Stable Poverty: Describing the Characteristics of Low-Eviction Poor Neighborhoods

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the socio-demographic characteristics and temporal stability of high-poverty American neighborhoods that experience low eviction rates. The presumption within much of urban sociology is that residents of poor neighborhoods experience higher levels of mobility and residential instability than those of non-poor neighborhoods. In analyzing variations in one form of (forced) residential mobility—eviction—across poor neighborhoods, we present evidence that runs contrary to this assumption. Using eviction rate data drawn from a unique longitudinal database of eviction court filings, we are able to demonstrate the existence of a small set of urban tracts that have poverty rates above 20% yet exceedingly low eviction rates. Analysis focus on the characteristics and temporal stability of these eviction patterns. The paper aims to spur more nuanced discussion and analysis of the heterogeneity of urban poverty and, ultimately, the development of policies that better-protect low-income households.

Extended Abstract

A general assumption pervades the urban sociology literature: poor neighborhoods experience a high degree of residential mobility. Either because of housing dissatisfaction, neighborhood changes (be they in the form of gentrification, revitalization, or slum clearance), or forced displacement in the form of eviction, we are led to believe that the poor are more mobile than the rest of us. This paper lays out evidence that questions the validity of that assumption. Specifically, we look at one indicator of residential instability—eviction rates—and analyze the characteristics of areas whose experience of this phenomena does not match expectations: high-poverty, low-eviction neighborhoods. This paper pursues two goals:

1. We document the existence and correlates of high-poverty, low-eviction neighborhoods. What sorts of poor neighborhoods fall into this category? What sets them apart from socio-demographically comparable poor neighborhoods with higher eviction rates?
2. We examine the temporal stability of this alignment. Looking across years, are these neighborhoods consistently poor? Stably low-eviction?

In analyzing the experience of high-poverty, low-eviction neighborhoods, we hope to spur more nuanced discussions and analysis of the heterogeneity of urban poverty. Evaluating the full range of urban poverty in the United States makes for better science and policy development. In particular, identifying and better-understanding the characteristics of high-poverty, low-eviction neighborhoods—especially those that are consistently low-eviction—can help us to craft policies that better-protect low-income households.

Data & Methods

Tract-level eviction rate data from 2000 – 2016 were drawn from eviction case filings that have been cleaned, compiled, and validated by the Eviction Lab at Princeton University. 1,241,623 tract-years are plausibly available. We drop all tract-years in which eviction data is missing (n=268,915) or marked as "low" relative to expected rates (n=361,560). Because we are interested in urban neighborhoods, we remove all tract-years from tracts that (1) are not located within a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) and (2) have a reported population of less than 1,000 individuals in the 2012-2016 5-year ACS estimates. The latter condition represents cutting at the 1.8-th percentile of average tract population amongst tracts within an MSA. Given these restrictions, data are drawn from 429,854 tract-years.

To improve the stability of estimates, we combine tract-years into six periods: 2000-2001, 2002-2004, 2005-2007, 2008-2010, 2011-2013, and 2014-2016. Tract-period eviction rates are taken as the average within the tract across the observed years.[1] Within available tracts, we cut the top of the distribution of eviction rates at the period-specific 99th percentile; anything above that cut point is marked as missing and dropped from analysis. We drop all tracts from any MSAs in which (1) eviction rates are available from less than 50 tracts and (2) the count of tracts with available eviction records make up less than 50% of total tracts in the MSA. That is, we keep MSAs with small number of tract eviction rates only if the total number of tracts in the MSA is

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[1] Averages are taken across all available tract-years within the tract-period. Tract-period eviction rates may therefore take into account as little as one tract-year and as many as three.

small. This leaves us with an unbalanced panel sample of 170,328 tract-period observations from 38,163 unique tracts across 210 MSAs. As an example, for the most recent period (2014-2016), there are 29,696 tract-period eviction rate observations drawn from 172 MSAs; these MSAs have a median of 79 tracts with available eviction rates and a median aggregate population across these tracts of 368,180.

To account for variations in eviction patterns across MSAs and time periods, we calculate the MSA- and period-specific percentile of the eviction rate distribution for each tract-period. All tract-periods that fall below the 20th percentile of this distribution within their MSA are marked as "low eviction;" those that fall at or above the 80th percentile within the MSA are marked as "high eviction;" the remainder are "medium eviction." This results in varying cut-offs across MSAs and periods in what constitutes low, medium, or high eviction. The median ceiling for low eviction is 1.33% and the median floor for high eviction is 4.85%.[2]

We employ 2012-2016 5-year ACS estimates to characterize all tracts as low or high poverty. All tracts in which the percentage of the population with income in the past 12 months below the poverty level is at or above 20% are marked as high-poverty. In total, 8,326 unique tracts in our dataset (21.8%) fall into this category.[3] We also measure poverty in these tracts using equivalent measures drawn from the 2000 Census, which allow us to analyze the experience of tracts that enter or leave the high poverty group over the period under analysis.

Preliminary Results

In the most recent period (2014-2016), 395 tracts are both high poverty and low eviction (see Table 1). That represents 1.3% of all available tracts and 6.3% of all high poverty tracts.

Table 1. Distribution of Tracts in 2014-2016 by Eviction and Poverty Rates

	Low Eviction	Med Eviction	High Eviction
Low Poverty	6,044	14,120	3,180
High Poverty	395	3,242	2,674

Table 2 presents tract-level characteristics, by poverty status and eviction categorization, for the most recent period using data drawn from five-year ACS estimates for 2012-2016. We see, as expected, an increase in mean tract eviction rates across categories; the increase is more pronounced in high poverty tracts, where mean eviction rates range from 0.5% in low eviction neighborhoods to 7.06% in high eviction neighborhoods. Mean tract poverty is fairly stable amongst high poverty tracts, but increases notably within low poverty tracts by eviction category (from 5.23% to 10.1%). Median gross rent and median household income are higher in low poverty tracts than in high poverty tracts, as expected; there appears to be little variation in the latter depending on tract eviction categorization. Property values are higher in low poverty tracts,

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[2] These ceiling and floor values vary across MSA-periods. The first quintile ceiling varies between an eviction rate of 0 and an eviction rate of 9.97%. The fifth quintile floor varies between 0.09% and 16.34%.

[3] Across all tract-periods, 21.5% are marked as high poverty using the 2012-2015 5-year ACS estimate. The close correspondence between this percentage and the percentage across unique tracts suggests that eviction rate observations are not differentially selected on poverty status across periods.

and in both low and high poverty tracts we observe a decline in property values as we move from low to high eviction. The renter occupied rate is much higher in high poverty than low poverty tracts, but fairly stable by eviction categorization. High poverty tracts have fewer white residents. Within high poverty tracts, note the increase in percentage black and decrease in percentage Hispanic as moving from low to high eviction.

Table 2. Tract Characteristics by Eviction and Poverty Rates

	Low Poverty			High Poverty		
	Low Eviction	**Med Eviction**	**High Eviction**	**Low Eviction**	**Med Eviction**	**High Eviction**
Mean Eviction Rate	0.65	2.48	5.89	0.5	3.31	7.06
SD	0.69	1.68	3.29	0.69	2.05	3.13
Mean Poverty Rate	5.23	7.63	10.1	31.37	31.04	32.65
SD	4.39	5.14	5.6	11.29	10.11	9.96
Mean Population	4,378	4,803	4,764	4,052	3,976	3,705
SD	2,018	2,380	2,309	2,018	2,009	1,771
Mean Median Gross Rent	1,222	1,058	1,030	810	800	783
SD	481	368	329	242	208	183
Mean Median HH Income	81,434	65,164	57,419	31,816	31,180	28,950
SD	34,218	25,574	22,525	10,955	9,503	8,163
Mean Median Property Value	304,261	209,496	172,844	136,853	127,933	102,369
SD	195,625	121,848	98,930	103,112	90,573	70,404
Mean % Renter Occupied	28.9	32.4	34.8	60.7	61.7	62.1
SD	21.4	19.3	20	24.5	19.7	17.4
Mean Race/Ethnicity						
% White	76.3	69	57.3	31.1	29.7	27.5
% Black	6.6	11.4	21.8	23.9	34.7	45.5
% Hispanic	9.3	12.5	14.1	37.9	29.8	21.3

Note: Tract characteristics, with the exception of eviction rates, are based on ACS five-year estimates for 2012-2016

Table 3 presents results from a simple multinomial logistic regression model predicting tract eviction rate categorization in high poverty tracts in the 2014 – 2016 period (with "medium eviction" as the reference category) on the basis of a set of covariates used in the previous table. Estimates are presented as log-odds. In high poverty tracts, increase in total population, percent renter occupied, percent white, and percent black are all significantly negative associated with a tract being in the low eviction category (vs. the medium eviction category). Property values are positively associated with falling into this category. Tracts that were low poverty in 2000 were significantly less likely to fall into either the low or high eviction category in 2014-2016.

Table 3. Eviction Categorization in High-Poverty Neighborhoods as a function of Tract Characteristics

	Low Eviction			High Eviction		
	Est	SE	p-value	Est	SE	p-value
Population	-0.0001	0.000	*	0.0000	0.000	
Median Gross Rent	-0.0003	0.000		0.0009	0.000	***
Median HH Income	0.0000	0.000		0.0000	0.000	***
Median Property Value	0.0000	0.000	**	0.0000	0.000	***
% Renter Occupied	-0.0150	0.000	***	0.0058	0.001	***
% White	-0.0087	0.000	***	0.0070	0.001	***
% Black	-0.0146	0.000	***	0.0108	0.001	***
Low Poverty 2000	-0.2309	0.000	***	-0.0609	0.000	***

Note: Multinomial logistic regression with reference category "Medium Eviction"
*<.05, **<.01, ***<.001

To start to address the second goal of the paper—analyzing neighborhood trajectories over time—Table 4 presents data on eviction rate stability across previous periods based on the tract's categorization in the most recent period. For the 29,655 tracts that are categorizable by poverty and eviction rate in the 2014-2016 period, in how many of the previous periods did they share the given eviction rate categorization? Table 4 presents percentages of tracts that fall into the given count (plus the mean number of missing periods). As an example, in the top left we see that among low poverty-low eviction tracts, 21.1% were not in that category for a single previous period, 20.2% were in that category for only one previous period, and so on. Note that high poverty-low eviction tracts are the *least likely* to be stably in that category: 30.9% were not in that category in any previous period and an additional 27.6% were only there for one previous period. Only 6.8% of these tracts fell into this category for all six period under observation (less than any other category). There appears to be minimal variation in observation missingness by categorization; on average, just over one out of the six periods is missing.

Table 4. Tract Stability over Time by 2014-2016 categorization

	Low Poverty			High Poverty		
# Previous Periods (%)	Low Eviction	Mid Eviction	High Eviction	Low Eviction	Mid Eviction	High Eviction
Zero	21.1	9.6	24.7	30.9	16.5	15.4
One	20.2	14.4	22.2	27.6	12.1	15.7
Two	19.9	19.8	17.7	18.0	19.6	16.6
Three	15.2	20.3	16.3	9.1	19.5	19.2
Four	13.6	19.8	11.3	7.6	16.3	16.8
Five	9.9	16.0	7.9	6.8	16.0	16.3
Mean periods missing	1.07	1.17	1.21	1.44	1.21	1.20

Further Analysis

In the version of this paper to be presented at PAA, we will expand on the preliminary results outlined here and produce a series of additional analyses. These planned additions include:

- Adding measures of neighborhood characteristics. We plan to include indicators of public housing and group quarters in the tract; the presence or proximity of colleges to the tract; variables related to the age distribution of the tract; labor market indicators; welfare recipiency rates; traditional measures of gentrification; and indicators of ethnic enclave status. We will also add more tract-years of eviction rate data as they become available.
- Adding models of neighborhood stability. Among high poverty tracts that experience at least one period with low eviction rates, which have more or fewer such periods? What characteristics are correlated with stability?
- Mapping the placement of high poverty, low eviction tracts in select MSAs. We have found it helpful to see the spatial distribution of these tracts and their proximity both to each other and to urban amenities (public transit lines, business districts, etc.).
- Conducting sensitivity analyses related to the eviction rate measures. Do results hold when we use absolute eviction rate cut-offs rather than MSA- and period-specific distributions?
- Conducting sensitivity analyses related to the poverty rate. Poverty is only one potential measure of disadvantage, and ACS data for this measure are of poor quality (judging by high coefficients of variation). We plan to test the sensitivity of results to multiple overimputation (to deal with measurement error) and to repeat analyses using other measures: aggregate measures of disadvantage that are better-estimated at the tract level as well as poverty measures aggregated across tracts to reduce measurement error.
- Examining the other "tail" of the distribution. Low eviction rates stand out as unusual in high-poverty neighborhoods. By the same coin, high-eviction rates are unusual (but observed) in a small set of low-poverty neighborhoods. We will also provide some analysis of the characteristics of well-to-do, high-eviction tracts that we find in our data.