

Comparing Methods for Measuring the Prevalence of Evictions and Forced Moves on the Poverty Tracker and the American Housing Survey: What Can Be Learned?

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Introduction

Launched in 2012, the Poverty Tracker¹ is a longitudinal study of poverty and well-being in New York City. The study follows a representative sample of New Yorkers for up to 4 years, collecting information on income, material hardship, health problems, and several other factors related to economic security and well-being. Respondents enter the study by completing a baseline survey that assesses poverty status, experiences of material hardship, and health status. This survey is repeated every year that respondents are in the study, tracking the dynamics of those experiences. Between the annual surveys, respondents complete quarterly surveys on a variety of topics, including—but not limited to—assets and debts, employment, consumption, and service use. Important to this comment, the Poverty Tracker surveys also ask about relocation and eviction.

In 2017, a Poverty Tracker survey was updated to learn if respondents had moved in the previous 12 months and, if so, the reason why. The list of reasons for moving included being evicted and other experiences of forced relocation.² That module was then repeated the following year. The American Housing Survey (AHS) was also updated in 2017 to include newly developed survey questions on evictions. The questions included on both the Poverty Tracker and the AHS were adapted from those written by Matthew Desmond for the Milwaukee Area Renters Study (MARS). In 2019, the study published results from the Poverty Tracker survey module in a report titled

¹ See appendix A to learn more about the Poverty Tracker study.

² The new module was added to the Poverty Tracker's 21-month and 33-month surveys. The module has since been repeated, but analyses presented in this comment rely on data collected on the two initial surveys featuring the module.

Forced Moves and Evictions in New York City, which featured estimates of both the number of formal evictions that take place in New York City within a year and the estimated number of informal evictions and other experiences of forced moves (as described in Desmond and Shollenberger, 2015) that occurred. The estimates of formal evictions in New York City based on Poverty Tracker data aligned well with administrative records, although that is not the case for the eviction module that was added to the American Housing Survey in the same year (Bucholtz, 2021; Gromis and Desmond, 2021).

In this article, we discuss (1) the development and fielding of the Poverty Tracker questions about forced displacement, (2) the findings based on data collected by the Poverty Tracker and how they compare with other data sources, and (3) how the Poverty Tracker's methods for assessing forced moves compare with those employed in the AHS and how that may explain why one source is more closely matching administrative records. This analysis is meant to provide ideas as to how to adapt or adjust the AHS's methods for measuring forced moves, if possible, to get an accurate estimate of their prevalence at the national level.

The Development and Fielding of the Poverty Tracker Questions About Forced Displacement

The Poverty Tracker first fielded its module on moving and forced relocation in 2017 and then repeated the module a year later.³ The first survey on which we included these questions had a sample size of 2,931, and the second, 2,813. In the module, respondents were first asked, *have you moved in the past 12 months?* Those who had moved were then asked to indicate if they rented or owned the household or apartment they lived in before moving⁴ and if any of the following reasons listed contributed to their most recent move.

1. The landlord raised the rent (renters only).
2. You wanted to be closer to work/easier commute (renters and homeowners).
3. You found a more affordable house or apartment (renters and homeowners).
4. The neighborhood was dangerous (renters and homeowners).
5. The landlord wouldn't fix anything and your place was getting run down (renters only).
6. The landlord was harassing you (renters only).
7. The house or apartment went into foreclosure (homeowners only).
8. The City condemned the building (renters and homeowners).
9. You or the person you were staying with missed a rent payment and you thought you might be evicted (renters only).

³ See appendix A to learn more about the sample who completed this survey and how respondents were recruited.

⁴ Respondents are also given the option to say "Other" when responding to this question.

10. The landlord told you or the person you were staying with to leave (renters only).
11. You received an eviction notice (renters only).
12. Other. Please specify.

The survey logic restricted different response options to people who moved out of rental units versus residences that they owned (as noted previously). Respondents were able to select multiple reasons for moving, and the question included an “other, please specify” option for respondents to provide reasons not included in the question.

Estimating the Prevalence of Forced, Responsive, and Voluntary Moves Using the Poverty Tracker Data and Validating Our Results Using External Sources

We first published results from the Poverty Tracker’s moving module in 2019 (Collyer and Bushman-Copp, 2019). The report focused on the prevalence of forced, responsive, and voluntary moves in New York City, based on the framework developed by Desmond and Shollenberger (2015). According to that framework, we organized the question response categories into the following groups:

- a. **Forced Moves:** Eviction (formal or informal), building foreclosures, building sales, building condemnations, and harassment by landlord.
- b. **Responsive Moves:** Moves in response to housing or neighborhood conditions, such as rent hikes, neighborhood violence, and maintenance issues.
- c. **Voluntary Moves:** Intentional and unforced moves, often with a quality-of-life improvement, such as moving closer to work or moving to a larger or more affordable apartment.

Forced moves included both formal and informal evictions. Based on Desmond and Shollenberger (2015), we identified respondents who had “received an eviction notice” as having faced a *formal* eviction, whereas those who were told by their landlord to leave or feared eviction after a missed rent payment faced an *informal* eviction.

The analysis found that, of the 2.3 million families in New York City who lived in rental housing in the years studied, roughly 13 percent of families (or 294,000 families) moved each year.⁵ Of those who moved, 19 percent were forced to move (exhibit 1).

⁵ Our results cover moves that occurred between 2016 and 2017 and between 2017 and 2018.

Exhibit 1

Prevalence of Forced, Responsive, and Voluntary Moves in New York City Among Families in Rental Housing

	%	Number of Families
Forced moves	19	56,000
Responsive moves	23	67,000
Voluntary moves	56	165,000
Unknown reason for moving	2	6,000

Note: We used two surveys to produce these results. The results are the average of the estimates produced on the two surveys and are rounded to the nearest 1,000. Source: Poverty Tracker 21-month and 33-month surveys, second panel

Of those who were forced to move, roughly 46 percent of those moves (26,000 moves) were classified as resulting from a formal eviction (see exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2

Composition of Forced Moves Among New York City Families in Rental Housing Who Moved

	Number of Families	Percentage of Families Who Moved (%)
Evictions (Formal and Informal)	38,000	68
<i>Formal Eviction Reported</i>	26,000	46
<i>Informal Eviction Reported</i>	12,000	21
Other Forced Moves	18,000	32
Total Number of Forced Moves	56,000	100%

Notes: We used two surveys to produce these results. The results are the average of the estimates produced on the two surveys and are rounded to the nearest 1,000. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Source: Poverty Tracker 21-month and 33-month surveys, second panel

We validated the estimates in exhibit 2 using a variety of external data sources. First, we compared our estimate of the number of New York City families living in rental units to estimates from the New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey (NYC-HVS).⁶ According to the NYC-HVS, 2.1 million rental housing units were occupied in 2014, which is close to our estimate of 2.3 million families in rental housing from data collected in 2017 and 2018. We also compared our estimate of the share of families who moved in the 12 months before they were surveyed to data from the NYC-HVS, and the results aligned well.⁷ Finally, according to administrative estimates, 22,089 residential evictions were issued by court marshals in New York City in 2016 and 21,074 in 2017 (City of New York, 2018). Our estimate of the number of formal evictions during the same time period

⁶ See <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/nychvs/data/tables.html>, series A1, table 1.

⁷ See <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/nychvs/data/tables.html>, series A1, table 12. The NYC-HVS data show that 813,114 families in rental housing in 2014 moved into their homes or apartments between 2011 and 2014. Assuming that the share of families who move in a year is relatively constant from year to year, that leaves 203,278 families in rental housing moving into rental homes or apartments in a year. That count is slightly, but not significantly, below our estimate of 294,000 families in rental housing moving in a year. Note that this is not as perfect a comparison as the NYC-HVS respondents who moved *into* rental units; the Poverty Tracker estimate is of families living in rental units who moved *from* rental units, either to other rental units or to other types of residences.

(26,000) is thus slightly higher than administrative estimates but not substantially higher. We note that, like all estimates based on survey data, ours have a margin of error, and the administrative count falls within the margin around our estimate.

The one result that we were not able to compare with an external source was the number of informal evictions and other types of forced moves that occur within a year in New York City. Such information is not available in other data sources that are representative at the city level. We were, however, able to compare our results with those from Milwaukee—collected through the MARS—to see if the ratio of formal to informal evictions in our data differed from that in Milwaukee. As discussed by Gromis and Desmond (2021), in the MARS data, informal evictions are twice as common as formal evictions in Milwaukee, whereas the reverse is true in the Poverty Tracker data. Gromis and Desmond posit that this could result from the robust tenant protections in New York City that incentivize tenants to defend themselves in eviction cases.

Overall, our alignment with external data sources in terms of the count of families in rental housing, the share who moved in a year, and the count of evictions that occur within a year gave us confidence in our estimate of the number of informal evictions and other forced moves that occurred in New York City in the years studied.

Comparing the Poverty Tracker’s and the American Housing Survey’s Methods for Assessing Forced Moves

Funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the AHS is a longitudinal survey of housing units that asks residents questions about housing quality every other year. The Census Bureau, which conducts the survey, visits or telephones the residents occupying each housing unit (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020a). The AHS study universe includes all the occupied and vacant residential housing units in the 50 states and Washington, D.C., excluding businesses, hotels, motels, and group quarters.⁸ The AHS sample includes a national sample and a metropolitan area sample that covers 20 metropolitan areas chosen from a sample of the 51 largest U.S. cities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020c).

As discussed in Bucholtz (2021), the AHS added an eviction module in 2017. Gromis and Desmond (2021) present the first analysis of that data (both articles are featured in this issue), finding that the module underestimates the number of formal evictions in the United States when compared with the administrative data compiled by the Eviction Lab.⁹ In addition, the AHS data show very high rates of informal evictions, finding that they are more than five times as common as formal evictions. Gromis and Desmond (2021) and Bucholtz (2021) both cast doubt on the accuracy of the estimates of formal evictions in the AHS data because they vary substantially from

⁸ According to the Census Bureau, *group quarters* includes “all people not living in housing units (house, apartment, mobile home, rented rooms).”

⁹ The Eviction Lab, based at Princeton University, has built and hosts the first national database of evictions. Learn more at <https://evictionlab.org/>. We cannot compare estimates of the number of formal evictions in New York City from the Poverty Tracker to those from the AHS because the AHS is representative of New York City Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), which is a larger geographic area than New York City.

administrative records, and that misalignment also leads them to question the AHS's estimate of informal evictions and other types of forced moves.

In the following points, we discuss some of the key differences between the methods employed in measuring formal evictions on Poverty Tracker and the AHS and how they might lead to different outcomes in terms of matching administrative records and measuring the prevalence of forced moves.

1. The Poverty Tracker sample is representative of adults in New York City, whereas the AHS is a representative sample of housing units. Thus, when Poverty Tracker respondents move (for whatever reason), they continue to participate in the study. That is also true if they leave New York City. When respondents in the AHS move, they are no longer in the study and are replaced by whoever moves into their prior residence. If all individuals who were evicted or forced to move ended up signing new leases or buying homes, they could be within the sample frame for the AHS. However, many individuals who experience a forced move end up in shelters, and we see evidence of this in the Poverty Tracker sample. Those individuals would not be identified in a new unit in the AHS sample. Many also move in with other family members or friends, which brings us to point two.
2. The AHS and the Poverty Tracker employ different methods when filtering in respondents to their respective modules on forced moves and evictions. As discussed in Bucholtz (2021), AHS administered the eviction module to a narrow sample of respondents. Only households with at least one member who had moved within the past 2 years and who had rented at their previous residence were included. Within that parameter, the sample was narrowed further, as only survey respondents who had themselves recently moved and who had previously rented were filtered into the eviction module. That step removes, for example, respondents who had family members or friends move in with them after they were evicted or forced to relocate. Because the respondents answering the survey had not moved, they would not be eligible for the eviction module even though residents in the unit had been evicted. In the Poverty Tracker, anyone in the representative sample of adults who had moved in the 12 months before the survey completed the module on moving and forced relocation, including those who moved in with other friends or family members after they were evicted.
3. Another difference between the studies concerns *who* is asked to complete the survey. Poverty Tracker respondents are recruited through a random digit dial methodology, and the survey interviewer randomly selects one of the adults in the household to complete the interview. The AHS, on the other hand, interviews “someone who is a knowledgeable household member 16 years old or older, and preferably one of the owners or renters of the housing unit” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020b). Similar to the previous point, the individuals who moved into a residence temporarily after a forced move would likely not be the most knowledgeable household member or the leaseholder; thus, they would be missed in the AHS.
4. The Poverty Tracker classifies anyone who reported receiving an eviction notice as someone who faced a formal eviction. The AHS contains additional data on the court proceeding and measures formal eviction “following the filing of an eviction case in court” (Gromis

and Desmond, 2021: 279–290). The more specific questions about interactions with the court might be filtering out people who received a formal eviction notice but did not attend the court proceedings. Although those questions would seem to more accurately identify individuals who were evicted, they might be too restrictive. That could explain, in part, why the ratio of informal to formal evictions in the AHS is so high.

5. Another difference pertains to the flow of the survey questions. On the Poverty Tracker, the question about receipt of an eviction notice is part of a “Select all that apply” survey item; thus, respondents are able to indicate more than one reason for moving. That structure might be more comfortable for respondents to answer because they can select options that have less stigma as well as express their side of the story.¹⁰ For example, respondents might consider it important to indicate that they moved because their landlord raised the rent *and* they received an eviction notice. In addition, respondents can select an “Other” option and enter a text response. We have found that some people who were evicted write this into the text response as opposed to selecting it as an answer choice. Although whether those variations in question design and language explain the differences in results between the Poverty Tracker and AHS is unknown, the variations (and consequential difference in results) lend support to the recommendation from Bucholtz (2021) to engage in questionnaire design research.
6. Finally, as discussed in Bucholtz (2021), interviewer training is very important when asking about sensitive topics. The Poverty Tracker interviewers go through extensive training led by study coordinators who have overseen field operations for several years. Given that many of the Poverty Tracker survey questions ask about sensitive topics (such as income), such training specifically prepares interviewers to build trust with respondents. As a longitudinal study that contacts respondents every 3 months, the Poverty Tracker begins establishing trust with our baseline survey and then continues to build over the course of the study. Bucholtz (2021) notes that AHS interviewers have not been specifically trained to ask questions about sensitive topics, such as evictions.

Conclusion

The addition of questions on evictions and forced relocation to the AHS marks an important step toward estimating the incidence of forced relocation at the national level. Such an estimate will be invaluable to policymakers, researchers, and advocates addressing those challenges and their consequences. The analysis by Gromis and Desmond (2021) included in this issue, however, shows that the first set of results from the eviction module on the AHS must be interpreted with caution. In this article, we compare methods for measuring forced moves on the AHS and the Poverty Tracker survey, as results from the latter more closely align with external sources. The comparison reinforces the recommendations put forward in this issue by Bucholtz (2021). First, the universe of respondents eligible for the eviction module on the AHS is too limited and filters out people who may have someone who was previously evicted living in their home. In addition, the question structure on the two surveys is different, and the AHS questions on evictions present

¹⁰ In the MARS survey, respondents do not select all reasons that applied to their most recent move, but MARS interviewers are specifically trained to ask about evictions and might have strategies that address issues related to stigma.

internal validity issues (described by Bucholtz, 2021). Addressing the sample size and question wording, as well as interviewer training, seem to be the first steps toward improving the accuracy of the AHS estimates. Bucholtz's (2021) recommendation to test such changes through a cognitive study would be a good place to start.

Appendix A.

The Poverty Tracker is a longitudinal study of poverty and disadvantage in New York City run through a partnership between [Robin Hood](#) and Columbia University's [Population Research Center](#) and [Center on Poverty and Social Policy](#). Since 2012, the study has recruited four representative panels of adults in New York City to participate in the study for up to 4 years. When participants join the study, they complete an annual survey that collects information on income, material hardship, and health problems. The survey is repeated every 12 months to get a better understanding of who is moving in and out of poverty and hardship each year, capturing a dynamic picture of economic well-being in the city. Every 3 months between the annual surveys, shorter supplementary surveys are administered. Those "quarterly" questionnaires focus on particular topics, such as consumption, immigration, moving, and paid sick leave.

Poverty Tracker data collection began in 2012, when a representative sample of 2,002 adult New Yorkers were recruited to participate in the study through a random digit dial. An additional 226 adults were recruited through social service agencies as an intentional oversample of individuals facing disproportionate levels of economic insecurity. New Yorkers in that panel were interviewed every 3 months between 2012 and 2014. In 2015, the study recruited a new representative panel of 3,403 adults from the pool of 10,000 individuals who had completed the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's (DOHMH) 2015 Community Health Survey. New York City's DOHMH had recruited a panel of 10,000 using a random digit dial, a subset of whom were asked if they would participate in the Poverty Tracker. As with the first panel, an additional sample of 505 social services users were also recruited to participate. Unlike the first panel, however, we interviewed the second panel every 3 months for 4 years. In 2017, the study adopted a rotating panel design, and, using a random digit dial, we recruit new representative panels biennially to participate in the study for 4 years. To make the panels representative of the city's population, we produce family-level and personal-level weights using the New York City sample of the American Community Survey.

The data presented in this article come from surveys that respondents in the second panel completed after participating in the study for 21 months and then again after participating in the study for 33 months.

Additional information about the Poverty Tracker can be found at povertycenter.columbia.edu and robinhood.org/programs/special-initiatives/poverty-tracker/index.html. Public-use Poverty Tracker data files are available to download at povertycenter.columbia.edu.

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