have documented that families who cannot afford to purchase or lease their own housing, or who experience a housing, employment, income, or personal shock, often turn to their social networks for shelter (Clampet-Lundquist 2003, Edin & Shaefer 2015, Mazelis 2017, Seefeldt & Sandstrom 2015, Tienda & Angel 1982, Venkatesh 2006, Wiemers 2014). Shared housing arrangements, or doubled-up households, have grown over time, driven mostly by an increase in multigenerational households (Koebel & Murray 1999, Mykyta & McCartney 2012, Pilkauskas & Cross 2018). Such arrangements are more common among Black, Latino, and Asian families, and low-income, less educated, and unmarried mothers (Beck & Beck 1989, Cross 2018). Current estimates put the share of children who live in doubled-up households at about 15–20% nationally (Harvey et al. 2021, Raley et al. 2019).¹¹ However, in part because these households tend to be unstable, the cumulative prevalence over childhood is likely even higher (Harvey et al. 2021); as such, nationally representative survey data likely underestimate the prevalence of such arrangements. As Pilkauskas et al. (2014) show using the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which oversampled low-income households, 49% of children were in doubled-up households at some point between birth and age nine (see also Harvey 2020a), and 64% of single mothers were doubled up when their child was born. In the Family Options Study, a multisite intervention targeting households who were seeking emergency housing, 85% of participating heads of households reported that they were doubled up at the time of the study enrollment, and 45% were living with relatives or others before entering a shelter (Gubits et al. 2016).¹²

There are different ways to assess whether shared housing arrangements are beneficial. A shared housing arrangement can provide emergency housing and emotional support, reduce expenses, and increase childcare availability (Amorim 2019, Dunifon et al. 2014, Reyes 2020), but these benefits may come with the potential costs of crowding, instability, and conflict.¹³ Research has long pointed to the double-edged sword of sharing resources with networks (Briggs 1998, Domínguez & Watkins 2003, Portes 1998). Doubling up tends to be a short-term and unstable arrangement (Mollborn et al. 2012, Perkins 2017, Pilkauskas et al. 2014). Harvey's (2018; 2020a,b; Harvey et al. 2021) recent research explores the inner workings of these households. In particular, she focuses on how the power asymmetry between hosts and guests affects parental identity. While hosts feel good about helping family members in need, concerns about financial independence, control over space, childrearing, and household rules may threaten guest mothers' identities as good parents (Harvey 2020b). The economic arrangements and ground rules in shared households can be complicated, including determining what counts as a contribution to the household and how the arrangement should benefit the host versus the guest (Harvey 2018; Harvey et al. 2021). Such arrangements often lack taken-for-granted norms, which can cause tension (Harvey

¹¹We thank Hope Harvey for noting that the number of doubled-up households also includes families with children who host shared households and that these are not necessarily housing unstable families.

¹²Skobba & Goetz (2015) find that in a convenience sample of subsidized households in Minnesota, 82% had doubled up with family or friends at some point, and for 77%, this doubling up happened during a period of residential churning and short-term moves.

¹³While more commonly studied in public health, the relationship between intimate partner violence and housing insecurity also warrants attention (Rollins et al. 2012). Clinicians and social workers have long cited such interpersonal trauma as a precipitator of housing insecurity (Rollins et al. 2001), and the behavior of abusive partners can lead to unit damage and police calls that trigger an eviction (Desmond & Valdez 2012, Martin & Stern 2005). Indeed, victims of domestic violence are given priority under HUD's voucher program and considered homeless under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (2009).

2020b). Because guests are usually less advantaged, and hosts can control whether the arrangement ends or not, guests are put in a subordinate position (see also Burton & Clark 2005). In addition to straining relationships, doubled-up arrangements can adversely impact future health and employment for young adults (Harvey 2020a,b; Perkins 2019).

Low-income renters, especially Black and Latino renters, also turn to their social networks to help them find their own housing (Krysan 2008, Spring et al. 2017). Such housing search strategies can reproduce residential segregation, given homophily in social ties (Krysan 2008, Krysan & Crowder 2017), which means low-income minority renters may experience more housing insecurity if their similarly situated networks channel them into high-poverty areas with low-quality housing. Members of social networks may also confer benefits for renters during the housing search by lending money for security deposits, vouching for one's credit to a landlord, cosigning leases, or letting renters stay in their homes rent free while renters save up money for their next place (Schmidt 2021). However, these benefits may differ by ethnicity and income, with low-income White renters more likely to get gift money from their ties and less likely to have ties expect financial contributions, and low-income Latino renters getting loans and doubling up with ties who anticipate they will benefit by getting help with the rent (Schmidt 2021).¹⁴

What if there are no close ties to rely on when shelter is needed? Both Desmond (2012a) and Mazelis (2017) note that the housing insecure may turn to weak ties they meet through local organizations and social service agencies to help them survive poverty, but at times at a social cost. Those without any connections with whom to double up may turn to outdoor encampments or squatting (Finnigan 2021, Herbert 2018, Stuart 2016, Venkatesh 2006). Recent work in Detroit shows that squatting arrangements are often precarious, given the prevalence of substandard housing conditions and substance use (Herbert 2018). Still others who experience housing insecurity resort to rooms for rent (Rosen 2020) or weekly room rentals at extended-stay motels,¹⁵ sometimes the only choice for people whose poor credit makes it impossible to rent housing (Dum 2016, Frazier 2021). This emerging literature suggests that these temporary yet understudied strategies are important for understanding the full extent of housing insecurity.

SUPPLY-SIDE RELATIONSHIPS

Landlords

One of the biggest changes in the literature on housing insecurity has been a renewed focus on supply-side actors, especially landlords and housing providers, who until very recently had not received research attention since the 1970s (Stegman 1972; Sternlieb 1966, 1972). Understanding supply-side actors is key for understanding not just the production or maintenance of actual supply but also the socially stratified way supply and housing are brokered and allocated. In recent years there has been a surge of research examining the supply side of housing, and more specifically, examining how it plays a role in both mediating and amplifying housing instability (P. Garboden & E. Rosen, manuscript in preparation). A new and growing body of work explores how the landlord-tenant relationship shapes housing careers, especially through screening and selection, the quality of the rental experience, and processes of tenant removal.

¹⁴Like Harvey (2020b), Schmidt (2021) also finds that some of these exchanges can strain existing relationships, especially if there are misunderstandings about what is expected from the ties to their beneficiaries, making some of these housing arrangements unstable.

¹⁵For example, in 2018–2019, nearly 98,000 homeless children (7%) lived in a hotel or motel (NCES 2019, NCHE 2019).

A long literature using audit studies demonstrates considerable discrimination against renters of color in many housing markets (Cunningham et al. 2018, Faber & Mercier 2022, Ross & Turner 2005, Turner et al. 2002, Yinger 1995). But landlord discrimination can affect not only which tenants end up where, but also housing security itself. Discrimination on the part of landlords and leasing agents can prolong the search process, making it harder for tenants to find homes in the neighborhoods and units that they prefer (DeLuca et al. 2013, Freeman 2012, Freeman & Li 2014). Similarly, when tenants anticipate landlord discrimination in certain neighborhoods, they are less likely to search for homes in those areas and more likely to end up in units with quality problems and in neighborhoods with high levels of crime and violence (DeLuca et al. 2013, Turner & Ross 2005). New work shows that some landlords screen tenants based on the degree to which their behavior conforms to insidious cultural narratives at the intersection of race, gender, and class (Rosen et al. 2021). While not all landlords engage in such behavior, when these discriminatory tactics are used on low-income, subsidized tenants of color, they can limit residential options and burden an already difficult housing search process.

Research on landlords increasingly emphasizes not just whether a family leases up or is removed from their home but also the ongoing set of relations between the landlord and tenant that broadly shape housing instability (Burawoy 2017, Garboden & Rosen 2019, Leung et al. 2020). For example, Garboden & Rosen (2019) find that some landlords use eviction filings not primarily as a means to evict tenants but rather as an intimidation tactic to get them to pay rent (by forgoing other expenses, appealing to friends and family, or applying for emergency rental assistance from the government or a charity). This threat of eviction strips these tenants of their consumer rights, turning the landlord-tenant relationship into one of creditor-debtor.

Research on eviction increasingly makes the important distinction between eviction filings (when the landlord initiates a lawsuit against the tenant) and executed evictions, when the sheriff shows up at a household's home to put them out and change the locks (Garboden & Rosen 2019). Recent data show that the number of executed evictions (about 898,000 in 2016) pales in comparison to the number of eviction filings (estimated to be about 2,350,000) (Eviction Lab 2018). For example, in places like Washington, DC (with one of the highest filing rates in the country), only 5% of all eviction filings result in an executed eviction (McCabe & Rosen 2020, Nelson et al. 2021). This is related to a process called serial eviction, where landlords file on the same tenants in the same units more than once per year (Garboden & Rosen 2019, Gormory 2021, Immergluck et al. 2020, Leung et al. 2020). For example, Leung et al. (2020) show that each eviction filing that does not result in an eviction still costs the household an average of \$180 in fines and fees, essentially raising tenants' monthly housing cost by 20%. Serial eviction filing is financially beneficial to landlords and costly to tenants. Black and Latino households are more likely to face serial eviction than their White counterparts (Hepburn et al. 2020).

Recent work has found that different kinds of landlords engage in vastly different eviction strategies, with important implications for housing insecurity. Several new studies show that larger landlords file for eviction more frequently overall, they are more likely to engage in serial eviction, and their filings are less likely to result in an executed eviction (Gormory 2021, Immergluck et al. 2020, Leung et al. 2020, McCabe & Rosen 2020, Sims & Iverson 2021). Smaller landlords are more likely to try to avoid formal eviction (Balzarini & Boyd 2021) and to use tactics to manage and control tenants rather than replace them (Rosen & Garboden 2022); however, when they do file, those filings are more likely to end in an eviction (Raymond et al. 2016). Indeed, landlord financial security is inextricable from tenant housing insecurity: From the landlord's perspective, eviction can result in several months of lost rent plus turnover costs. This lost revenue can be enough to push a property into the red, jeopardizing the long-term health of the housing stock (Garboden & Newman 2012, Greif 2018).

Landlords also have social relationships with their tenants (Greenlee 2014), with consequences for housing insecurity. Shiffer-Sebba (2020) shows that circumstantial landlords are less likely to focus on profit maximization—since they feel a certain social closeness with their tenants and the meanings they ascribe to properties—than those who purchased property with the intent to make money, with consequences for tenant stability. When landlords mistrust tenants and worry that their behavior may incur financial sanctions—for example, by incurring fines for trash or water—they may be more likely to engage in discriminatory screening, surveillance, or harassment, practices that undermine tenants’ housing security (Greif 2018, 2022).¹⁶

Landlord expectations for tenancy, both implicit and explicit, demand a great deal of emotional labor on the part of tenants—especially tenants of color—to demonstrate their worthiness. In a practice reminiscent of those used to sanction mothers in public housing, some landlords require tenants to perform respectability by demonstrating moral worth, enacting deference, and displaying children’s cleanliness and unit tidiness in the current residence during home visits (Du Bois 1903, Lacy 2007, Rosen et al. 2021, Rosenblatt & Cossyleon 2018). Landlord tactics can sometimes go beyond a benign paternalism, such as demanding sexual favors in return for rent or—especially for women tenants of color—sexually harassing tenants (Cahan 1987, Reed et al. 2005, Roscigno et al. 2007, Rosen & Venkatesh 2008, Tester 2008).

Other Housing and Real Estate Intermediaries

New research shows the importance of understanding the multiple supply-side actors and intermediaries who are relevant at all stages of the housing process (Korver-Glenn 2018), such as housing code inspectors (Bartram 2019a,b; 2022), home appraisers (Howell & Korver-Glenn 2020), the owners of limited liability companies (Travis 2019), the holders of seller-financing contracts (Jang-Trettien 2021), and real estate agents (Besbris 2020) in shaping residential preferences, home values, racial segregation, and residential insecurity more broadly. Intermediaries such as building inspectors have an important impact on housing instability through their discretionary decision making around code violations (e.g., Becher 2014, Desmond 2016, Edin et al. 2012, Satter 2009). Based on notions of deservingness, Bartram (2022) argues, building inspectors “go easy” on small property owners, overlooking small matters such as peeling paint or minor damages, while they “go hard” on professionalized landlords, overreporting violations and levying fines. The result is that the homes owned by amateur landlords are held to less stringent quality standards, increasing housing precarity for the tenants who live in them.

Real estate agents are important intermediaries too. Besbris (2020) shows how real estate agents shape middle- and upper-class home buying decisions by steering these groups away from poorer areas with populations of color. These processes indirectly affect housing instability by directing mortgage capital away from neighborhoods that could benefit the most from it.

Housing insecurity is also wrought from neighborhood insecurity. Using archival data in high-poverty, racially segregated neighborhoods in Baltimore spanning 40 years, Jang-Trettien (2019, 2021) finds that real estate investors in these unregulated markets deploy many shady tactics to bundle, purchase, and sell properties many times, making it almost impossible to determine who owns a given property, and also for residents, community organizations, and city governments to hold property owners accountable for the deterioration of neighborhoods.

¹⁶Amateur landlords, often motivated by middle-class values of independence and self-sufficiency but lacking in business acumen, may adopt strategies of action that come at the expense of tenant housing security, such as relying on hard-money lenders (Garboden 2021).

HOUSING POLICY

American housing policy has long valorized homeownership, instantiated in postwar lending practices, as a means of promoting social mobility and wealth building (Fischel 2005, McCabe 2016). Through the process of redlining, in which poor and Black families and neighborhoods were excluded from access to federally backed mortgages (see Baradaran 2019, Oliver & Shapiro 1995, Rothstein 2017, Taylor 2019) and the disproportionate subsidy provided by the mortgage interest deduction, it is clear that US policy strongly supports homeownership over renting. This focus on homeownership has two important implications when it comes to housing insecurity. First, postwar, federal housing policy gave birth to a dual housing market: one for Black Americans and one for White Americans. Federal homeownership subsidization was built on decades of racially discriminatory lending practices, resulting in differential homeownership rates by race and a tremendous racial wealth gap, both of which affected housing insecurity. Second, sociologists have highlighted how American housing policy, in prioritizing homeownership, has failed renters. Because of the enormous differences in homeownership and renting by race, this failure has important implications for people of color, since Black communities were excluded from the mainstream mortgage market and became prey for subprime markets and exploitative tactics (Satter 2009, Taylor 2019).¹⁷ This is also clear from the shift in federal housing subsidy policies since the 1970s that increasingly rely on private market landlords to house the poor (Hackworth 2007, Rosen 2020, Rosen & Garboden 2022, Schwartz 2015, Stuart 2016). This set of policies has made renters—and especially renters of color—far more vulnerable to housing insecurity than homeowners.

Recent sociological research on housing policy has brought our attention to the ways in which public policy is part of social structure, and how these policies fall short of providing as much housing security as they could. Even when these programs make housing more affordable, they do not serve everyone they need to, leaving most renters who need financial assistance without it. Only one in four renters in need of rental assistance receives it (CBPP 2021c, Turner & Kingsley 2008). By focusing on affordability above all else, these programs also fail to account for the socially situated nature of housing. Furthermore, these programs operate in, and do not account for, a racially stratified housing market, hampering their ability to reduce housing insecurity, especially among disadvantaged populations.

Public Housing

Public housing, the best-known form of housing assistance, provides relatively stable and affordable homes to more than one million of the nation's poorest and most vulnerable households (Docter & Galvez 2019, Schwartz 2015). Poor families are concentrated in these developments by design, as public housing was deliberately built on inexpensive land in neighborhoods already suffering from racial segregation, underinvestment, and decline (Goetz 2013, Hirsch 1983, Polikoff 2006, Popkin et al. 2000, Schwartz 2015, Turner et al. 2009, Vale 2000). Public housing is limited to those who earn below 80% of AMI, and least 40% of new household admissions must earn below 30% of AMI. Most families pay 30% of their income in rent, or at least \$50 per month, in rent.¹⁸

While public housing can promote housing security by making homes more affordable, it has been criticized for providing substandard housing conditions under poor management (Goetz

¹⁷More broadly, Taylor (2019) argues, US federal housing programs have long been a tool to protect and promote the financial interests of the private banking and real estate industries, rather than those of ordinary people and especially renters.

¹⁸In 2016, 91% of households that were living in public housing met HUD's definition of very low-income (below 50% of AMI), and 72% met the extremely low-income definition (below 30% of AMI). The majority of households in public housing were headed by a person who was elderly or disabled, and more than one-third

2013, Kotlowitz 1991, Newman 1995), and for exposing families to violence (Popkin et al. 2000; Vale 2000, 2013; Venkatesh 2002) and neighborhoods of concentrated poverty and racial segregation (Bickford & Massey 1991, Massey & Kanaiaupuni 1993). While some scholars point to the social capital benefits of public housing (Rodriguez 2021, Venkatesh 2002), the bulk of the research points to drawbacks. Public housing units are still concentrated in racially segregated, disadvantaged neighborhoods (CBPP 2021b, Hirsch 1983, Rothstein 2017, Schwartz 2015, Turner et al. 2009, Vale 2000).¹⁹

From the 1990s through the 2000s, public housing in over 200 cities was redeveloped through the federally funded HOPE VI in an effort to deconcentrate poverty and create mixed-income developments (Joseph et al. 2007, Popkin 2016). While this program has provided safer, more affordable housing for many, it has also been criticized for reducing the total amount of affordable housing units and creating housing insecurity for many families who were displaced and unable to return to the original site (Chaskin & Joseph 2015; Cunningham & Popkin 2004; Joseph et al. 2007; Popkin 2016; Popkin et al. 2004). Since then, the number of households living in public housing has further declined through the Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program, which converts public housing units into project-based Section 8 and project-based rental assistance (Docker & Galvez 2019). The implications of this transition for housing insecurity remain to be seen. While RAD may preliminarily improve living conditions, scholars worry it will increase housing insecurity in other ways—for example, by making it easier to evict tenants as compared with public housing (Econometrica Inc. 2016, GAO 2018, HUD 2019).

Housing Vouchers

The country's largest tenant-based federal housing assistance program, the housing choice voucher program (colloquially known as Section 8) houses 2.3 million households (CBPP 2021c).²⁰ Families pay 30% of their household income in rent toward the cost of a unit in the private market, and the voucher makes up the difference.²¹ The voucher covers the remaining portion, which is paid directly to the landlord by HUD and administered by over 2,000 local public housing authorities across the country (Schwartz 2015). Nationwide, voucher holders are 35% White, 45% Black, and 16% Latino (NLIHC 2012). Vouchers are designed to increase housing stability by making housing more affordable. On this first goal, the program does quite well, at least for those who are lucky enough to receive the subsidy. Research shows that vouchers keep people off the streets and stably housed, improve affordability, reduce homelessness, alleviate overcrowding, improve some measures of parent and child well-being (Gubits et al. 2016), and reduce poverty (Fischer 2015). They also provide families a sense of choice and the flexibility to move in response to life shocks (Rosen 2017, 2020).

included children younger than 18 (CBPP 2021b). Between 2016 and 2017, 6% of all new admissions to public housing were homeless (Docker & Galvez 2019).

¹⁹More often than not, units are still located in census tracts that are poor (33% poor on average) and non-White (71% non-White, on average) (CBPP 2021b, Docker & Galvez 2019).

²⁰The largest producer of low-income housing, the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program, is not a federal housing program but rather an item in the tax code. The LIHTC supports the construction or renovation of about 100,000 affordable units annually. LIHTC households have incomes below 60% of AMI, and rents are set no higher than 30% of that income level (Schwartz 2015). However, research has demonstrated that LIHTC units are frequently located in racially segregated, poor neighborhoods: 34% of LIHTC units are in high-poverty neighborhoods (where more than 30% of residents are poor), and more than half of all LIHTC units are located in neighborhoods where the majority of residents are people of color (Fischer 2018, Horn & O'Regan 2011).

²¹Landlords can charge up to the payment standard, which is typically set at 90–110% of fair market rent, which is the fortieth percentile of the area rent, adjusted for number of bedrooms.

While deconcentrating poverty and racial segregation has never been an explicit goal of the program (Galster 2013, Khadduri 2005, Varady 2010), policy makers increasingly see vouchers as a tool to promote not only affordability but also geographic opportunity (Basolo & Nguyen 2005, Briggs 2003, Freeman 2011, Goering 2005, McClure 2010, Newman & Schnare 1997, Pendall 2000b). This is because, unlike public housing, voucher subsidies are tied to the tenant rather than the unit, and in theory, a tenant can use this voucher in any affordable unit. While vouchers are moderately successful compared with public housing when it comes to the poverty level of the neighborhoods to which recipients move (Newman & Schnare 1997), the program has fallen far short of expectations when it comes to poverty deconcentration and racial desegregation (McClure 2008, McClure et al. 2015, Metzger 2014, Sharkey 2013). Many voucher recipients still live in poor neighborhoods (where over 20% are poor) (Devine 2003). Compared with White voucher holders, Black voucher-holding households are more likely to live in segregated neighborhoods and less likely to live in low-poverty neighborhoods (Devine 2003, Pendall 2000b). Perhaps this is unsurprising—since the 1970s, federal housing policy has been increasingly absorbed into the private market, which sits on a racially stratified geography of opportunity and is brokered by private market landlords.

Sociological research on why voucher holders do not move to less disadvantaged areas also points to the low supply of affordable rental units in low-poverty areas (Pendall 2000b), the challenges of housing searches (DeLuca & Jang-Trettien 2020; DeLuca et al. 2013, 2019; Wood 2014), racial preferences (Charles 2003, Krysan & Farley 2002), social networks (Boyd 2008), and, increasingly, the role of landlords and discrimination (Cunningham et al. 2018; Garboden et al. 2018; Rosen 2014, 2020). Voucher status is stigmatized and may play a bigger role than race (Faber & Mercier 2022, Rosen 2020). Refusing voucher holders is legal in most states, and landlords have an incentive to advertise and rent to voucher holders in more disadvantaged neighborhoods while turning them away in more affluent ones (Besbris et al. 2022; Cunningham et al. 2018; Desmond & Perkins 2016; Garboden et al. 2018; Rosen 2014, 2020). The program itself can penalize already low-income renters during the housing search. The voucher program limits the time households have to find units, panicking already bandwidth-taxed parents (DeLuca et al. 2013); websites commonly recommended for voucher holders, such as Craigslist or AffordableHousing.com (formerly GoSection8.com), promote subsidized units in segregated areas; security deposits are not usually covered (Rosenblatt & Cossyleon 2018); and housing authorities are incentivized more to lease up tenants period, rather than leasing them up in higher-opportunity areas (DeLuca et al. 2013).

Research increasingly demonstrates that the neighborhoods in which housing vouchers are used matter for housing insecurity. While initial results from the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) study failed to demonstrate robust effects on economic self-sufficiency (Kling et al. 2007), later work found that moving to lower-poverty neighborhoods improved mothers' and daughters' mental health, reduced obesity, and reduced rates of hospitalization and healthcare spending (Clampet-Lundquist et al. 2011; Ludwig et al. 2012, 2013; Pollack et al. 2019; Sampson 2008). A subsequent analysis of the long-term MTO outcomes using Internal Revenue Service data has made clear the importance of neighborhood context for outcomes ranging from income and finishing college to marriage (Chetty et al. 2016). However, other work shows that even when subsidized renters do live in areas that are higher income, they may not always be able to access the social capital the neighborhood has to offer, due primarily to the stigma surrounding housing subsidies (Chaskin & Joseph 2015, Rosen 2020, Small 2004, Tach 2009). These outcomes—income, education, marriage, neighborhood attainment—all have important implications for housing insecurity more broadly: When voucher households live in safe neighborhoods with quality housing stock, job opportunities, and high-performing schools, they are less likely to end up moving to address these needs.

Tenant Legal Protections and Eviction Policy

In recent years scholars have focused on how to better protect renters from one of the clearest forms of housing insecurity: eviction. The literature documents how landlord-tenant law favors landlords and puts tenants at a categorical disadvantage. Landlords are able to initiate eviction proceedings against tenants for a wide range of reasons beyond nonpayment of rent, and they have financial and institutional advantages in the courtroom to back up their claims (Desmond 2016, Dreier 1982). Nevertheless, a range of legal solutions have been implemented and studied in just the past decade, and evidence points to the disadvantage that tenants face in the courtroom (Bezdek 1992, Lempert & Monsma 1994, Nelson 2021). Recent research also focuses on the fact that tenant protections and legal regimes surrounding eviction vary substantially by state, complicating attempts to compare eviction data across the country (Aiello et al. 2018, Nelson et al. 2021). Nelson et al. (2021) highlight six ways in which the legal eviction process differs across localities to shape the institutional life of an eviction, including when the first legal record of the eviction is filed; the unintended policy incentives (and disincentives) to file against a tenant, such as the fee to file; the role of just-cause eviction ordinances and local statutes such as the right to redemption and the warranty of habitability; and the substantial variation in the timeline for a legal eviction. Each of these local policy and legal regime variations shapes whether landlords file for eviction at all, when they file, how the data are reported, and the likelihood of a landlord pursuing an informal self-help eviction rather than a formal one.

CONCLUSION

Housing insecurity has been studied by scholars in many fields, and we are especially encouraged by recent studies in the newly emerging subfield of the sociology of housing. This scholarship situates housing insecurity within a set of social relations that extend beyond mere affordability, helping the field conceptualize housing insecurity as a dynamic process. Long-standing research has focused on the questions of whether housing is affordable and the extent of physical housing quality problems, but it has focused far less on the social context of housing insecurity. New research shows just how important social context is. For example, as Muller et al. (2018) point out, research on lead paint should focus not just on documenting where, when, or with what effects children are poisoned but also on the social causes of lead poisoning, such as the housing supply that was not renovated due to unequal mortgage lending practices that divested neighborhoods' resources, and landlords who may not have an incentive to abate the lead hazard.

A growing literature makes clear that housing insecurity is not a one-time event. It is the looming or repeated threat of an eviction, rather than just the eviction itself. It is the fraught environment of managing space and children in a doubled-up arrangement, rather than just the state of being housed. It is the strain on family relationships from lending a security deposit, rather than simply signing a lease. It is the search for housing that takes up bandwidth, time, and resources, rather than just finding a place to live. It is the compromise on housing quality and school quality that must be made to avoid homelessness. Sociology provides us the tools to understand these additional social costs of housing insecurity, all of which can add to future housing insecurity in a cycle of substandard living arrangements, damaged relationships, and debt.

Thus, we also highlight the limitations of using point-in-time, static measures to understand housing insecurity, which belie a more dynamic reality. For example, at what point does housing insecurity end and homelessness begin (see Culhane et al. 2007, Sosin et al. 1990)? While the chronically homeless have received much attention (Lee et al. 2021, Shlay & Rossi 1992), cycles of housing insecurity due to economic and personal shocks are more common but less often studied (Piliavin et al. 1996). Research on homelessness typically relies on data from households who

seek emergency housing at shelters, which, while capturing some of the worst needs cases, likely underestimates total housing insecurity (Gubits et al. 2016, Shlay & Rossi 1992). Furthermore, existing panel surveys do not typically capture housing dynamics at intervals frequent enough to fully measure housing insecurity among the poor, and they suffer from attrition among the subgroups most likely to experience housing insecurity. The questions asked in conventional surveys are also limited in scope, neglecting the shorter, intermittent, more frequent stays that characterize the housing trajectories of low-income households (see Fitchen 1992). Data on household rosters and changes in household composition are sometimes collected in large surveys, but rarely with any sense of how the arrangement came to be, the key details around whether there is a lease in place and who is on the lease, and whether the respondent is a host or guest, which recent research shows to be important. We need better and more frequent measures of housing insecurity, including information on causes, duration, living arrangements and relationships.²²

When it comes to eviction, the type of housing insecurity research that has perhaps seen the most growth in the past decade, we still lack consistent national household-level data—which is not collected by the federal government—on evictions, eviction filings, and their consequences. Without such data, crafting policies that effectively reduce the negative outcomes of housing instability is impossible, both because the extent is not known and because the nature of the instability is not well understood.

Given these data limitations, and as we have shown in this review, mixed methods and longitudinal qualitative methods in particular have been helpful for moving beyond narrow measures of moving, to understand the circumstances, mechanisms, and consequences of housing insecurity. Despite practical limitations on the number of sites or interviews, qualitative research can be crucial for capturing the fluid and socially situated nature of housing insecurity and dynamic family composition, where surveys often fall short.²³ Eviction is not merely the moment of expulsion but also the ongoing set of relations between the landlord and tenant that lead sometimes to a formal eviction, but far more frequently to a filing that changes the power dynamic, or an informal eviction. Reactive moves and involuntary mobility prompted by housing quality, family conflict, and neighborhood violence have also been captured through qualitative work (as well as race and income differences across these types of moves), despite such data not typically being collected in surveys.

One area where we note a considerable gap in research evidence is the study of housing insecurity in rural settings (see Lichter & Brown 2011). While there are some earlier studies of residential mobility and insecurity in rural sites (e.g., Bartlett 1997; Fitchen 1992, 1994; Schafft 2006), we find little on how increasing housing costs, landlord dynamics, and shared housing affect households in less dense, less publicly visible regions of the country. Questions of how supply, infrastructure, policy, and demography affect housing insecurity differently (or similarly) in rural areas relative to urban and suburban areas are vital, and we urge scholars to explore these questions.

Newer research in the sociology of housing reveals how social context, social networks, and power dynamics shape housing outcomes. This work, as we have reviewed it, makes clear that housing insecurity goes beyond what affordability measures can show. As we outline, when policies focus predominantly on affordability to the exclusion of other considerations, there may be

²²Indeed, a new module in the AHS allows us to understand a broad range of reasons for moving. In these data, of those who moved in the past 2 years, twice as many reported moving in response to a negative housing condition such as higher rent, than reported a forced move (although evidence also suggests that these numbers underestimate forced moves among the poorest) (Gromis & Desmond 2021).

²³Innovations in large-*N*, in-depth qualitative interviewing studies—such as with the American Voices Project (<https://americanvoicesproject.org/>)—are beginning to circumvent some of these limitations.

social costs. While there are clearly many ways to measure housing insecurity, we believe the contribution of sociologists in particular is to understand the dynamic and socially situated nature of housing insecurity within the household relationships, supply-side actors, institutions, and policies that shape it.

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