

Can the American Housing Survey Provide Reliable Estimates of the Prevalence of Eviction?

Shawn Bucholtz¹

Federal Housing Finance Agency

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Introduction

As the sponsor of the American Housing Survey (AHS), the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has consistently demonstrated a willingness to use the biennial AHS to collect information on housing topics relevant to HUD and other federal agencies, as well as to state and local governments and advocacy and research communities. Between 2009 and 2019, HUD and the U.S. Census Bureau² included 17 different topical modules covering topics such as emergency and disaster preparedness, food security, and residents' perceptions and use of arts and cultural resources in their community (HUD, 2020b).

One theme throughout several of HUD's AHS topical modules is housing insecurity—a blanket term that generally refers to issues such as housing affordability, residential stability, housing quality, and safety (Watson and Carter, 2020). Housing insecurity is a notoriously difficult concept to define or measure (Cox et al., 2019). One aspect of housing insecurity is forced moves, including eviction. For the 2017 AHS, HUD teamed up with Matthew Desmond of Princeton University to incorporate eviction questions from his Milwaukee Area Renters Study (MARS) into a new AHS eviction module, thereby making AHS the first national-level survey on the prevalence of evictions and other types of forced moves. As Desmond noted in his seminal book, *Evicted*, the previous AHS questions concerning why household members moved were not adequate for measuring forced moves, including formal and informal eviction rates (Desmond, 2016a).

¹ Shawn Bucholtz was formerly the Director of Housing and Demographic Analysis Division at HUD. In this role, he oversaw the American Housing Survey for 10 years.

² HUD funds AHS, selects metropolitan areas to be sampled, provides survey content, and provides overall leadership in direction. The U.S. Census Bureau conducts AHS fieldwork and provides survey design and operational expertise.

This article assesses whether AHS effectively measures evictions and other types of forced or responsive moves and discusses eviction estimates derived from the 2017 AHS eviction module by Gromis and Desmond (2021).

The Purpose of AHS

HUD's mission statement for the American Housing Survey is—

To supply the public with detailed and timely information about housing quality, housing costs, and neighborhood assets in support of effective housing policy, programs, and markets (HUD, 2020a).

Throughout its nearly 50-year history, the AHS program has experienced numerous changes in funding, sample size and scope, and topical modules. However, there have been two constants through the years. First, the focus of AHS has always been on three areas: housing quality, housing costs, and neighborhood conditions. Survey questions in these three topics have appeared in every survey since the first national survey was conducted in 1973.

The second constant in the AHS program is the longitudinal design of the national sample. Housing units in the national longitudinal sample were surveyed every 2 years between 1985 and 2013. In 2015, a new national longitudinal sample was drawn and surveyed in 2015, 2017, and 2019. This sample design strategy enables HUD and the Census Bureau to track at least two types of changes in the housing stock. The first type includes cross-sectional changes in the housing stock, such as the share of housing units that have three bedrooms. The second type includes “within-unit” longitudinal changes in the housing stock, such as the share of housing units that undergo major remodeling projects every 2 years. The latter measurement can only be estimated with a survey that follows the same housing units every 2 years.

AHS, like other household surveys, collects data about each occupant of the household. The AHS questionnaire includes questions about when *current* occupants moved into the housing unit. These data enable HUD and the Census Bureau to see at least *some* of the turnover of people within a housing unit over a 2-year period. Moreover, the longitudinal sample design, coupled with the demographic information, permits the creation of longitudinal estimates of household turnover characteristics, such as the share of housing units that switch between owner and renter occupancy.

AHS is a powerful source of data that can be used to analyze countless research questions across several housing domains. However, it is not a longitudinal survey of people. As such, there is no information about what happens to household members who leave a household. The survey periodicity (every 2 years) means that some household member transitions (that is, move-ins and move outs) are not captured.

Administering the 2017 AHS Eviction Module

The decision to include the MARS eviction and forced-move questions into AHS as the AHS Eviction module was motivated by the work of Matthew Desmond (Flowers, 2016). The questions were respondent-friendly, perhaps because they were heavily influenced by ethnographic work conducted

by Desmond (2016a). Finally, the design of the series of questions captured different types of moves (that is, forced, responsive, and voluntary) while imposing a minimum respondent burden.

Although HUD adopted the MARS eviction questions nearly verbatim for the AHS Eviction module, HUD placed limits on the universe of AHS respondents who received the AHS Eviction module questions. To understand why the universe was limited, it is useful to explain two design characteristics of AHS. First, as with many household surveys, AHS is administered to a single respondent who answers questions about the housing unit and demographic questions about themselves and other household members. Second, a household member who moved into the household within the past 2 years is considered a “recent mover” household. If an AHS household includes household members who moved into the household during the past 2 years but came from different housing units, each recent mover(s) is considered a “mover group.” Whereas there may be up to three mover groups within the AHS household, the AHS respondent answers recent mover questions about his or her own mover group and the other mover groups.

The universe of AHS respondents who had a recent mover group represented 34.38 million households. HUD made a strategic decision to limit the universe of households who received the Eviction module questions. Exhibit 1 shows the numeric representation of the universe restrictions.

Exhibit 1

Numeric Representation of Eviction Module Universe Restriction

Eviction Module Universe Description	Eligible Households (weighted)
Total households with at least one recent mover group	34,380,000
... who were renters at their prior residence	22,952,000
...and where the respondent was a recent mover	19,902,000
...who rented their prior residence.	19,370,000

Source: 2017 American Housing Survey Eviction Module

First, only AHS households with recent mover groups who *rented* their prior residence were eligible to receive the Eviction module questions. This decision was a straightforward one to make because the Eviction module questions were designed for renters who experienced a forced move, not for households who owned their prior residence but may have experienced a forced move due to foreclosure, disaster, or condemnation.

Second, only households in which the respondent was a member of a recent mover group were eligible to receive the Eviction module questions. HUD believed that asking an AHS respondent who was *not* a recent mover to answer the Eviction module questions about *another* recent mover group within the household would be difficult for the respondent and might lead to misreporting. Furthermore, HUD and the Census Bureau believed that requiring *each* mover group to provide a response to the Eviction module questions would have greatly increased the length of the survey for some respondents and could have led to high nonresponse rates. However, it is not a stretch to say that at least some of these 3.05 million households included mover groups who experienced eviction or some other type of forced move from their prior residence.

Third, only households in which the respondent was a renter at his or her prior residence were eligible to receive the Eviction module questions. In other words, if the respondent was a recent mover but owned his or her prior residence, the household was ineligible to receive the Eviction module question. Again, this was because the Eviction module questions were designed for renters.

The 2017 AHS Eviction Module Estimates

Before discussing the estimates, it is important to note that Matthew Desmond created a classification system for Eviction module responses. Responses are classified as either forced moves, responsive moves, or voluntary moves. Forced moves are further classified into one of five subcategories: formal eviction, information eviction, condemnation, foreclosure, or missed rent payment. Responsive moves come in three subtypes (as seen in exhibit 2) but are not mutually exclusive. Voluntary moves are any moves that are not forced or responsive.

As discussed in Gromis and Desmond (2021) and Collyer, Friedman, and Wilmer (2021), the initial results suggest the AHS estimates of formal eviction rates are an undercount, both nationally and for selected metropolitan statistical areas. This finding was unexpected; HUD’s hope was that the Eviction module, despite its limited universe, would produce results more in line with administrative data collected from local government entities.

Exhibit 2

Eviction Module Estimates for Forced and Responsive Moves ³	
Total Households Eligible for Eviction Module Questions	19,377,000
Type of Move	
Forced move	1,200,000
Responsive move	2,633,000
Voluntary move	14,100,000
Don't know/refused	1,444,000
<i>Total</i>	19,377,000
Forced moves	
Formal eviction	157,400
Informal eviction	867,200
Building condemned	38,730
Landlord foreclosure	60,060
Missed rent payment	76,330
<i>Total</i>	1,199,720
Responsive moves¹	
Landlord raised rent	1,010,000
Dangerous neighborhood	1,032,000
Landlord did not do repairs	1,152,000
<i>Total</i>	2,633,000

¹ Respondents could select more than one reason for making a responsive move.

Source: 2017 American Housing Survey Eviction Module

³ Exhibits 2, 3, and 4 have been approved for release by the U.S. Census Bureau Disclosure Review Board.

The AHS Eviction module informal eviction rate estimates reveal a nearly 5.5:1 ratio of informal-to-formal evictions at the national level. This result must be considered with caution. As discussed in Gromis and Desmond (2021) and Collyer, Friedman, and Wilmer (2021), the AHS informal eviction rate for the New York City Metropolitan Statistical Area (3.9 percent) is nearly four times as large as Poverty Tracker⁴ (1.1 percent). Moreover, the Poverty Tracker's informal-to-formal eviction rate (1:2) is the opposite relationship compared with the AHS estimate for the New York City Metropolitan Statistical Area (2.5:1).

Could the AHS Design be Altered To Better Estimate Evictions and Other Forced Moves?

Despite what an AHS designed to collect eviction data could achieve, AHS is not well designed for those purposes. Gromis and Desmond (2021) cite nine characteristics of the AHS design and interview strategy that might produce undercounts of the number of evictions. Redesigning AHS to better capture additional information on forced or responsive moves would be difficult. Following are four areas where the AHS design could be altered to better estimate evictions.

Change the Recent Mover Interview Strategy

As previously discussed, AHS respondents representing nearly 3.6 million households who were renters at their prior housing units did not receive the Eviction module questions due to universe restrictions. To address that and other similar issues cited by Gromis and Desmond (2021), two major changes to the AHS recent mover interview strategy would need to be made. First, recent mover groups would need to report *all* their moves over the past 2 years (or perhaps all their moves in the past 12 months). Second, recent mover groups who were renters at any of their prior housing units would need to answer the Eviction module questions rather than only the respondent's recent mover group.

Both changes would significantly expand the respondent burden, perhaps leading to a higher nonresponse rate. It is also likely that AHS interviewers would have increased difficulty attempting to reach multiple respondents for the same housing unit. One possible remedy is for HUD and the Census Bureau to adopt a web-based instrument for AHS, either entirely or for selected topical modules. A web-based instrument might allow multiple respondents in the same household and multiple instances of the Eviction module questions corresponding to each individual move made by a mover group.

Sample Size

For the AHS Eviction module estimates to gain credibility, they must be directly compared with, and gain some alignment with, similar estimates from administrative records for metropolitan areas or other local jurisdictions. The AHS sample size must be increased for certain metropolitan statistical areas or jurisdictions within metropolitan statistical areas to accomplish this goal. As shown in Gromis and Desmond (2021), the AHS Eviction module estimates for formal evictions were

⁴ Poverty Tracker is a longitudinal study of disadvantaged households in New York City. More information is available at <https://www.robinhood.org/programs/special-initiatives/poverty-tracker/index.html>.

suppressed for several metropolitan statistical areas due to disclosure reasons. Moreover, eviction is a low-probability event, so a larger sample size is needed to detect the occurrence of the event.

To do this most efficiently, the Eviction Lab would need to identify jurisdictions throughout the United States where the administrative records on evictions are of high quality and comprehensive of the universe of evictions. Then, for these jurisdictions, the AHS sample could be increased to a level necessary to produce a statistically reliable estimate of formal evictions, which could then be compared with estimates from administrative records. It may help to target the sample to small geographic areas (e.g., census tracts or blocks) where the portion of low-income renters is high. This goal is achievable using the American Community Survey and the Decennial Census.

Conduct Questionnaire Design Research

When HUD and the Census Bureau decided to include the Eviction module in the 2017 AHS, they also decided to keep the existing “Reasons for Moving” module questions in which recent movers are asked why they moved. In other words, every household receiving the Eviction module questions also received the AHS Reasons for Moving module.

The Reasons for Moving module begins with two questions that, on their face, appear to align with the Eviction module’s forced-move concept. Respondents are asked whether they were forced to move “by a landlord, bank, other financial institution, or government.” If they respond “no,” they are asked if they were forced to move “due to a natural disaster or fire.”

If respondents answer “no” to both the first and second questions, they are then asked a series of questions about other reasons for moving. The possible responses do not necessarily map well into Desmond’s responsive or voluntary move categories. For instance, the Eviction module asks respondents if they moved because “the landlord raised rent,” whereas the Reasons for Moving module asks respondents if they moved “to reduce your housing costs.”

Exhibit 3 compares estimates from the Eviction module and the Reasons for Moving module for the universe of respondents who received the Eviction module questions. Interestingly, the aggregate estimates are closely aligned. The Eviction module forced-move estimates are not statistically different from the Reasons for Moving module estimates.

Exhibit 3

Comparison of Eviction Module and Reasons for Moving Module

Type of Move	Eviction Module	Reasons for Moving Module
Forced move	1,200,000	1,202,000
Responsive or voluntary move	16,733,000	17,142,000
Did not respond	1,444,000	1,033,000
Total	19,377,000	19,377,000

Source: 2017 American Housing Survey Eviction Module

Unfortunately, this close alignment does not hold when comparing household-level responses. Exhibit 4 compares the same household responses in the forced-move category (formal and

informal eviction only) from the Eviction module with responses to the Reasons for Moving module question regarding forced moves due to bank or landlord. The results show that 36 percent of the respondents (weighted) who were classified as formal or informal eviction based on responses to the Eviction module would not be classified as a forced move on the basis of their responses to the Reasons for Moving module questions. Likewise, 46 percent of respondents (weighted) who were classified as a forced move “by bank or landlord” on the basis of their responses to the Reasons for Moving module were not classified as formal or informal eviction on the basis of their responses to the Eviction module. These findings suggest that the two modules capture different concepts although they are designed to capture the same concept.

Exhibit 4

Comparison of Eviction Module and Reasons for Moving Module Questions

Eviction Module ¹ Formal or Informal Eviction	AHS Reasons for Moving Module Forced to Move by Bank or Landlord?		
	Yes	No	Total
Yes	651,000	373,500	1,024,500
No	551,000	16,760,000	17,311,000
Total	1,202,000	17,133,500	18,335,500

AHS = American Housing Survey

¹The universe for this table includes respondents representing 18,335,500 households who responded to questions in both modules.

Source: 2017 American Housing Survey Eviction Module

These results point to a need to conduct further questionnaire testing to determine if either question series truly captures the underlying concepts of interest. It is also necessary for HUD to decide which aspects of a household’s decision to move are most important from a policy perspective. In the Eviction module, the emphasis is on forced moves and, to a lesser extent, responsive moves. Voluntary moves are a remainder category. In contrast, the Reasons for Moving module places roughly equal importance on all types of moves. One of these approaches may be better aligned to HUD’s policy goals.

Conduct Interviewer Effects Study

Studies have noted the importance of interview training on survey participation and the potential interviewer effects of poorly trained interviewers (O’Brien et al., 2002; Schaeffer et al., 2020). For the MARS data collection operations (Desmond, 2016b)—

All interviewers (eight [8] in all) were recruited, trained, certified, and supervised by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center. Interviewers underwent three full days of training on MARS, during which they studied the introductory script and practiced interview questions.

MARS data collection operations are in many ways not comparable to the AHS data collection operations. The AHS data collection operations include more than a thousand different interviewers who receive general training in data collection across several AHS topics but are not specifically trained to work with the Eviction topic or with households who may have experienced

a forced move. The Eviction module questions, when administered in MARS using in-person interviews with specially trained interviewers, would likely perform better than they would when administered in AHS. However, there is no direct evidence comparing MARS-derived eviction rates to AHS-derived eviction rates because MARS was conducted in the city of Milwaukee, and AHS includes only a small sample of housing units in the city of Milwaukee. As such, one cannot estimate the impact of interviewer effects. Interview training and interviewer effects are areas that need further study before considering adding the Eviction module to a future iteration of AHS.

Conclusion

This article's suggestion to conduct interview effects research along with the three prior suggestions (modify the interviewer strategy, increase the sample size, and conduct questionnaire research) indicate that the Eviction topic is ripe for a well-designed cognitive study. Such a study could address important questions across each of the four areas identified as potentially problematic.

Closely related, in 2018, HUD and partners developed the national Housing Insecurity Research Module (HIRM) for the 2019 AHS to help better understand how various indicators of housing insecurity can be measured in household surveys and possibly lead to the development of a housing insecurity index (Watson and Carter, 2020). HIRM includes the 2017 Eviction module questions as well as numerous other questions about housing stability. Currently, HUD is reviewing the results from that module. Although the HIRM module does not address all the issues raised in this paper, the HIRM module approach, which included a small subsample of specially selected AHS respondents, could serve as an approach for a thorough cognitive test of forced-move questions.

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Author

Shawn Bucholtz is Chief Data Officer at the Federal Housing Finance Agency and can be reached at shawn.bucholtz@fhfa.gov.

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