

Evictions in DC: Compounding Racial, Spatial, and Class Risk

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Abstract

In the years since the 2008 financial crisis, much has dramatically changed in the real estate markets in major cities in the U.S. Gentrification, displacement, and increasing demands for urban housing have had disruptive effects on marginalized groups formerly stratified to urban housing by redlining and discriminatory housing policies. Recent scholarship has suggested that eviction is used as an intentional tool to reshape housing markets in favor of profit, while mainstream discourse frames eviction as a personal socioeconomic failure resulting from the behavior and choices of evicted people. However, an analysis of data on evictions in Washington, DC from 2006-2018 collected by the Princeton Eviction Lab reveals a clear, uneven distribution of evictions that privileges certain groups. Evictions are starkly stratified to rapidly developing, low-income, and black areas of the city—specifically Wards 7 and 8. This threatens the longevity of communities of color in DC and necessitates further inquiry into the motivations of landlords, quality of housing, and how tenant rights and protections are accessible to the groups that need them most.

Background

Matthew Desmond's 2017 book *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* revitalized a conversation on urban growth regimes, housing, and social stratification in American cities by highlighting the phenomenon of eviction. However, little scholarship exists on the actionable realities of evictions in specific U.S. cities to date. Scholars note that much scholarship on housing instability focuses on prevalences of foreclosures, citing lack of access to evictions data as a cause (Clayton and Harris Combs 2016). Likewise, in their dataset, the Princeton Eviction Lab notes the challenges and unequal access to obtaining data on evictions across the U.S. Nonetheless, the Princeton Eviction Lab provides an important new tool to test hypotheses on urban poverty and housing.

In addition to the structural financial problems that precipitated the 2008 financial crisis, scholars suggest that decades of degradation of public housing, limited affordable housing, and rising rents in urban areas contributed to the eviction crisis since 2008 (Clayton and Harris Combs 2016 and Holl (2016)). Desmond (2017) argues that eviction has been used increasingly as a tool to extrapolate profit from property. He observes how eviction works to further concentrate poverty, destabilize families, and how in many circumstances, evictions actually precipitate rather than result from extreme poverty. In addition to displacing families

and individuals of their home, community ties, and possessions, evictions are also connected to negative mental health outcomes (depression, anxiety, suicide) and physical health outcomes (high blood pressure, child neglect)(Vasquez-Vera 2017). Other scholars note that eviction is a strong predictor of prolonged homelessness, especially for individuals who have previously experienced disruptive life events and do not have a supportive social network (Crane 2000).

However eviction does not affect all renters and homeowners equally. The low-to-middle income, heavily rent burdened, and people of color are disproportionately affected by eviction. Low-income urban mothers are one of the most vulnerable groups to eviction, and their evictions result in deteriorating mental health among mothers and children, challenges parenting, and material hardship for up to years afterwards (Desmond and Kimbro 2015). Reflecting on this intersection, King (2010) situates the disciplinary mode of eviction in a framework of governmentality that seeks to further marginalize and dispossess black women. Desmond (2012) poignantly notes that “in poor black neighborhoods, eviction is to women what incarceration is to men: a typical but severely consequential occurrence contributing to the reproduction of urban poverty.”

The discourse on eviction is also situated in a larger conversation on right to the city, the meaning and value of rent, and profit in urban space. In *Evicted*, Desmond (2017) chronicles the changing meaning of urban landlordship and rent-making. In earlier decades, landlords only owning one or two properties might be forced to evict due to unpaid rent preventing landlords from paying rent or otherwise severely financially burdening them. However, in recent decades, eviction has evolved to become primarily a punitive measure and a way to strategically make more property-derived profit. Today, specific landlords are more likely to evict than others; one case study in Atlanta showed that large corporate owners of single-family homes were 68% more likely to file eviction notices than small landlords (Raymond 2016).

In their pivotal piece, *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place*, Logan and Molotch (1987) challenge the inevitability of profit-making in urban space. To them, growth is an ideology entrenched in U.S. cities where development and redevelopment are posited as essential and uncontestedly good policy. Cities, real estate developers, and other non-resident urban actors will always yield power over residents because they can leverage the sentimentality of place, home, and community against residents. It is through this framework that eviction becomes such a devastating socioeconomic phenomenon for many families and individuals.

Redevelopment and gentrification have bred much discourse on race, stratification, and segregation in Washington, DC where literature on eviction lacks. Examining the persistence of residential segregation in DC, Squires (2002) found that current black households were nearly twice as likely to not be offered their first choice in housing as white households. This has important implications for reentrenching poverty when evictions in DC are spatially concentrated in certain high black population areas of the city. Many focus on the prioritization of primarily white, high-income interests in the development and redevelopment of neighborhoods producing displacement and contention effects with native DC residents (Hyra 2008 and Williams (1988)). It is through this framework of eviction effects, profit and growth in contemporary cities, and the legacy of segregation and gentrification in DC that I

situate this analysis.

Research Design

This research utilizes the Princeton Eviction Lab data for census tract level data in Washington DC. The Princeton Eviction Lab full U.S. dataset includes 80 million records related to evictions and eviction filings. Due to differential access to eviction records in different places across the U.S., the dataset has limited comparative capabilities. However, validity in these results is strengthened because it is limited to one city and thus one standard of eviction reporting.

Princeton Eviction Lab lists D.C. as one of the cities where eviction data is undercollected due to limited access to records. Thus, results of this research may not be fully representative of the eviction crisis in DC and eviction rates are likely greater than the data suggests. The DC data includes eviction records from 2006-2016 but includes demographic information from 2000-2016. The tracts dataset contains 3043 observations of 27 variables that describe demographic and economic information about the population. Each observation is a census tract's information for a given year.

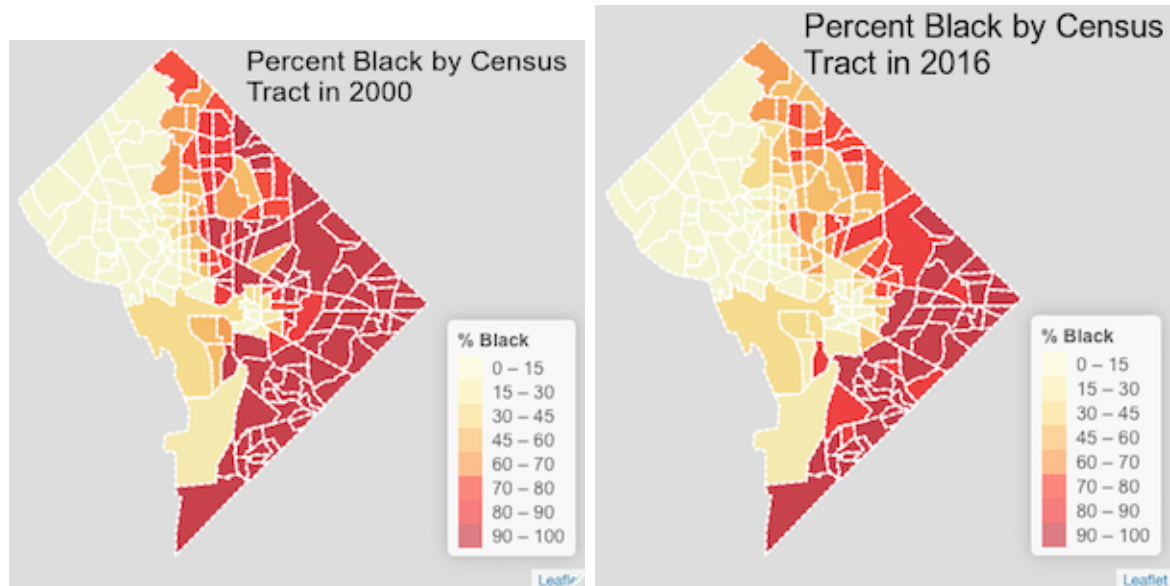
To aid the spatial analysis of this data, I also added a variable “ward” to the tracts dataset. This allows the data to be observed by wards which can be more easy to draw patterns from than census tracts due to size.

Table 1: Variables Used

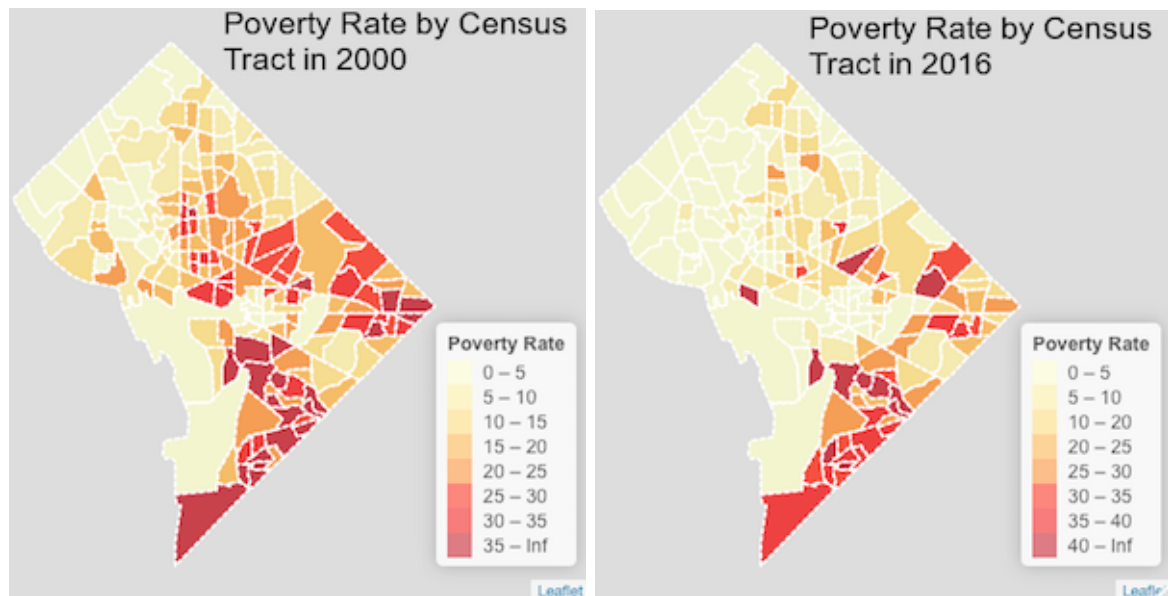
Variable	Minimum	Maximum
Year	2000	2016
Ward	1	8
Poverty Rate	0%	63.31%
Percent Black	0%	98.25%
Eviction Rate	0%	14.01%
Rent Burden	0%	76.4%

Results

Shifting Demographics in Washington, DC 2000-2016

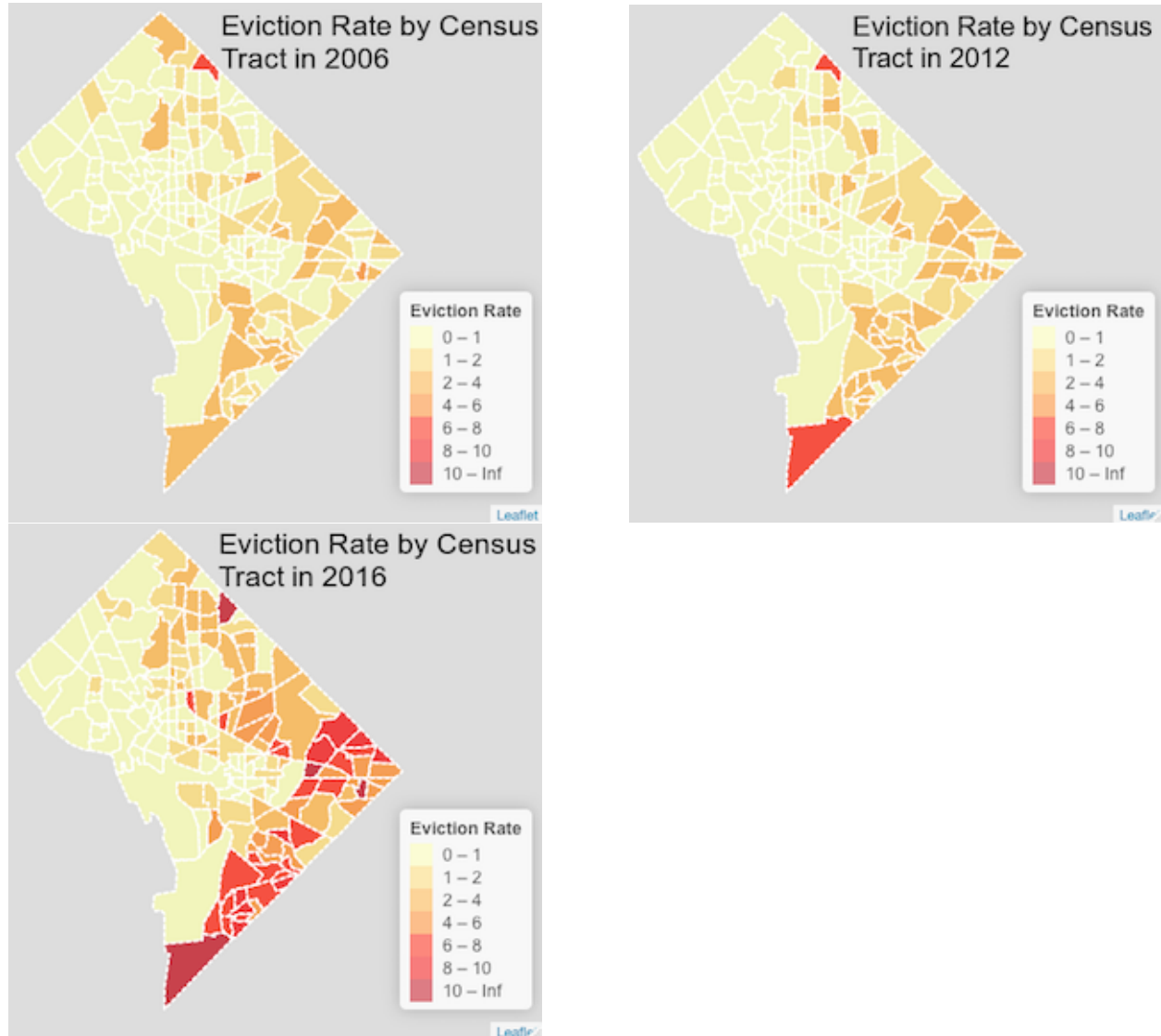


As you can see in these figures, the black population has become increasingly concentrated in Southeast DC from 2000-2016, particularly in Wards 7 and 8. Areas in Northeast and Northwest DC that were previously majority black have lost much of their black population over this time period. Ward 5's black population decreased by 18.9% from 2000 to 2016 and Ward 4's black population decreased by 16.4% in this time. At this same time, the black population in Wards 7 and 8 remained stable within 3 percentage points. Because the relative populations of census tracts within Wards 7 and 8 have not increased compared to other wards over the last 16 years, this demographic data indicates that many black residents have left DC completely. Although some have likely relocated to Wards 7 and 8.



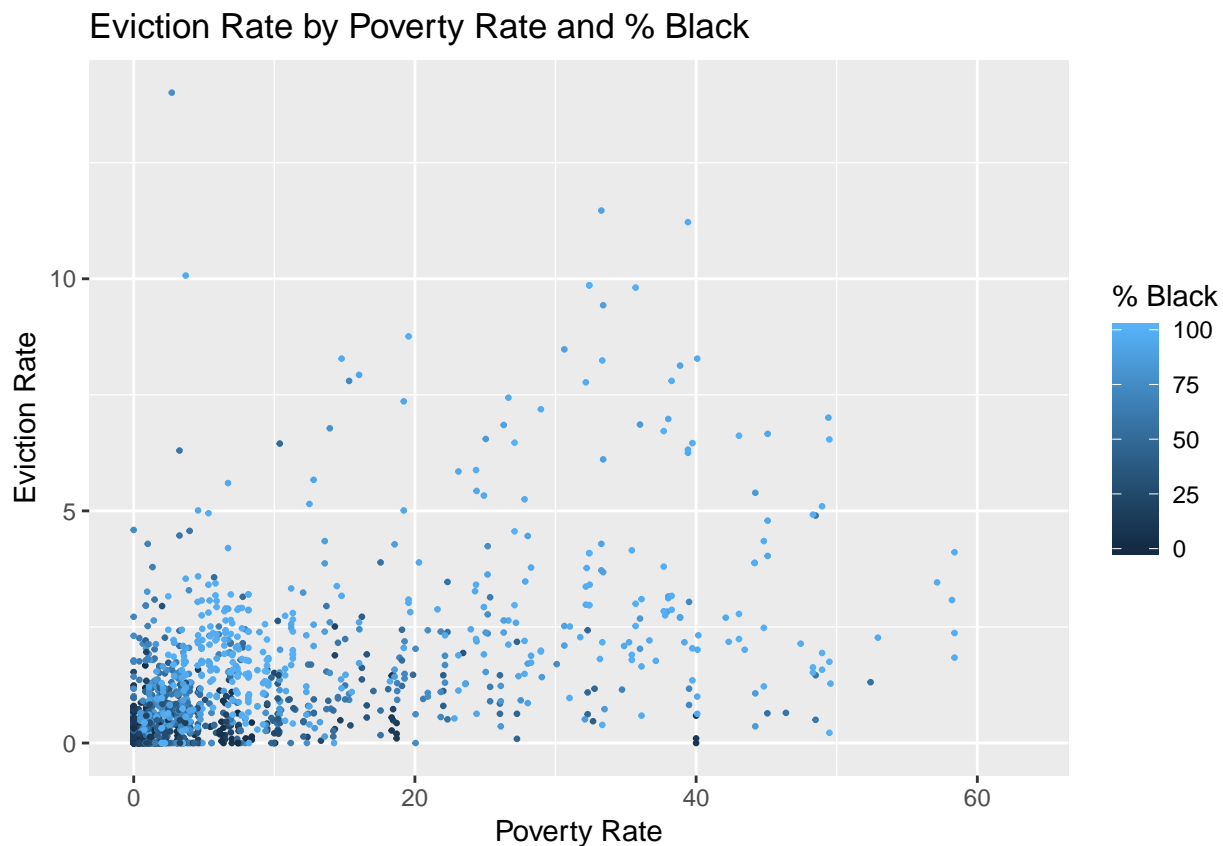
Likewise, Figures 3 and 4 show that poverty has become spatially concentrated in the same areas over this time period, particularly in Ward 8. From 2016 to 2000, the poverty rate in Ward 6 fell drastically by 12.03% and in many other Wards by 5% or more. However, the poverty rate in Ward 8 remained at 36.3% and Ward 7's remained at 24.5% in 2016. Taken together, these two shifts in demographics of poverty and race driven by rapid development of other parts of DC have spatially concentrated low-income black people in Wards 7 and 8.

Evictions in DC

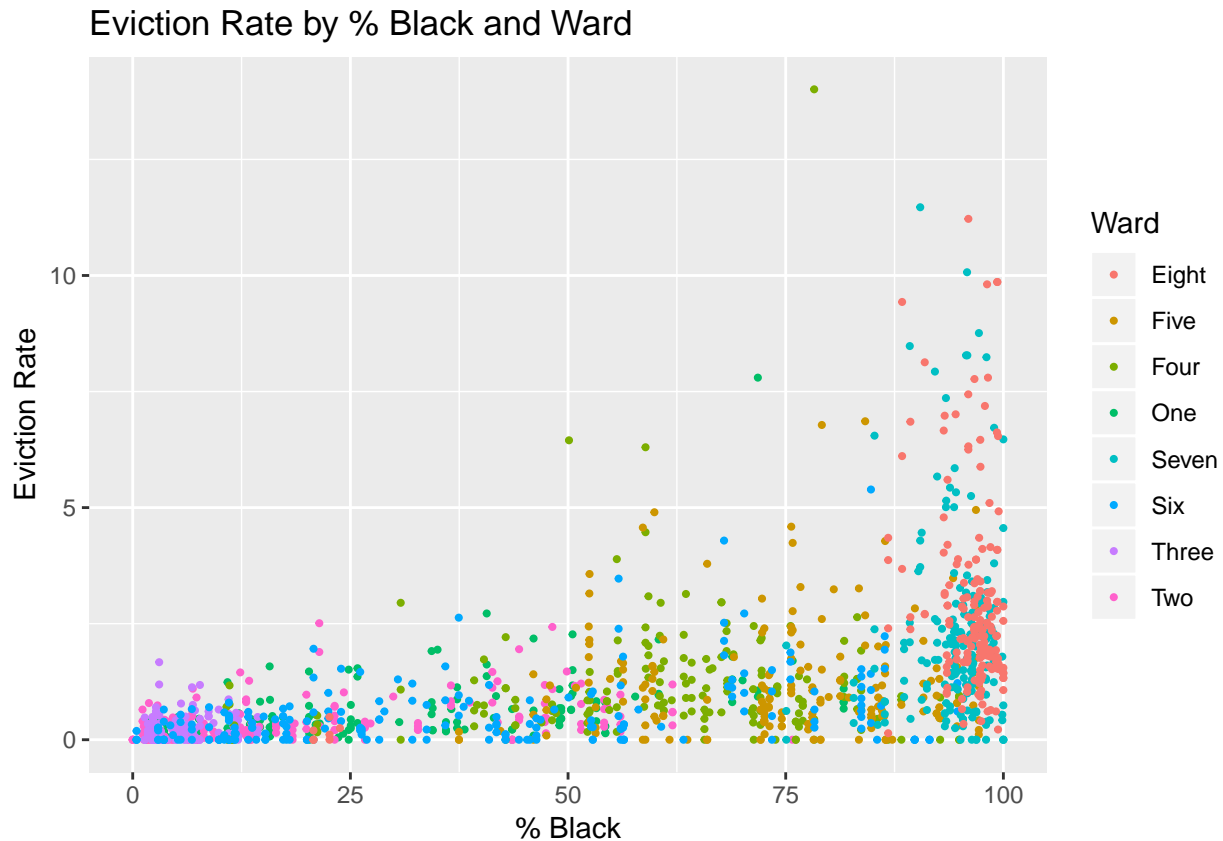


Figures 5 through 7 show the progression of the Eviction Crisis in DC over time. Clearly, the speed at which the eviction rate increase rose exponentially from 2012-2016 due to the significant number of evictions in Wards 7 and 8 in 2016. The mean eviction rate by tract in DC rose 1.9% from 2006 to 2016, however that increase is much higher in certain areas with areas in Wards 7 and 8 having eviction rates over 10% in 2016. This is in stark contrast to certain areas of Ward 3 and 2 having a nearly 0% eviction rate over these 10 years. Because of the simultaneous concentration of low-income black people in Wards 7 and 8 from 2000-2016, increasing eviction rates in this area, and previous research about risk factors for evictions, I hypothesize that place, race, and income have a causative relationship with evictions in DC.

Compounding Risk: Space, Class, and Race



This graph begins to show the way that risk compounds in DC. That is, even at similar poverty rates, census tracts with a greater black population are likely to have a higher eviction rate. This indicates that eviction cannot be attributed to class and income alone as mainstream discourse on evictions might suggest. One important difference between low-income non-black and black people suggested by these data is where they live. This suggests that neighborhoods that black and non-black people live in may be qualitatively different regarding quality of housing, type of landlord (corporate vs. small), and household type. Importantly, this disparity is not solely attributable to rent burden. While majority black tracts are slightly more likely to have a higher rent burden than minority black tracts, the relationship is not strong enough to render the relationship between race and eviction spurious. There is a less than 10% mean rent burden difference between 0% black tracts and >90% black tracts.



Likewise, this graph shows the stratification of evictions to black people living in mostly wards seven and eight. Importantly, census tracts with exceptionally high black populations outside of Wards 7 and 8 are significantly less likely to have high eviction rates than tracts with similar demographics in other wards. For example, there are many tracts that are more than 80% black in Wards 4, 5, and 6 shown above that maintain eviction rates under 3% where tracts in Wards 7 and 8 with similar black populations have eviction rates from 3% to over 10%. This confirms the prevalence of neighborhood as a significant risk factor for eviction.

Testing the hypothesis that income, race, and place had a causative relationship with eviction risk, I performed four regression tests between eviction rate, percent black, ward, and one multiple regression with all three variables. The regression between eviction rate and percent black yielded $r^2 = .2702$, and is statically significant at $p < .05$. This indicates that concentration of black population alone accounts for 27% of the variation in eviction rate. The regression between eviction rate and poverty rate yielded $r^2 = .2786$, and is statically significant at $p < .05$. This indicates that concentration of poverty alone accounts for 27.9% of the variation in eviction rate. Comparing these two is significant because poverty is only a slightly (less than 1 percentage point) better predictor of eviction than race despite the fact that income and the ability to pay rent are posited as the reason for eviction. Ward was similarly effective in predicting eviction rate. The regression for ward and eviction rate yielded $r^2 = .2971$, and is statically significant at $p < .05$. This indicates that ward alone accounts for 29.71% of the variation in eviction rate, even greater than the other two models. Finally, the multiple regression between eviction rate, poverty rate, percent black, and ward yielded $r^2 = .3944$, and is statically significant at $p < .05$. This indicates that income, race,

and place account for 39.4% of the variation in eviction rate. This is incredibly important when considering that none of these variables directly expresses anything about housing type, housing cost, or rent burden. That is, structural risk factors including race, neighborhood, and income account for nearly 40% of variation of eviction rate in DC.

Conclusion

The validity and confidence of these results are limited by certain factors. First, the conflation of all-non black people in the hypothesis testing might distort the reality of eviction for non-black people of color in DC. Further, Eviction Lab notes that their data is incomplete and underrepresentative of evictions data in DC. However, this could just mean that the relationships I analyzed between evictions, race, space, and class are even stronger than my statistical testing indicated. Further, the analysis only included data within the limits of DC even though demographic analysis clearly indicates that many black and low-income residents have moved out of DC, many to the suburbs in Maryland and Virginia in the last two decades. Analysis of eviction among these once displaced populations might yield even greater insight into these relationships in DC and further research should focus on the greater DC-Maryland-Virginia area.

Noting these limitations, this research revealed statistically significant relationships between neighborhood, income, race, and eviction rate. This implies that there are structural flaws that predispose low-income black people in certain areas of DC—Wards 7 and 8 in particular—to eviction and thus cyclical economic vulnerability and poverty. Future research and policymaking needs to focus on tenant literacy of rights, access to resources like the Office of the Tenant Advocate, and what specific configurations of low-income, black families in Wards 7 and 8 precipitate significant vulnerability. This research provides an important first step to cataloging the status and causes of the eviction crisis in DC. Future research should also focus specifically on displacement specifically as the result of gentrification and disparities between landlord and renters’ reported causes of eviction.

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