The Geography of Eviction in Richmond: Beyond Poverty

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INTRODUCTION

T he most common reason landlords evict tenants is for not paying rent (Desmond, 2012). At first glance, it may seem logical to assume that poverty—simply not having enough money to make rent—is the underlying cause of eviction. However, households face various kinds of displacement pressure that ultimately causes them to be unable to afford rent, many other less common reasons for eviction, and involuntary displacement that occurs outside of the formal, legal eviction process. These different reasons for eviction and displacement are context-dependent, varying in different places. Because American housing markets, including those in Virginia and Richmond, are institutionally and spatially segmented by race and class—there is not one regional housing market in which everyone participates, but many submarkets for specific groups—the routes leading to eviction will vary by place and therefore must be examined geographically.

This report focuses on the relationship between eviction and urban geography in the City of Richmond in order to begin to unravel different causes of eviction and how they are distributed across the city. The report examines neighborhood-level eviction data and what factors have measurable effects on the eviction rate. The analysis shows that:

- Neighborhood racial composition is a significant factor in determining eviction rates, even after controlling for income, property value, and other characteristics.
- As the share of the African American population increases, the eviction rate increases.
- As the share of non-Hispanic Whites increases, the eviction rate decreases.
- Demographic and housing market characteristics do not explain why high and low eviction rates are concentrated in certain parts of the city, suggesting that other factors such as rental housing ownership, financing, and property management strategies may play an important role in eviction.

Given that previous research has found that the scale and structure of ownership and rates of eviction are connected (Raymond, et al., 2016), we suggest open data policies to advance future research in this area. Furthermore, future work should focus on the underlying mechanisms that make race a significant factor in eviction, both in terms of lower rates in White neighborhoods and higher rates in Black neighborhoods.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF EVICTION IN RICHMOND

Richmond's 11% eviction rate is three to four times the national rate.[1] The picture is starker, however, at smaller scales (Figure 1). Taking an average of eviction rates from 2000 through 2016, much of the city's west side neighborhoods have eviction rates below the city's average. The north and south sides, and some of its east end have rates higher than the city average. A few Richmond neighborhoods have eviction rates much higher than the city average—in some cases two and three or more times higher. Two census block groups—a geographic scale at roughly the neighborhood level and smaller than a census tract—on the south side down Hull Street have average eviction rates higher than 33%. On the Northside, these extremely high eviction rates are centered to the south of Battery Park.
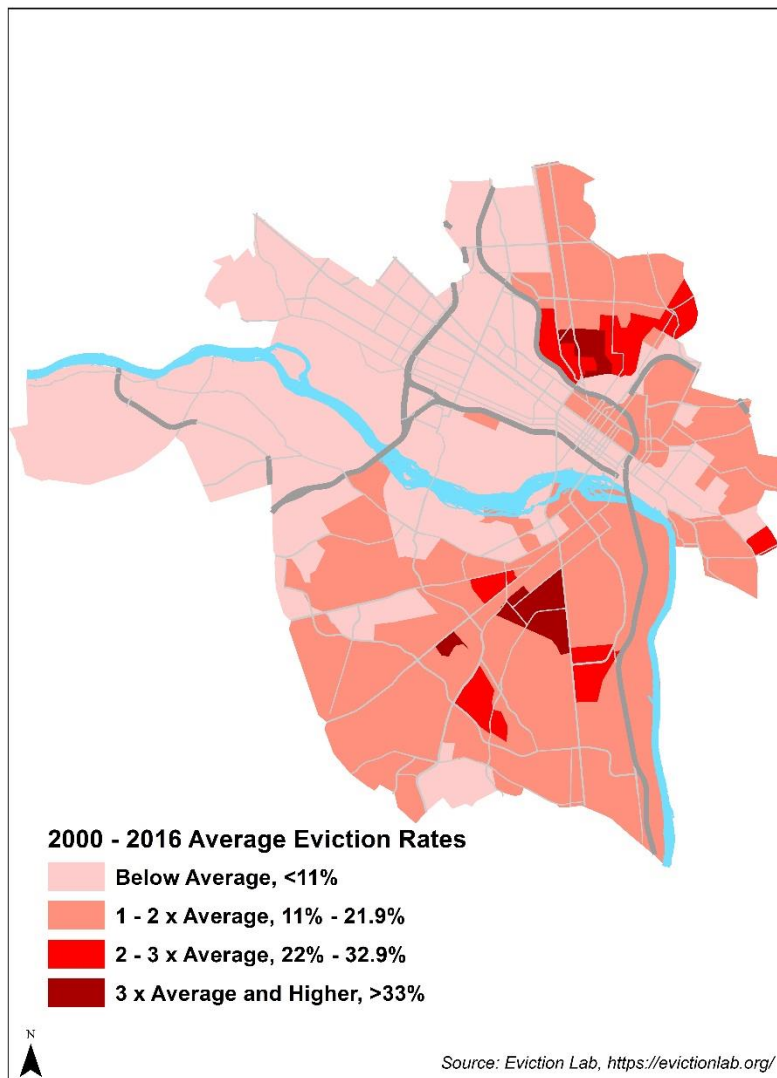
Figure 1. Eviction Rates by Census Block Group.

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[1] Eviction rates are from Princeton University's Eviction Lab data. In this data, an eviction is when an "unlawful detainer" judgment is given in an eviction court case.

Racially and ethnically concentrated areas of poverty (RECAP)—areas that are more than 50% non-white, greater than 40% of the population in poverty, and less than 50% of the area median income—are prevalent on the north, east, and south sides of the city, often in places with public housing developments. Notably, areas of high eviction rates of more than twice the average for Richmond of 11%, do not consistently overlap with racially concentrated areas of poverty (Figure 2). Most of the areas with the highest eviction rates in Richmond are not the poorest.
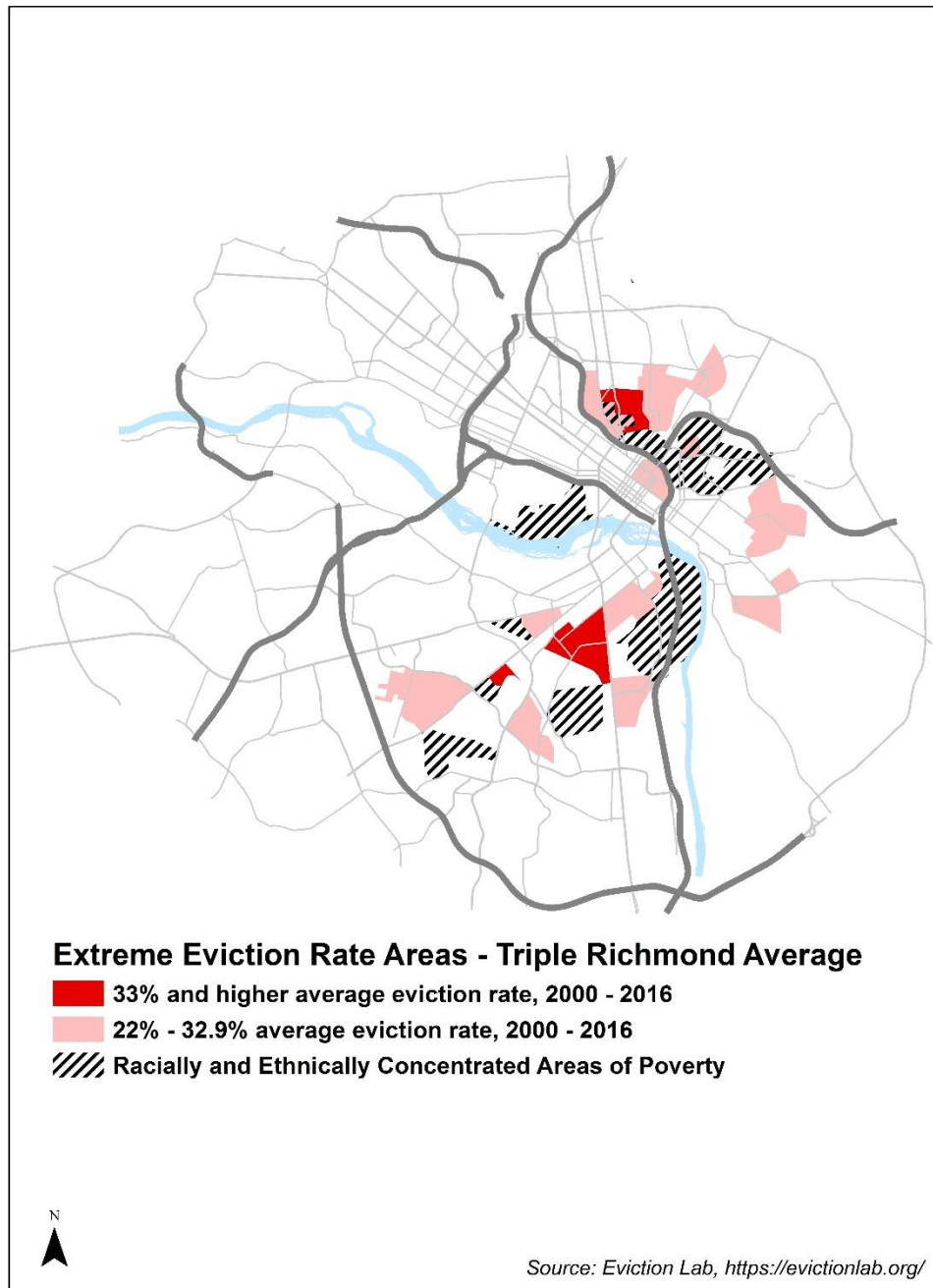

Extreme Eviction Rate Areas - Triple Richmond Average
- 33% and higher average eviction rate, 2000 - 2016
- 22% - 32.9% average eviction rate, 2000 - 2016
- Racially and Ethnically Concentrated Areas of Poverty

Source: Eviction Lab, https://evictionlab.org/

Figure 2. Eviction Rates and Concentrated Poverty

Looking at areas where eviction rates are more than three times Richmond's average, 33% or higher, shows that none of them are located in the poorest areas of the city. This raises the question as to why certain areas of the city demonstrate sustained and extremely high eviction rates since 2000 and suggests that

1) while poverty and eviction are undoubtedly connected, there is not a simple relationship between the two so that higher poverty always means higher eviction rates; and
2) eviction likely has different causes and functions differently across Richmond neighborhoods.

For example, the most southern census block group exhibiting an extreme eviction rate has an average eviction rate of 45% since 2000 and a 56% eviction rate in 2016. On average since 2000, 118% of rental units have had an eviction filed, meaning that more than one eviction is filed in court per rental unit per year. Dominated by multifamily rental housing complexes, the area was about 70% Hispanic in 2016, but had been majority Black in the middle 2000s.

In the extreme eviction rate block group on the Northside near Battery Park, the 2016 eviction rate was 76% and the eviction filing rate was 159%. The poverty rate is 22%, which is only slightly higher than the city average. While this area is majority non-white, the percentage of white residents has increased by about 20 percentage points since 2000. While uneven, this area and other parts of the Northside have seen reinvestment in the housing stock and rising sale prices.

While this kind of descriptive mapping indicates concentrations of above average eviction rates, we can assess the statistical probability of spatial clustering of eviction rates. In other words, we can test whether high eviction rates randomly distributed across the city or if there is a cause for them to be concentrated in certain parts of the city. "Hotspot" analysis confirms that high evictions rates are concentrated on the Northside and south side of Richmond, while low eviction rates are concentrated on the West End (Figure 3). Evictions are non-randomly distributed in the city, meaning that there are reasons that above- and below-average eviction rates are concentrated in certain areas.
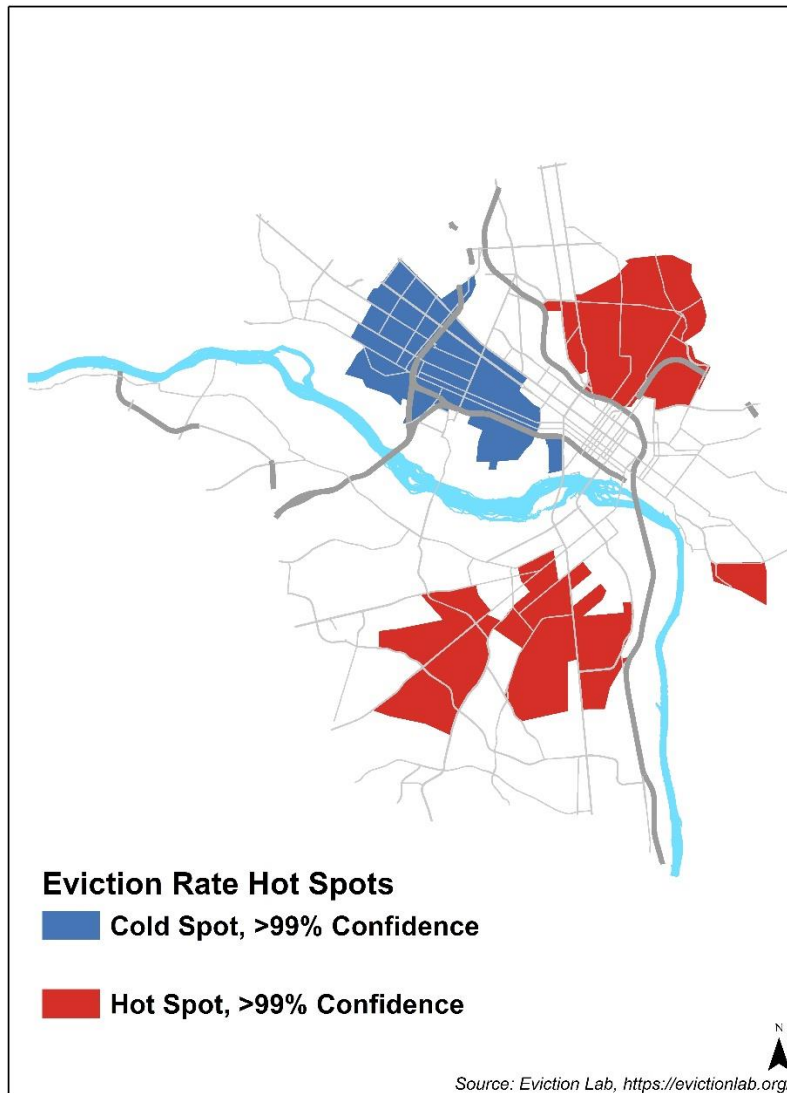
Eviction Rate Hot Spots

■ Cold Spot, >99% Confidence

■ Hot Spot, >99% Confidence

N

Source: Eviction Lab, https://evictionlab.org/

Figure 3. Eviction "hotspots".

We test how eviction rates are influenced by demographic and housing market characteristics at the census block group level[2]. Both the share of African American and White, non-Hispanic residents in a block group has a statistically significant effect on eviction rates. Holding median income, property value, and other factors constant, we estimate that as the share of the block group's African American population increases by 10%, eviction rate increases by about 1.2%. As the share of a block group's White population increases by 10%, the eviction rate decreases by about 0.9%. Importantly, poverty rates and median income are not statistically significant, supporting the idea that eviction and poverty are not directly related.

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[2] For full linear regression model and results, please contact RVA Eviction Lab at rvaevictlab@vcu.edu.

Importantly, the demographic and housing market characteristics we use to understand how eviction rates vary across the city significantly underestimate eviction rates in areas that have extreme eviction rates, over 33%, and in many areas with high eviction rates of 22% or more (Figure 4). This means that something is causing high eviction rates in these areas that we have not yet accounted for. On the other hand, those factors *overestimate* eviction rates for block groups on the west side, suggesting something unaccounted for that reduces eviction rates in these areas. In other words, poverty, income, and other neighborhood characteristics do not adequately explain why some areas have extremely above- and below-average eviction rates.
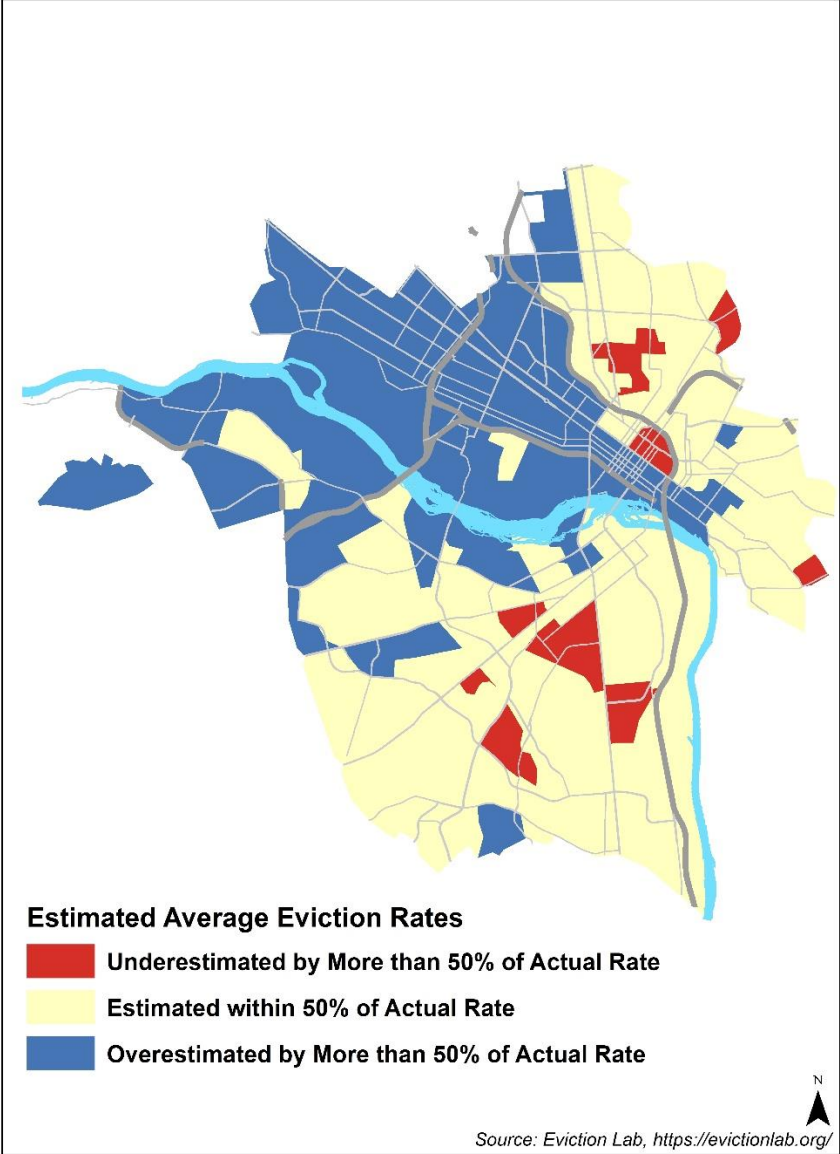

Estimated Average Eviction Rates

- Underestimated by More than 50% of Actual Rate
- Estimated within 50% of Actual Rate
- Overestimated by More than 50% of Actual Rate

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Source: Eviction Lab, https://evictionlab.org/

Figure 4. Areas above- and below-average eviction rates.

This analysis raises at least two questions. First, related to what we did find is what the deeper and more specific significance of race is in eviction. The racial categories in our statistical analysis are likely standing in for much more complex histories and lived realities of accumulated disadvantage for Black people and families in job and housing markets and how Black people live in institutionally and spatially segmented housing markets. This leads us to the second question, which has to do with what our analysis did not take into account: rental housing ownership, financing, and property management strategies. Census block groups with extreme eviction rates (over 33%), all feature multifamily rental housing developments, which have different ownership and financing than single-family rental properties. Previous research shows that larger scale owners evict at higher rates than landlords who control fewer properties (Raymond et al., 2016).

CONCLUSIONS: FUTURE RESEARCH AND PUBLIC DATA POLICY

The reason for eviction appears deceptively simple: not enough income to make rent. However, this report shows that the relationship between poverty and eviction is not as direct as this cause-and-effect assumes. Instead, the analysis provides evidence for a much more complicated picture of eviction, one that plays out differently in different parts of the city. In particular, neighborhood racial composition plays a significant role in eviction, but ultimately there are other unidentified factors at work that increase and suppress eviction rates across Richmond's neighborhoods. Based on the analysis here and previous research, ownership, financing, and management strategy very likely play a key role in eviction. Therefore, we propose a few open-data polices that would immediately provide additional insight into these questions:

- Open Recorder of Deeds database to the public and eliminate fees.
- State-level legislation that requires "beneficial ownership" of property to be identified, providing clarity to Limited Liability Corporation (LLC) structures.

Additionally, the statistical analyses here require further qualitative work to detail the mechanisms of accumulated disadvantage and housing market segmentation and how those compound eviction problems in certain parts of the city. Specifically, larger scale surveys of tenants would provide more information about the eviction process, timing, and outcomes. In-depth interviews with tenants would help fill in the details about how eviction happens.

Finally, policy makers should be aware that there are multiple causes of eviction which are 1) unevenly distributed in Richmond and across the state as a whole, and 2) are connected to their specific geographic contexts, whether that is Richmond neighborhoods or other urban, suburban, and rural geographies of Virginia. Therefore, solutions to what are effectively several distinct but overlapping eviction problems will be multiple and need to be relevant to the different contexts in which they arise. This is particularly important when considering solutions within a state as diverse as Virginia.

Desmond, M. (2012). Eviction and the reproduction of urban poverty. *American Journal of Sociology*, 118(1), 88-133.

Raymond, Elora, Richard Duckworth, Ben Miller, Michael Lucas, and Shiraj Pokharel. 2016. "Corporate Landlords, Institutional Investors, and Displacement: Eviction Rates in Single Family Rentals." AFRB Atlanta Community and Economic Development Discussion Paper No. 2016-4.