

Estimating the Prevalence of Eviction in the United States: New Data from the 2017 American Housing Survey

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Introduction

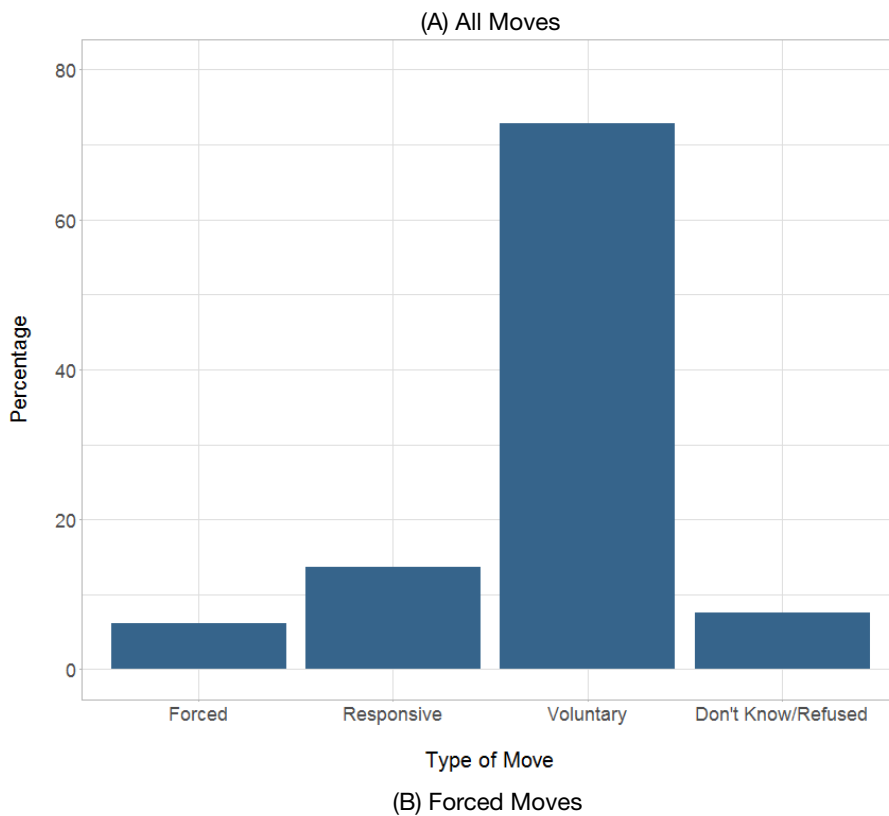
The American Housing Survey (AHS), administered biennially by the U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), is the most comprehensive source of data on U.S. housing conditions. In 2017, a new set of questions was added to expand the measurement of forced displacement among renter households. Forced moves, particularly eviction, are an increasing concern as renters' housing costs have risen while incomes have stagnated and federal housing assistance has not been expanded (Desmond, 2015). The new questions, adapted from the Milwaukee Area Renters Study (MARS), measure several types of forced moves among households who rented their previous residence, including forced moves not captured in administrative records. Administrative court records are an important source of data for formal eviction lawsuits, but they do not capture forced moves involving landlords incentivizing or coercing tenants to vacate rental properties without relying on the legal authority of the courts (Hartman and Robinson, 2003). Previous data from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, indicated that these “informal evictions” are twice as common as formal, court-ordered evictions, underscoring the importance of capturing these moves in estimates of forced displacement (Desmond and Shollenberger, 2015).

Forced Displacement

Among households who moved within the past 2 years and rented their previous residence, 6.2 percent were forced to move from their previous residence (exhibit 1A).¹ An additional 13.6 percent of these households reported moving in response to negative housing and neighborhood conditions.² Most moves among these households were reported to be voluntary (72.8 percent). An additional 7.4 percent of households did not report the reason for their most recent move.

Exhibit 1

Type of Moves Among Households in the United States Who Rented Their Previous Residence (1 of 2)

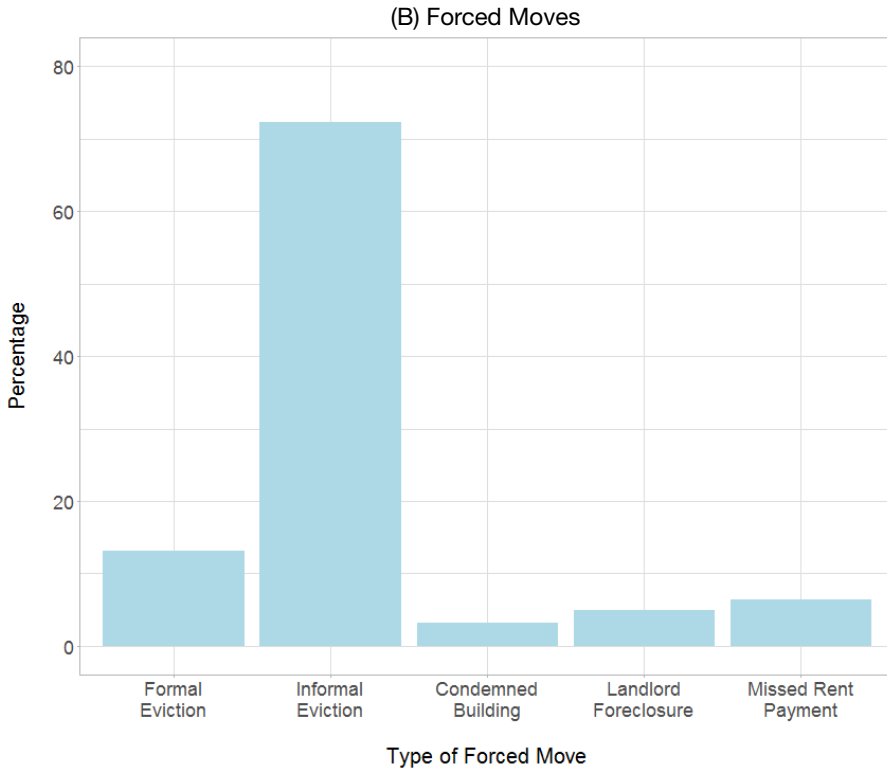


¹ The previous 2-year period was defined as the 24 months prior to the interview date. All households that rented their residence before the most recent move were asked the forced displacement questions, regardless of whether they currently rented or owned their home.

² Responsive moves were prompted by the landlord raising rent, the landlord not making needed housing repairs, or the unit being located in a dangerous neighborhood.

Exhibit 1

Type of Moves Among Households in the United States Who Rented Their Previous Residence (2 of 2)



Note: Only households' most recent moves within the previous 2 years were captured in these data.
Source: 2017 American Housing Survey

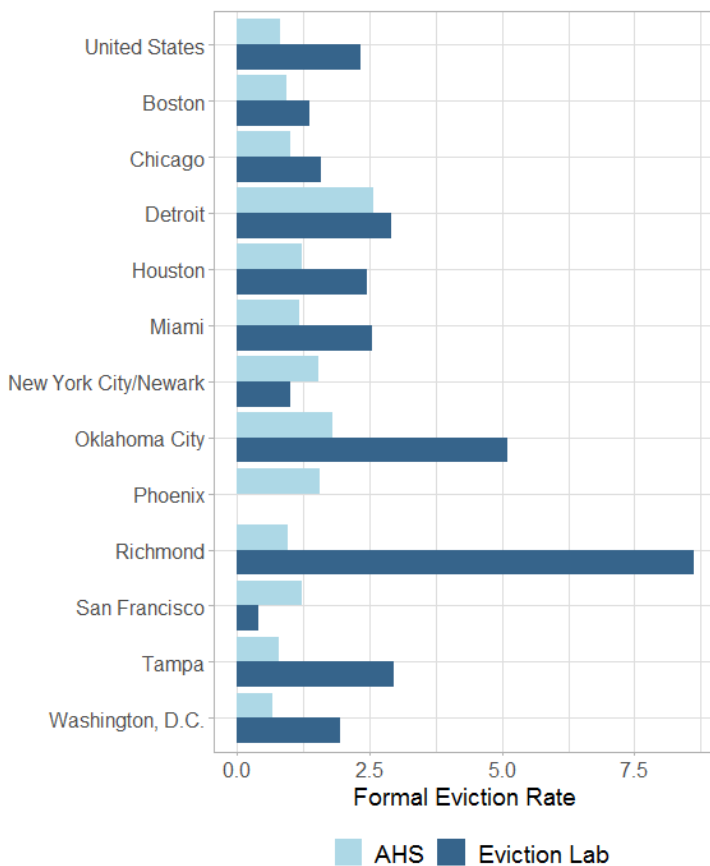
Evictions constituted most forced moves (exhibit 1B). The most common reason for a forced move was an informal eviction (72.3 percent). Formal evictions represented an additional 13.1 percent of forced moves. The remaining 14.6 percent of forced moves were due to fear of eviction following a missed rent payment (6.4 percent), foreclosures on the landlord's property (5.0 percent), and condemned buildings (3.2 percent). These findings demonstrate that displacement estimates that focus only on formal evictions miss a substantial number of forced moves that occur outside the purview of the courts. The ratio of informal-to-formal evictions for the United States (5.5 informal evictions for every formal eviction) is significantly higher than the ratio previously reported for Milwaukee (2 informal evictions for every formal eviction) (Desmond and Shollenberger, 2015).

The ratio of informal-to-formal evictions reflects not only the prevalence of informal and formal evictions but how well the AHS captures both types of eviction. The national formal eviction rate estimated by the AHS (0.8 percent) is 65 percent lower than that produced from a national database of eviction court records compiled by the Eviction Lab at Princeton University (2.3 percent) (Desmond et al., 2018). This pattern is repeated in many of the Metropolitan Statistical

Areas (MSAs) represented in the AHS (exhibit 2).³ As informal evictions are not captured in court records, no comparable sources of data exist with which to compare national estimates of informal eviction. This situation makes it difficult to assess not only how well the AHS captures informal eviction but also the relative frequency of informal-to-formal evictions. Underestimates of formal eviction, but not informal eviction, would result in an inflated estimate of the informal-to-formal eviction ratio, overrepresenting the relative frequency of both types of eviction. For this reason, it is important to examine factors that could be responsible for the discrepancy in formal eviction rates produced by the AHS and the Eviction Lab.

Exhibit 2

Formal Eviction Rates in the 2017 AHS and 2016 Eviction Lab Court Records, by Metropolitan Statistical Area



Notes: This figure excludes the following Metropolitan Statistical Areas, which have formal eviction rates too low to meet federal disclosure requirements: Atlanta, Baltimore, Birmingham, Dallas, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Riverside, Rochester, San Antonio, San Jose, and Seattle. The Eviction Lab does not have court records for Phoenix.

Sources: 2017 American Housing Survey; Desmond et al., 2018

³ Only MSAs with formal eviction rates that met disclosure requirements are included in exhibit 2. Formal and informal eviction rates for all 25 MSAs represented in the AHS (and eviction judgment rates produced by the Eviction Lab) are shown in exhibit A1.

Formal Eviction

The most significant source of discrepancy between AHS and Eviction Lab estimates of the formal eviction rate is how formal eviction is measured. The AHS measures formal eviction as household displacement following the filing of an eviction case in court. The unit of measure is the household, and the eviction rate represents the number of households who were formally evicted out of the total recent moves by households in the previous 2 years. Alternatively, the Eviction Lab records eviction judgments reported in a large sample of public court records. Here, the unit of measure is the court case, and the rate represents the number of eviction judgments divided by the total number of renting households. Due to these differences in the definition, unit of measurement, and sampled populations, one would expect the formal eviction rate in the AHS to be lower than that calculated by the Eviction Lab. The challenge is to reconcile how much lower the displacement rate due to formal eviction measured by the AHS should be than the eviction judgment rate produced by court records.

At least eight additional factors could be responsible for underestimating the formal eviction displacement rate in the AHS.

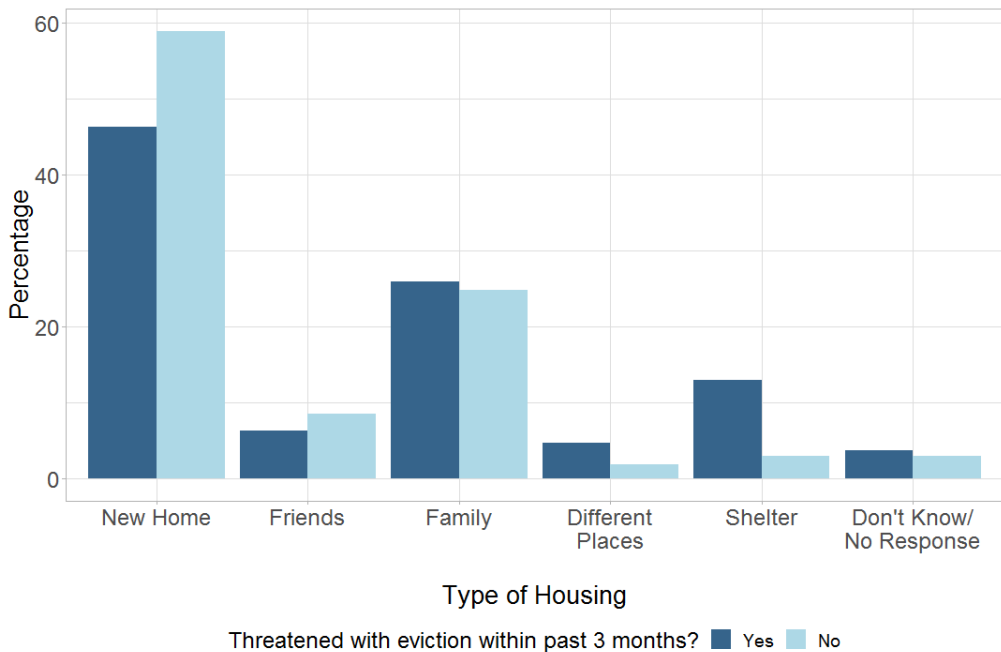
1. To be asked the forced displacement questions, households must have moved in the previous 2 years. Some households may have had eviction cases filed against them that resulted in eviction judgments; however, those households may have negotiated with property owners to remain at the property. In these cases, households would have lost the legal right to continue tenancy but were not ultimately displaced.
2. The AHS asks only if respondents' most recent move resulted from an eviction. Local studies of eviction have shown that forced moves often precipitate voluntary moves (Desmond, Gershenson, and Kiviat, 2015). If a household was evicted within the past 2 years but made a subsequent voluntary move in search of better housing or neighborhood conditions, the eviction would not be captured by the AHS.⁴
3. If respondents were evicted more than once in the previous 2 years, the AHS would capture only, at most, one of those evictions.
4. The AHS asks about the respondent's most recent move, not the most recent moves of other household members that did not move with the respondent. If another household member moved into the residence following an eviction but did not move with the respondent, that eviction would not be captured.
5. If a respondent did not move within the past 2 years but another household member moved into the residence following eviction, the eviction would not be reported. The eviction questions capture only recent moves by the respondent, not changes in household composition resulting from housing displacement (Desmond and Perkins, 2016).

⁴ The authors investigated whether the AHS formal eviction rate varied by time since most recent move but did not find a clear temporal pattern (exhibit A2).

6. Evictions may also result in moves that exclude household members from the AHS sampling frame. The AHS is a sample of housing units; households who relocated to a shelter or nonprofit organization or failed to secure shelter would not be visible to the AHS. The 2017 AHS included a second module intended to measure housing insecurity among all currently renting households (regardless of whether the household had moved in the past 2 years). Renting households were asked whether they had fallen behind on rent, been threatened with eviction, or received an eviction notice within the past 3 months. Respondents were also asked where they would be likely to go if evicted. Of respondents threatened with eviction in the past 3 months, 46.3 percent indicated that they would be likely to relocate to a new home (exhibit 3). More respondents who were threatened with eviction within the past 3 months reported being likely to relocate to shelters or unstable housing (“different places”) than those not similarly threatened. Although these responses represent hypothetical moves, this finding suggests that a substantial number of evicted households would not be captured in a sample of household units following displacement.

Exhibit 3

Where Household Would Be Likely To Go if Evicted, by Threat of Eviction Within Past 3 Months



Source: 2017 American Housing Survey

7. Households may have been evicted prior to their most recent move but did not report it. Just over 7 percent of households did not indicate the reason for their most recent move (exhibit 1A). A nonrandom selection of households into this nonresponse category could underestimate the prevalence of forced or responsive moves.

8. Previous research has shown that economically disadvantaged renters are underrepresented in surveys, even those with large, nationally representative samples (Tourangeau, Edwards, and Johnson, 2014). Furthermore, eviction is an uncommon and sensitive event. Previous studies have shown that administrative data are better suited to capture the prevalence of these types of events (Røed and Raaum, 2003).

Informal Eviction

Due to the lack of available alternative national estimates of informal eviction, it is difficult to assess whether, and to what extent, AHS estimates of informal eviction are affected by the factors that may be leading to underestimates of formal eviction. There are at least two reasons why it may be easier for a household to relocate to a new home following an informal eviction.

1. Because they occur outside the courts, an informal eviction does not result in a formal record of the eviction visible in tenant-screening reports. Landlords routinely screen tenants for eviction histories, and the filing of an eviction lawsuit, regardless of the case outcome, can negatively affect a tenant's chances of securing housing (Gold, 2016). Informal evictions may have fewer long-term consequences for securing subsequent housing than formal evictions owing to the lack of an official eviction record.
2. There may be other household characteristics that affect the type of eviction (informal vs. formal) among those at risk of eviction. Households with (relatively) increased access to resources may have greater ability to relocate following an eviction threat by a landlord. Other households may also be threatened with eviction but unable to secure resources to move before this threat results in a formal eviction case being filed in court. If informally evicted households tend to have more resources than formally evicted households, this factor may make them more likely to be captured by the AHS.

The lack of data on informal evictions also limits the ability to investigate these questions at the MSA level. To the authors' knowledge, New York City is the only metropolitan area represented in the AHS that has available alternative data on informal evictions from a Poverty Tracker survey, which also adapted the MARS eviction questions (Collyer and Bushman-Copp, 2019). The AHS reported an informal eviction rate of almost 4 percent and an informal-to-formal eviction ratio of 2.5:1 for the New York City/Newark MSA. Poverty Tracker reported a lower informal eviction rate (1.1 percent) and the opposite relationship between informal and formal eviction: formal evictions were almost twice as common as informal evictions in New York City. This finding may reflect New York City's uniquely robust tenant protections, which incentivize tenants threatened with eviction to defend their case in court. The difference in the relative frequency of informal and formal evictions does not appear to be due to significant differences in estimates of the formal eviction rate (exhibit A3), which raises important questions about how sampling frames and the scope of moves captured by surveys affect estimates of informal eviction.⁵

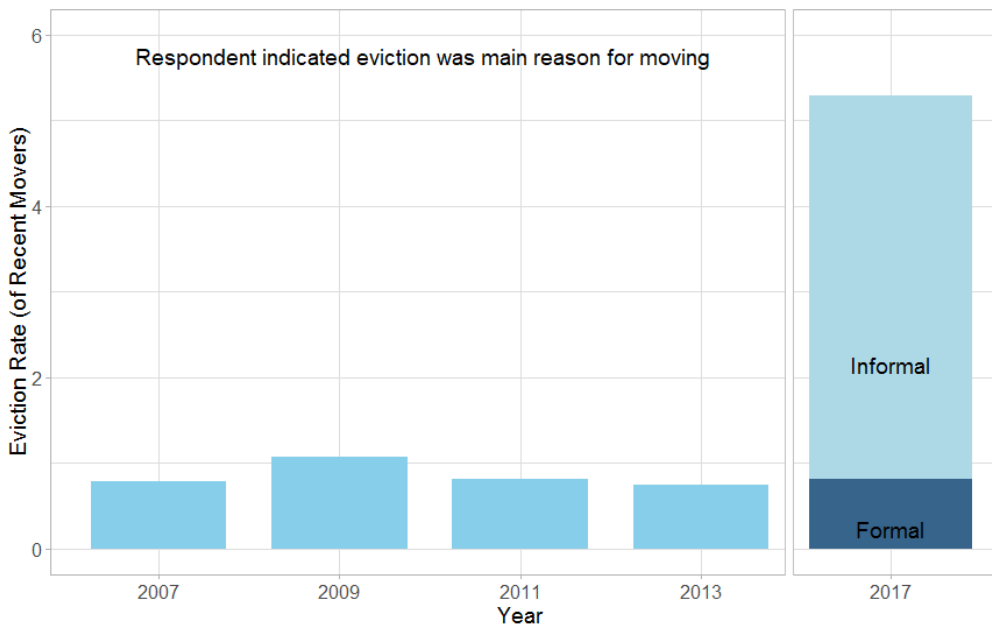
⁵ The Poverty Tracker survey is not directly comparable to the 2017 AHS for several reasons. First, Poverty Tracker collected data only in New York City rather than the larger New York-Newark-Jersey City MSA. Second, Poverty Tracker asked respondents about any evictions that had occurred in the past 12 months rather than just those preceding the most recent move. Third, the time window for data collection in the Poverty Tracker survey was longer than that for the 2017 AHS.

Conclusion

The new set of forced displacement questions added to the 2017 AHS has expanded national measurements of eviction. The 2007–2013 waves of the AHS asked if respondents’ most recent move was due to eviction, but these estimates appear to account only for formal evictions (exhibit 4). The exclusion of informally evicted households in these years underestimated the full prevalence of forced displacement from housing. Although these new questions have expanded the overall catchment of households that have been evicted, formal evictions still appear to be underestimated in the AHS. For this reason, and due to the lack of alternative data sources measuring informal eviction, both the rate of informal evictions and the ratio of informal-to-formal evictions should be interpreted with caution. The addition of expanded forced displacement questions in the AHS is an important step forward in generating estimates of the national prevalence of eviction in the United States, but more work is needed to assess and improve how well formal and informal evictions are represented in these data.

Exhibit 4

AHS Estimates of Eviction among Recent Mover Households, 2007–2017



AHS = American Housing Survey.

Note: In the 2007–2013 waves of the AHS, respondents were asked if the main reason for their most recent move was eviction, without distinction between formal and informal evictions. The 2015 AHS did not ask whether eviction was the main reason for respondents’ most recent move, resulting in missing data for that year.

Source: 2007–2017 American Housing Survey

Appendix A

Exhibit A1

Eviction Rate Estimates, by Metropolitan Statistical Area

MSA	2017 AHS		Eviction Lab (2016)
	Formal Eviction	Informal Eviction	Formal Eviction
United States	0.81	4.48	2.34
Atlanta	(S)	2.48	5.50
Baltimore	(S)	3.40	
Birmingham	(S)	3.72	0.56
Boston	0.94	6.61	1.38
Chicago	1.02	5.67	1.58
Dallas	(S)	2.70	2.26
Detroit	2.59	4.21	2.91
Houston	1.23	1.42	2.45
Las Vegas	(S)	3.64	3.68
Los Angeles	(S)	3.53	0.60
Miami	1.19	3.95	2.56
Minneapolis	(S)	4.55	0.65
New York City/Newark	1.55	3.97	1.00
Oklahoma City	1.80	2.73	5.11
Philadelphia	(S)	4.24	2.14
Phoenix	1.58	3.46	
Richmond	0.97	4.81	8.63
Riverside	(S)	6.60	1.18
Rochester	(S)	5.39	
San Antonio	(S)	2.57	3.52
San Francisco	1.23	6.89	0.40
San Jose	(S)	6.91	0.32
Seattle	(S)	4.06	0.69
Tampa	0.79	5.49	2.95
Washington, D.C.	0.67	2.25	1.95

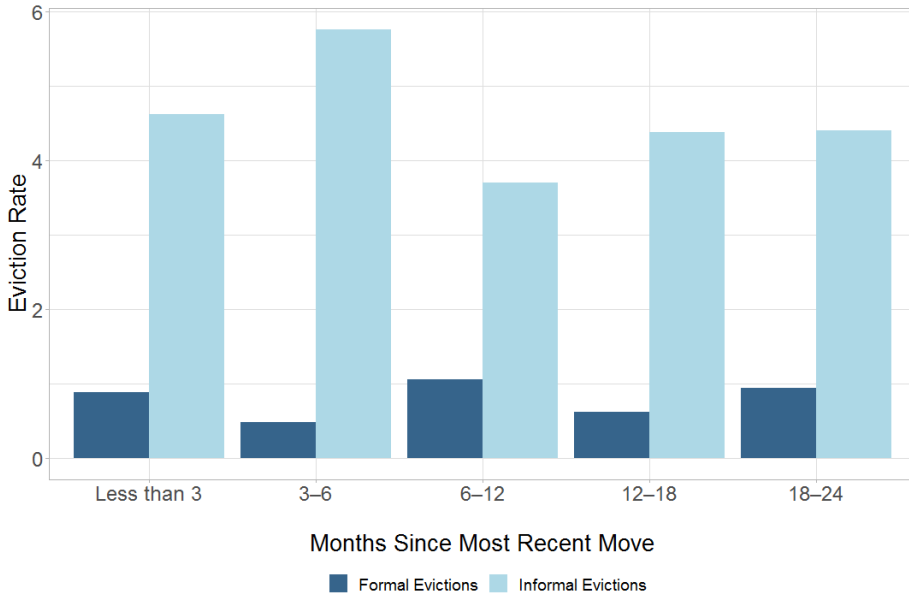
AHS = American Housing Survey. MSA = Metropolitan Statistical Areas.

Notes: (S) indicates suppressed cells. The Eviction Lab does not have data for the Baltimore, Phoenix, and Rochester MSAs.

Sources: 2017 American Housing Survey; Desmond et al., 2018

Exhibit A2

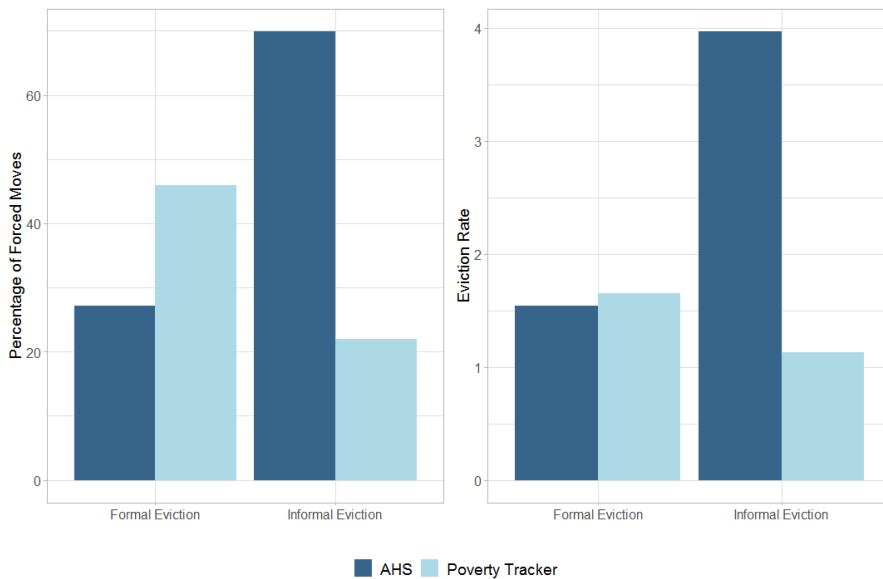
Prevalence of Formal and Informal Eviction, by Time Since Most Recent Move, 2017 AHS



AHS = American Housing Survey.
 Source: 2017 American Housing Survey

Exhibit A3

New York City Eviction Estimates from 2017 AHS and Poverty Tracker Survey



AHS = American Housing Survey.
 Sources: 2017 American Housing Survey; Collyer and Bushman-Copp, 2019.

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