Milwaukee Eviction Court Outcomes.

Part 1: Literature Review and Research Questions

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1 INTRODUCTION

Sociologist Matthew Desmond wrote about relationships between renters and landlords in Milwaukee and issues surrounding housing and eviction his 2015 book [1]. It is difficult to identify between correlation and causation of many issues associated with poverty—unemployment, education, drug activity, violence, crime, health, food insecurity, racial inequality, etc. Recognizing causation would be helpful in choosing beneficial interventions [5][7][17]. Desmond concludes that eviction is causal in long-term housing problems, resulting in people moving into degrading or dangerous housing [1], contributing to the perpetuation and worsening of poverty, deteriorating health [7] and mental well-being [6]. In addition to the likelihood of homelessness, evictions are associated with long-term stress, medical problems, substance use, depression and suicide among adults and their children [4]. Evictions might contribute to higher crime rates; evictions destabilize neighborhoods, causing more "resentment and disinvestment", reducing the presence of people who look after neighborhoods and who trust one another, which are associated with reducing crime rates [1].

Nuisance property laws ordinances are one type of third-party policing, offloading some of the work of combatting drug dealing and disorderly behavior to the community by penalizing landlords for frequent emergency calls [14]. These ordinances don't distinguish well between victim and perpetrator, being potentially harmful to victims of domestic violence who risk evicted for calling 911 or breaking a a lease to flee an abuser [12]. People with disabilities including depression and chronic health conditions may be also more likely to be evicted due to emergency calls related to suicide, mental health crises, health and welfare checks [13].

This project uses Desmond's data on eviction court cases to build a model of causes od eviction.

1.1 Data Set

The data for this project is data that Desmond made publicly available. The Milwaukee Eviction Court Study (MECS) [2] is from in-person surveys of people in Milwaukee County Small Claims Court for an eviction hearing in January and February of 2011. During that time, 1,328 eviction cases took place. In 378 cases, tenants appeared in court; of those, 251 were interviewed. The data as provided has 251 rows of 94 variables. Several of the 94 are already represented as one-hot encoded variables. The data includes information about rent amount and renter's income, adults and children who were living in the residence that received an eviction notice, including age, race, relationship to renter, reasons for the eviction notice, as listed on the notice and as reported by the interviewee, and the outcome of hearing.
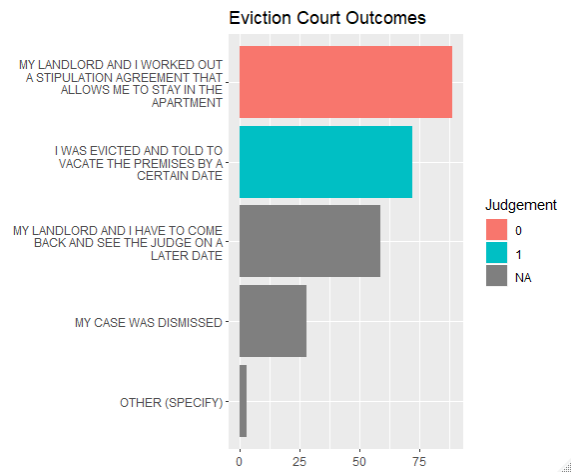
Figure 1: Eviction Court Judgements

1.2 Binary Classification

The model will do binary classification for the outcome of a court case: Eviction or Non-Eviction Judgement. Actual court cases have additional outcomes (Figure 1): Coming back at a later date, Case Dismissed, and Other. A decision in creating this model will be whether to treat these outcomes as Non-Eviction Judgements or to exclude them.

2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

When exploring the data, some questions might change depending on information that is revealed .Overall, the research question from this data is about why people get evicted:

- Of tenants appearing in court, what characteristics make one likely to receive an eviction judgement?

2.1 Reasons for Eviction

A first hypothesis is that the reason for eviction influences how likely a landlord and tenant can work out a solution. The reasons on the legal eviction reasons might or might not match the tenant's answers to questions about why they were evicted.

- Which reasons are the most and least likely to result in an eviction judgement?
- Is it significant whether the legal notice and the tenant give the same reasons for eviction?
- Is the amount due, income, or amount due relative to income (a possible indication or the tenant's ability to repay) a predictor of the court outcome? If so, how can it be quantified?

2.2 Nuisance Ordinances

To consider the effects of nuisance ordinances as a reason for eviction, questions might be:

- What is the probability of eviction with a nuisance property citation for female renters compared to male? How does this compare to male and female renters without nuisance property citations?
- How much effect does nuisance property activity as answered by the renter surveyed but not listed on the legal notice affect the probability of eviction?

2.3   Children

Prior to reading the book, I would not have expected children to increase the probability of eviction, but Desmond describes people having children having difficulties in finding homes to rent and with evictions. He makes the statement, "The effect of living with children on receiving an eviction judgement was equivalent to falling four months behind in rent," a conclusion from "doubly robust logistic regression models" [1].

- In a model I make to quantify the effects of living with children and months behind on rent, does it support the same conclusion, or what is different?
- Does the effect of living with children depend on the number or adults living there, the age of the renter, the age of the children or total number of children? For example, how much does each additional child increase the probability of an eviction judgement?

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