

Eviction and the Reproduction of Inner-City Poverty

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The process of eviction, a process that virtually has been ignored by urban poverty scholars despite the fact that thousands of poor families are forcibly removed from their apartments each year, holds strategic value for advancing social-scientific knowledge of the reproduction of inner-city poverty. By studying eviction, one can obtain a unique perspective into (1) the ways in which the dynamics of the low-income housing market exacerbate conditions of chronic poverty, (2) the degree to which poor people experiencing a crisis rely on their social networks, and (3) how cultural dynamics of the inner city reinforce conditions of poverty.

Set in inner-city Milwaukee, this study will employ both quantitative and qualitative methods, including an ethnographic study of the process of eviction as well as a survey of Milwaukee's poorest renters. I will conduct a ten-month ethnographic study of five landlords and five tenants facing eviction, researching, additionally, the array of actors involved in the eviction process (e.g., evicted tenants, non evicted tenants, landlords, lawyers). With respect to tenants, I will follow them through the eviction process, from the initial termination of tenancy to the temporary homelessness brought about by eviction; with respect to landlords, I will walk in their footsteps as closely as possible, watching them evict tenants, talking with them about how they decide whom to evict, and following them to court as they defend their case. Additionally, in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin Survey Center, I will collect 1,000 surveys (with approximately 100 items) of tenants living in Milwaukee's low-cost housing sector. Surveys, collected through face-to-face interviews administered by a team of researchers, will gather data on tenants' demographic attributes and opinions, experiences with eviction, housing conditions, residential mobility, social networks, income, and material hardship. This study will generate scientific findings that will interest scholars as well as policy makers attempting to draft effective and fair housing initiatives.