

How does your address affect your chances of being evicted?

Authors:

David A. Hoffman and Anton Strezhnev

Associate Editors:

Mary Bates and Alexandra Appleton

Abstract

The idea of losing your home is scary. If a renter struggles to pay their landlord, the landlord may start the legal process of eviction. The renter has the opportunity to present their case in court, but they typically must show up in person and on time. And if they don't? In some places, the landlord will receive a default judgment. This allows them to move forward with the eviction.

We wondered about renters traveling to the courthouse using public transportation. Does their travel time affect

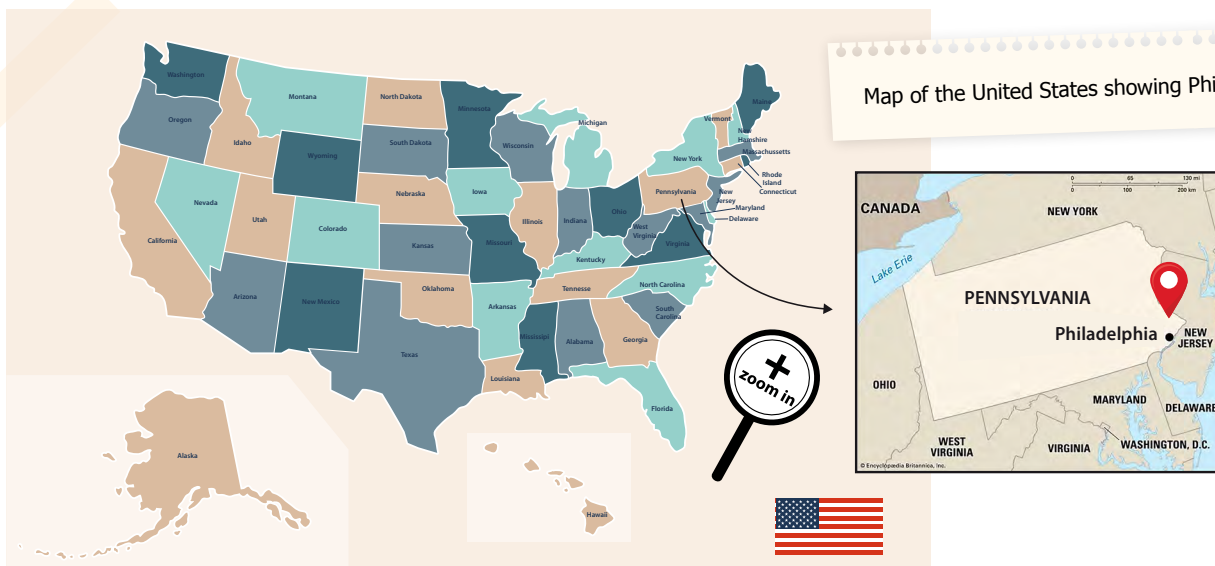
their probability of receiving a default judgment? We studied 200,000 eviction cases across fifteen years in Philadelphia, PA. We found that renters with longer travel times to the courthouse are more likely to receive a default judgment in favor of their landlord. But this effect was not present during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because renters could attend their court hearing virtually, via video call. Our findings show that the location and accessibility of a courthouse can affect the outcomes of individual cases.

Introduction

Evictions happen when a landlord forces people to move from the property they are renting. Most evictions occur when renters cannot or do not pay their rent. In recent years, the cost of rent – along with food and other necessities –

has increased. This has made it more difficult for people to afford to pay their monthly housing bills.

When a person fails to pay rent or otherwise breaks the terms of their **lease**, the landlord may file an eviction notice



with the court. Then a date is set for the landlord and renter to appear in court and present their cases. If the renter is not present in court on time, the result in many places is a **default judgment** in favor of the landlord. A default judgment means that the landlord automatically wins the case and the renter can no longer dispute what the landlord has said. Many cases in housing court result in default judgments, which then lead to evictions.

Methods

We studied approximately 200,000 eviction cases in Philadelphia, PA, from 2005 to 2021. Out of these, nearly 40% of renters facing eviction received a default judgment when they did not appear in court. Then they were ordered to leave their residences.

We used Google Maps to estimate how long it would take each renter to travel from home to the courthouse via public transportation. We also looked at public records to determine whether each case ended in a default judgment.

We had to consider other factors that might impact the relationship between travel time and default judgments. These **confounders** included **demographic** characteristics of the landlords and renters. We also considered the socioeconomic characteristics of different neighborhoods.

We wanted to investigate the role of transportation to court in default judgments. Many renters depend on public transportation, such as buses and subway trains, to get around. We wondered if the time it takes to travel to the courthouse impacts the likelihood of a default judgment against them.

We developed a **statistical model** to estimate the effect of a change in travel time. It accounted for the potential confounders. Then we looked at how well our data from Philadelphia fit the model.

Finally, we studied default judgments in two different **negative control** samples. These were where we thought commuting time would not affect default judgments. One negative control sample was eviction cases after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. These happened via video calls. Another was in part of the court system that considered the cases of tenants in public housing. In these cases, rules governing default judgments were more friendly to tenants.

What happens to the probability of a default judgment as renters' travel time to the courthouse increases?

Results

We found that longer travel time to the courthouse increased the likelihood of a default judgment (Fig. 1).

Every 10 minutes of extra travel time increased the probability that the renter would be late and receive a default judgment by about 1.4 percent.

As we expected, travel time was not an issue during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many cases happened via video calls. Nor was it an issue for public housing tenants. This reassured us that we had not forgotten an important confounder that would have had an effect on our results.

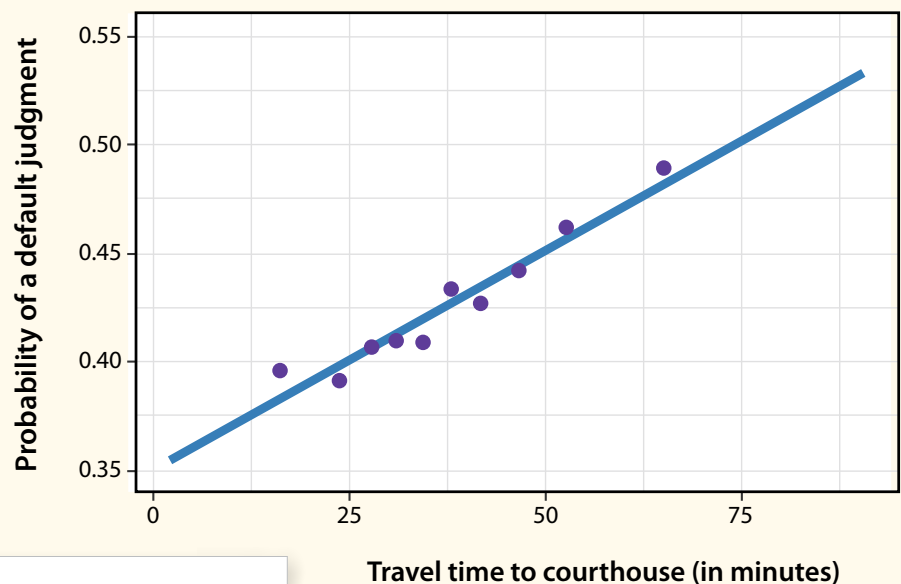


Figure 1: The relationship between travel time to the courthouse and the probability of a default judgment in favor of the landlord. The points represent the averages from approximately 200,000 eviction cases.

Discussion

Our findings show that transportation has a big effect on individual eviction cases in Philadelphia. But we believe the effect may be even broader. We carried out further research in Houston, Texas and found similar results. Future studies should therefore investigate the issue of travel time in other cities. They could also look at other types of legal cases.

There are steps we can take so that justice is accessible to everyone, no matter how far they live from the courthouse. Courts could allow more flexible scheduling of cases. Remote hearings via video call could be an option as an alternative to in-person hearings.

Reducing the number of evictions should be a goal for policymakers. The current eviction crisis in the U.S. hurts more than just the people losing their homes. The lack of affordable housing strains the nation's health care system, courts, schools, and local governments. Studying the causes and consequences of evictions will give us tools to better understand and fight the eviction crisis.

Conclusion

In the U.S., the goal is to have equal justice for all. But there are many factors that may make it more difficult for some people to access justice. Transportation time via public transport may be one of these challenges. Find out where your nearest courthouse is and work out how long it would take you to travel there via public transit. Can you think of

any other reasons why some people may have a harder time getting to court or receiving a favorable judgment? How could policymakers adjust the system to make it more fair and equal?

Glossary of Key Terms

Confounder – a factor that can affect the relationship between the variables being examined.

Default judgment – in eviction cases, a judgment in favor of the landlord when the renter fails to appear in court. Even if a renter is late to their court appointment, the judge may rule for a default judgment, which often leads to eviction.

Demographics – specific characteristics within a population, such as age, race, sex, income, and education level. The researchers included the demographics associated with different neighborhoods in their analyses.

Eviction – when a renter is forced to move out by a property owner. If a renter does not pay their rent, they may be subject to eviction.

Lease – a contract in which someone agrees to pay money in order to use a building, piece of land, vehicle, etc. for a period of time. We looked at agreements to rent homes.

Negative control – a sample where we know the causal effect is absent. Since cases could be determined via video call during the COVID-19 pandemic, we expected to not find an association between travel time and eviction.

Statistical model – a mathematical tool for learning from the data how to best predict the value of one factor, using the value of other factors.

Acknowledgement: This article's adaptation was supported by the GM Foundation.



Check your understanding

- 1** In the time period we studied in Philadelphia, what percentage of eviction cases ended in a default judgment in the landlord's favor?

- 2** Why was there an effect of travel time on default judgments before the COVID-19 pandemic but not during the pandemic?

- 3** How might the challenges faced by people in a city like Philadelphia differ from those faced by people living in more rural areas?

- 4** Form groups of 4-6 students. Within your group, split into two teams. Make an argument for or against giving renters the option to conduct their eviction hearings remotely via video calls. Present your argument in the form of a debate.

REFERENCES

David A. Hoffman and Anton Strezhnev (2023) *Longer trips to court cause evictions*. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2210467120>

National Low Income Housing Coalition: Evictions 101: The eviction process: how it works and what to know.

<https://nlihc.org/resource/evictions-101-eviction-process-how-it-works-and-what-know>

AP News: Eviction filings are 50% higher than they were pre-pandemic in some cities as rents rise.

<https://apnews.com/article/evictions-homelessness-affordable-housing-landlords-rental-assistance-dc4a03864011334538f82d2f404d2afb>