

Safer at Home? Studying the Virginia eviction crisis during the summer of 2020

By Emma Schmidt

In April of 2018, the *New York Times* published a story on evictions that highlighted Richmond, Virginia as the city with the second highest eviction rate in the country. Since its publication, a number of organizations in Richmond have dedicated themselves to seeking solutions to what many call an eviction epidemic. While there is available scholarship on eviction in Richmond that summarizes the spatial distribution of the problem, there is no research that includes tenant perspectives and experiences. When I was first awarded the Anne Davis '16 Summer Research Fellowship, my plan was to spend the summer surveying tenants in Richmond, Virginia. The purpose of this was to determine how household factors influenced eviction in Richmond, as well as to hear from the tenants themselves so that their perspectives were not lost in the process. COVID-19 made this in-person survey impossible, but also provided other research opportunities.

Clearly, we were in the midst of an eviction crisis before COVID-19. But once the pandemic set in, millions of renters found themselves at an even higher risk of not being able to make rent and in turn, at an even higher risk of eviction. Federally, there was a 120-day eviction moratorium that affected some, but not all, rental properties. This was instated on March 27, and expired on July 24. It protected government-financed housing, including public housing and housing with federally backed mortgage loans. Locally, the Virginia government stepped in and instituted their own temporary ban on evictions, allowing filings against tenants for reasons other than non-payment of rent but banning filings based solely on missing rent checks. This was instated on June 8, and halted eviction proceedings through June 28. Based on the timeline of eviction moratoriums, it follows that eviction filings should have gone down dramatically across the country in April and May, and that there should have been next to no filings in the state of Virginia in June and July. Among other things, I spent the summer investigating this by following news stories related to eviction in Virginia and looking through data on eviction filings, scraped from Virginia court records, to determine which areas in Virginia saw new eviction filings despite the moratoriums.

These data revealed several things. As expected, Richmond is a hotspot for eviction filings, recording the highest number of filings in both April and May. The Hampton Roads area (specifically Virginia Beach, Hampton, and Newport News) is also among the usual suspects for high eviction filing rates. Other areas to watch include the Northern Virginia area, Henrico County, and Roanoke - areas not usually highlighted when discussing the eviction crisis in Virginia. Northern Virginia had several municipalities towards the top of the list in April, and there has recently been some news coverage highlighting problem landlords in the area. Henrico County ranked among the top five in April and June, and followed closely behind at #8 in May. Roanoke ranked second highest for filings in April, and ranked #6 in the state for May and June.

In order to effectively curb the eviction crisis, policymakers must focus on all these areas, not just the ones that receive the most media attention.

The eviction crisis is ongoing, and we continue to see policy developments related to the pandemic. Throughout this semester I plan on continuing to track the data, working with Professor Caroline Hanley to determine whether there are sociologically significant trends in the areas that are seeing eviction filings despite the moratoriums.