Overview of the *Milwaukee Eviction Court Study*

Principal Investigator: Matthew Desmond, *Harvard University*

I. Description of the *Milwaukee Eviction Court Study*

The *Milwaukee Eviction Court Study* (MECS) is an in-person survey of tenants appearing in Milwaukee County Small Claims Court for an eviction hearing every weekday between January 17 and February 26, 2011 (with the exception of January 31). During this six-week period, 1,328 eviction cases took place. In 378 cases, tenants appeared in court; of those, 251 were interviewed, resulting in a response rate of 66.4%.

Of the 127 households appearing in court that were not interviewed, 21 refused to participate in the study. The remaining 106 were taken to other rooms and did not return to the main courtroom, the location of the study. Ineligible cases included households for which tenants did not appear in eviction court (n = 940) as well as nonresidential evictions (n = 10).

Each day of the study, interviewers received a court docket listing the day's eviction cases. All tenants appearing in eviction court whose name appeared on the Summons and Complaint were eligible to participate. As small claims court got underway, two administrators called out cases, asking parties present to come to the front of the room to be counted. As they did, interviewers identified all potential respondents: tenants who appeared in eviction court that day.

Once tenants checked in and sat back down, they were approach by an interviewer, who told them about the study and handed them an information card. So as not to interfere with the business of the court—including deals between landlords and tenants that occur in the waiting area prior to the hearing—tenants were interviewed after their case was heard in front of a commissioner. On most days, two interviewers and a Spanish translator were present at the courthouse, taking attendance, keeping track of potential participants, and conducting interviews. The average interview lasted five (5) minutes.

Respondents who completed the survey were offered five dollars ($5) as a token of appreciation. Everyone who began a survey finished it, resulting in no partial completes.

Tenants were asked about their current residence (e.g., rent, number of bedrooms); the outcome of their hearing (e.g., evicted, case dismissed); and to provide demographic information. Whenever possible, interviewers scanned with a portable scanner each tenant's Summons and Complaint or copied its contents directly onto the questionnaire (n = 105). Doing so provided high-quality data about the reasons for eviction, these reasons being listed clearly on the document. If tenants did not have their Summons and Complaint, or if they preferred interviewers not look at it, they were asked to provide the reasons they were called to eviction court (n = 146).

Additionally, the survey collected a roster of all adults and children in each household. Tenants were asked to provide the ages of children as well as the race, age, and sex of adults who lived with them. They also were asked about their relationship to each adult as well as if the adult's name also appeared on the eviction notice.

II. Analyses of the MECS Data

Two published studies have draw on the MECS dataset.

Desmond, Matthew, "Eviction and the Reproduction of Urban Poverty," ***American Journal of Sociology*** **118 (2012): 88-133.**

> Abstract. *Combining statistical and ethnographic analyses, this article explores the prevalence and ramifications of eviction in the lives of the urban poor. A quantitative analysis of administrative and survey data finds that eviction is commonplace in inner-city black neighborhoods and that women from those neighborhoods are evicted at significantly higher rates than men. A qualitative analysis of ethnographic data based on fieldwork among evicted tenants and their landlords reveals multiple mechanisms propelling this discrepancy. 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.*

Desmond, Matthew, Weihua An, Richelle Winkler, and, Thomas Ferriss, "Evicting Children," ***Social Forces*** **(2013) 92: 303-27.**

> Abstract. *This study identifies children as a risk factor for eviction. An analysis of aggregate data shows that neighborhoods with a high percentage of children experience increased evictions. An analysis of individual data based on an original survey shows that among tenants who appear in eviction court, those with children are significantly more likely to receive an eviction judgment. These findings indicate that policymakers interested in monitoring and reducing discrimination should focus not only on the front end of the housing process—the freedom to obtain housing anywhere—but also on the back end: the freedom to maintain housing anywhere.*

III. Funding

This research was supported by the Harvard Society of Fellows and Harvard University, through the William F. Milton Fund.

IV. Contact Information

For more information about the *Milwaukee Eviction Court Study* (MECS), please contact:

Matthew Desmond, Principal Investigator, Department of Sociology and Committee on Social Studies, Harvard University, mdesmond@fas.harvard.edu.

Kerryann DiLoreto, Senior Project Director, University of Wisconsin Survey Center, kdiloret@ssc.wisc.edu.

John Stevenson, Associate Director, University of Wisconsin Survey Center, stevenso@ssc.wisc.edu.