



February 2024

EVICTIONS

National Data Are Limited and Challenging to Collect

Accessible Version

Why GAO Did This Study

Estimates suggest that eviction affects millions of renter households annually. Evictions can have consequences for a family's mental health and housing stability, be expensive for the parties involved, and increase court caseloads. Comprehensive eviction data collection could have potential benefits for evaluating the effectiveness of policy interventions or remedies. However, relatively little comprehensive data exist on evictions in the U.S.

The Explanatory Statement for the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 includes a provision for GAO to review any barriers to collecting, digitizing, and standardizing data from the eviction process. This report (1) describes existing information about evictions and its limitations, (2) examines the capabilities and constraints of using court data and surveys on evictions, and (3) examines potential goals and options for federal data collection on evictions.

GAO conducted a literature review on efforts to collect and improve eviction data. GAO also reviewed data, documentation, and studies from federal and academic sources. GAO interviewed 22 stakeholders, including officials from a nongeneralizable sample of eight state and local jurisdictions (selected to obtain a mix of characteristics such as renter population and geographic dispersion), federal agency officials, researchers, and representatives from housing organizations.

View [GAO-24-106637](#). For more information, contact Jill Naamane at (202) 512-8678 or naamanej@gao.gov.

EVICCTIONS

National Data Are Limited and Challenging to Collect

What GAO Found

Limited information is available on the prevalence of evictions nationally. Local courts generally administer evictions, a process that generally begins with a property owner giving tenants a notice and then filing a lawsuit that may end with a judgement for or against the tenant. Tenants also may be forced to vacate a residence through an informal eviction, which occurs outside the legal process, such as when a property owner changes the locks. The most recent national eviction estimates are based primarily on two sources:

- **Eviction court records.** The Eviction Lab at Princeton University estimated 7.8 evictions were filed per 100 renting households nationally in 2018. This estimate was based on available court record data and statistical modeling.
- **American Housing Survey.** In 2017, the Census Bureau included survey questions designed to count forced moves due to evictions. Researchers estimated a national physical eviction rate of 5.3 percent based on the results of these questions. However, HUD officials and researchers noted the survey's small sample size may limit the accuracy of these estimates.

Court record and survey data, which capture different aspects of evictions, both present challenges for collecting eviction data. Court record data capture whether an eviction has been filed in court, but they do not capture physical or informal evictions. Court records may vary in content and their availability to the public. Eviction case data also may not include the outcome of a filing, making it difficult to determine if a filing resulted in an eviction judgement. Surveys may capture physical moves by tenants, but may undercount evictions if the questions are not designed properly or response rates are low.

Stakeholders GAO interviewed representing state and local jurisdictions, research organizations, and housing organizations identified two options to improve the collection of eviction data: (1) developing a national database of court record data or (2) strengthening national surveys. These stakeholders also identified several considerations for either option. GAO previously identified key practices applicable to such efforts. Examples of considerations and key practices include the following:

- **Goals.** Stakeholders stated that clearly defined goals could help plan collection efforts. Potential goals for using the data include helping target or assess federal efforts, such as those designed to reduce eviction and housing instability. The two options may have benefits and limitations in achieving different goals.
- **Data quality.** To ensure the reliability of evidence, stakeholders stressed the importance of establishing clear definitions and standards for terminology, given the differing definitions of eviction used across the country. Otherwise, both potential options run the risk of collecting incomplete or unreliable data, which could produce misleading results.
- **Resources.** Both options to improve collection of eviction data could involve substantial costs. Stakeholders noted that federal technical assistance and training for local court staff could help build capacity for data collection. Strengthening surveys could be the less costly option but would require additional resources to ensure they generated reliable results.

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Abbreviations

AHS American Housing Survey

Census	Census Bureau
CFPB	Consumer Financial Protection Bureau
HMDA	Home Mortgage Disclosure Act
HUD	Department of Housing and Urban Development

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February 28, 2024

Congressional Committees

Millions of households are estimated to be affected by evictions annually.¹ Evictions serve as the legal process for property owners to recover possession of leased property from tenants because of nonpayment of rent, lease agreement violations, or other reasons. Evictions can be expensive for the parties involved and burdensome for court systems. In particular, evictions can carry severely negative consequences for the physical and mental health, employment, and housing stability of families.

However, relatively little comprehensive data exist on evictions in the United States. Some policymakers and housing advocates have called for more and better data on the prevalence of evictions and the characteristics of the parties involved. They note that such information could benefit government and nonprofit programs that seek to assist tenants at risk of or experiencing an eviction. Such data also could help assess the extent to which tenants with different characteristics, such as race, experience eviction. Additionally, legislation previously has been introduced that would increase data collection related to evictions.²

The Explanatory Statement for the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 includes a provision for us to review any barriers that exist to collecting, digitizing, and standardizing data from the eviction process. This report (1) describes existing information about evictions and its limitations; (2) examines the capabilities and constraints of using court data and surveys to obtain national information on evictions; and (3) examines potential goals and options for federal data collection on evictions.

For the first objective, we conducted a literature search to identify existing estimates of the prevalence of evictions and the characteristics of tenants and property owners experiencing eviction. For the second objective, we

¹Ashley Gromis et al., "Estimating Eviction Prevalence Across the United States," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 119, no. 21 (May 2022); accessible at <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2116169119>.

²For example, the Eviction Crisis Act of 2019 (S. 3030) was introduced in the Senate on December 12, 2019 (116th Cong). The Eviction Crisis Act of 2021 (S. 2182) was introduced in the Senate on June 23, 2021 (117th Cong). Neither bill moved past introduction.

reviewed literature on existing eviction estimates to understand the limitations to their approaches. For the third objective, we reviewed key practices for evidence-based policymaking and applied them to potential options for expanded efforts to collect eviction data.

For all three objectives, we interviewed officials from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Census Bureau (Census), Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), Federal Housing Finance Agency, and Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland.³ In addition, we interviewed court officials from eight state and local jurisdictions. We selected the jurisdictions to include different mixes of characteristics (such as renter population and geography), and because they had publicly available eviction data and were recommended by stakeholders. We also interviewed officials from two public housing authorities (selected to represent two different sizes and geographic regions). Finally, we interviewed officials from seven research organizations and housing advocacy groups, including four organizations that analyzed local and national eviction data, about the feasibility of and challenge for collecting eviction data. Appendix I provides more information on our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from February 2023 to February 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

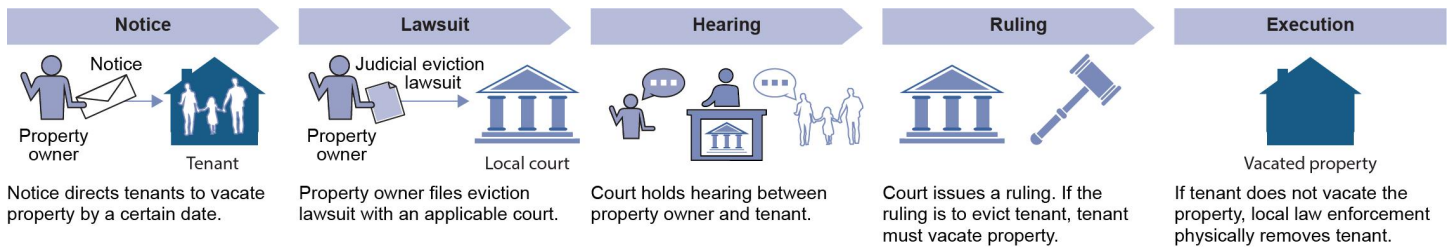
Evictions are primarily governed by state and local laws and administered by local courts and law enforcement.⁴ Partly because of this, no uniform definition of eviction exists among researchers. In general, an eviction is a legal process through which property owners remove tenants from their rental properties. According to HUD, the most common cause for

³See Hal Martin, "Making Sense of Eviction Trends during the Pandemic," *Economic Commentary*, EC-2022-12 (Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland: Aug. 23, 2022); <https://doi.org/10.26509/frbc-ec-202212>.

⁴GAO, *COVID-19 Housing Protections: Moratoriums Have Helped Limit Evictions, but Further Outreach Is Needed*, [GAO-21-370](#). (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 15, 2021).

evictions nationally is nonpayment of rent, although property owners may cite other factors such as lease violations or other reasons for initiating an eviction filing.⁵ Broadly, the legal eviction process follows a series of steps beginning with the property owner providing the tenant with a notice to vacate the property or reconcile the cause of the eviction notice, such as unpaid rent (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: General Process for Formally Evicting a Tenant from a Residential Property



Source: GAO analysis of information from the National Housing Law Project; GAO (icons). | GAO-24-106637

Accessible Text for Figure 1: General Process for Formally Evicting a Tenant from a Residential Property

Step	Step information
Notice	Notice directs tenants to vacate property by a certain date.
Lawsuit	Property owner files eviction lawsuit with an applicable court.
Hearing	Court holds hearing between property owner and tenant.
Ruling	Court issues a ruling. If the ruling is to evict tenant, tenant must vacate property.
Execution	If tenant does not vacate the property, local law enforcement physically removes tenant.

Source: GAO analysis of information from the National Housing Law Project; GAO (icons). | GAO-24-106637

Property owners also may pursue an informal eviction outside of the court system to evict or forcibly remove tenants, potentially unlawfully.⁶ For instance, property owners may illegally compel a tenant to move by

⁵Some jurisdictions conduct “no-fault” evictions, which are pursued outside of the civil court system for reasons other than nonpayment of rent or lease violations. See Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research, “Prevalence and Impact of Evictions,” *Evidence Matters*. (Washington, D.C.: Summer 2021).

⁶Some public housing authorities have the ability to evict public housing residents through an administrative action (without a court determination), in accordance with HUD regulations (if local law permits such an action). However, HUD staff stated that evictions from public housing are far more likely to use the standard court-ordered process instead of alternative administrative evictions, but also stated that comprehensive data on the latter does not exist.

changing entry-door locks or by shutting off utilities in potential violation of some state or local laws.⁷

In 2020, Congress directed HUD to study the feasibility of creating an evictions database and to examine strategies for collecting data on the characteristics of the parties involved in the eviction process. In October 2021, HUD released the *Report to Congress on the Feasibility of Creating a National Evictions Database*. The report noted that existing efforts to collect eviction data were limited by the availability and accuracy of court data, in addition to the disparate and often limited information in court records.

Some state and local court systems have attempted to make standardized caseload data available. The Court Statistics Project aggregates court statistics and collects the total number of cases, including evictions, for each state and U.S. territory, where available.⁸ The project established definition standards for data to be considered valid, but court definitions and data collection standards vary between states, and data submission to the project is not required. Additionally, some eviction case data are not publishable because they may not follow the project's definitions and states may not collect case data from each of their jurisdictions.

The Conference of State Court Administrators and the National Center for State Courts expanded on the Court Statistics Project and developed the National Open Court Data Standards. This project assists courts with data requests by standardizing definitions of variables associated with case data as well as technical standards for data formats and values. Researchers also have proposed ways to improve eviction data collection and access across jurisdictions.⁹

Various federal programs are designed to prevent eviction or assist evicted families. For example, HUD's Eviction Protection Grant Program provides tenants no-cost legal assistance to prevent or divert eviction.

⁷Legal Services Corporation, "Housing Insecurity in the United States and the Role of Legal Aid," *Issue Brief: Illegal Evictions* (Feb. 9, 2023).

⁸The Court Statistics Project is a joint project of the National Center for State Courts and the Conference of State Court Administrators.

⁹Yuliya Panfil, Sabiha Zainulbhai, and Tim Robustelli, "Why is Eviction Data so Bad? Recommendations for Improving the Local and National Landscape." (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 19, 2021), accessed February 15, 2023, <https://www.newamerica.org/future-land-housing/reports/why-is-eviction-data-bad/>.

The Department of the Treasury administers the Emergency Rental Assistance program, which has provided funds to tribal, state, territorial, and local governments to help low-income households affected by the COVID-19 pandemic to pay rent and utilities. In addition, Fair Housing Act and other federal, state, or local antidiscrimination laws prohibit evicting tenants because of their protected characteristics, such as race, religion, national origin, sex, familial status, and disability.

Information on the Prevalence of Evictions and Characteristics of Parties Involved Are Limited

Estimates on the Prevalence of Eviction Are Not Comprehensive

Some federal and private entities have sought to estimate the prevalence of evictions, at either a national or local level, but these estimates are not comprehensive. Available estimates that we reviewed are limited to providing either the number of eviction lawsuits filed and the number of households who received an eviction judgment, where available, or reported physical evictions (see sidebar).

Examples of Eviction Measures

Eviction filing rate measures the number of eviction cases filed in an area divided by the number of renter-occupied homes in that area. This measurement includes multiple filings against a single household. The data are based on court records created when a property owner files a lawsuit against the tenant.

Eviction judgment rate measures the number of renting households that receive an eviction judgment (a court order to leave the property) divided by the number of renter-occupied homes in that area. Not all court records contain information on whether an eviction case was dismissed or ruled in favor of the tenant or landlord.

Physical eviction rate measures the number of households that are forced to move due to a formal or an informal eviction divided by the number of renter-occupied homes in the area. Physical moves due to a formal eviction may occur after a property owner files for eviction. Informal physical evictions occur outside the court system and may include legal or extra-legal measures by the property owner. These eviction data are largely captured by surveys.

Source: Eviction Lab and GAO analysis. | GAO-24-106637

Eviction Lab

In 2018, Eviction Lab, a group of researchers at Princeton University, published a dataset of eviction filing estimates with nationwide coverage for 2000–2016. Eviction Lab later updated the data through 2018. The researchers collected eviction statistics from states in which data were available, purchased public records from a data analytics company that maintains court docket databases, and obtained county-level court eviction records where available. Eviction Lab standardized and validated the data to produce eviction filing rate estimates at the county level and, where available, eviction judgment rate estimates.

Eviction Lab previously had estimated eviction filing rates nationally and maintains estimated eviction filing rates for selected states and cities. Based on Eviction Lab's estimates, the national eviction filing rate was

approximately 7.8 percent in 2018, the most recent year with a national filing rate. Across the 10 states for which Eviction Lab tracks eviction filing data, Eviction Lab estimated the rate ranged from 3 to 13 percent for filings from December 2022 through November 2023.¹⁰

A lack of available court record data limits the comprehensiveness of Eviction Lab's estimates. For example, court record data on which the estimates are based did not consistently include information on the judgment in an eviction case and whether the tenant moved because of an eviction filing.¹¹ As a result, Eviction Lab cannot provide national estimates for the eviction judgment rate or the physical eviction rate. Court record data also do not provide information on the prevalence of informal evictions because they happen outside of the court system.

Eviction Lab's data also are limited due to incomplete and potentially unreliable court record data. Eviction Lab collected court data in some locations by requesting individual eviction case records that were publicly available. It also collected aggregated summary statistics of eviction filings and judgments from states and counties or purchased proprietary individual record data from LexisNexis Risk Solutions. However, due to the limited availability of eviction case record data, Eviction Lab was missing at least 1 year of court-issued data from 2,673 counties across 49 states. Eviction Lab validated the data by checking for inconsistencies and comparing the individual case records to aggregated summary statistics of eviction filings where available. Through this process, Eviction Lab excluded inconsistently collected, court-issued data. It instead relied on statistical modeling to count a significant portion of county-level eviction filings.¹²

¹⁰Eviction Lab compiles eviction filing data for 34 cities and for Connecticut, Delaware, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Wisconsin. For one of the 10 states, estimates are based on less than a full year of data as of January 2024.

¹¹The study based on the updated Eviction Lab data set (2000–2018 court records) did not provide an estimate for the national eviction judgment rate due to a lack of available data.

¹²Eviction Lab researchers determined they had reliable eviction filing counts from court-issued data for approximately 55.7 percent of their total county-year units. Eviction Lab did not have access to data for each year for every county. The rest were estimated using a model that considered available court records and proprietary data.

2017 American Housing Survey

The 2017 American Housing Survey (AHS) included questions designed to capture forced moves due to formal and informal evictions. Specifically, the questions asked whether a renting household's most recent move in the past 2 years was due to an eviction.¹³ The AHS is a biennial survey sponsored by HUD and administered by the Census Bureau that collects a range of housing information, including the size and composition of the U.S. housing inventory, physical condition of housing units, and characteristics of occupants.

Based on the survey's results, researchers estimated a national rate of forced moves to be 6.2 percent.¹⁴ Of this, the researchers estimated that the physical eviction rate was 5.3 percent, with about 4.5 percent from informal eviction and 0.8 percent from formal court-ordered eviction.¹⁵ However, studies published by HUD in 2021 reported that formal evictions appear to be underestimated in the 2017 AHS.¹⁶ According to a HUD official, for this reason, HUD has not made data from the 2017 AHS eviction module available for public use. In addition, another HUD official noted that the sample size of AHS may be too small to accurately capture the national prevalence of physical evictions.

Additionally, the accuracy of the 2017 AHS's informal evictions estimate is unclear because no other national estimates of informal evictions exist for comparison. One study compared the AHS's informal eviction

¹³ These eviction-related questions were not repeated in subsequent iterations of the survey.

¹⁴ Other types of forced moves not due to evictions are those due to fear of an eviction after a missed rent payment, foreclosure of the rental property, or condemnation of the building. See Ashley Gromis et al., "Estimating the Prevalence of Eviction in the United States: New Data from the 2017 American Housing Survey."

¹⁵ According to HUD, the 2017 AHS did not have a large enough sample size to reliably estimate the rate of evictions. See Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research, *Report to Congress on the Feasibility of Creating a National Evictions Database* (Washington, D.C.: October 2021).

¹⁶ Although the 2017 AHS is not directly comparable to Eviction Lab's data due to differences in how these data sets measure eviction, researchers noted that the difference between the AHS and Eviction Lab estimates for formal evictions is significant. See Gromis et al., "Estimating the Prevalence of Eviction in the United States: New Data from the 2017 American Housing Survey." See also Shawn Bucholtz, "Can the American Housing Survey Provide Reliable Estimates of the Prevalence of Eviction?" *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research*, 23, no. 2 (2021). HUD publishes *Cityscape* three times a year.

estimate for the New York City metropolitan area with another local survey that estimated eviction rates for New York City during the same period.¹⁷ According to this study, while the two surveys are not directly comparable, the local survey provides context for the accuracy of AHS's estimate.¹⁸ AHS and the local survey estimated similar rates of formal evictions for the New York City area—1.6 percent and 1.1 percent, respectively.

However, the two surveys differed in their estimates of informal evictions. AHS estimated the informal eviction rate to be 4 percent in New York City metropolitan area. In contrast, the local survey estimated that the informal eviction rate was approximately 0.5 percent in New York City.

In addition, in 2019 and 2023, AHS has included questions on housing insecurity. For example, the 2019 AHS asked renters if they have been threatened with eviction in the last 12 months and if they have received an eviction notice.¹⁹ However, these questions are not sufficiently comprehensive to estimate the prevalence of evictions because they do not ask whether the renters actually moved due to a formal eviction, only whether they have been threatened with eviction.

Other Federal Efforts Related to Eviction Data

As of November 2023, none of the federal agencies with which we spoke reported ongoing efforts or plans to collect data that measure the national prevalence of evictions or the characteristics of the parties involved. HUD does not collect eviction data or otherwise measure the prevalence of evictions, but it collects data on tenants who leave public housing, the Housing Choice Voucher program, and HUD-assisted multifamily

¹⁷The Poverty Tracker project asked its 2015 cohort, which consisted of over 4,000 adults in New York City, questions related to physical evictions and other moves during the 21-month and 33-month surveys. See Sophie Collyer and Lily Bushman-Copp, *Forced Moves and Eviction in New York City* (New York City, N.Y.: 2019)

¹⁸According to Gromis et al. (2021), the Poverty Tracker and the 2017 AHS are not directly comparable because of a few key differences. In addition to the differences in geographic scope, the Poverty Tracker project was conducted over a longer period and counted all evictions occurring in the previous 12 months. AHS asked only whether an eviction caused the most recent move in the past 2 years.

¹⁹The 2017 AHS asked respondents questions to measure forced displacement among renter households, but the 2023 AHS included questions to measure the respondents' housing stability and affordability.

housing.²⁰ To collect more specific information for public housing and Housing Choice Voucher participants, HUD has been updating its information systems to capture data on tenants' reasons for leaving, according to HUD officials.²¹ The update includes reasons such as nonpayment of rent and other circumstances.

In 2022, HUD awarded funding for a 2-year grant to New York University and the Urban Institute to examine evictions among households receiving tenant-based assistance through the Housing Choice Voucher program. The study is to explore the feasibility of linking eviction records with HUD's Housing Choice Voucher administrative data. According to HUD officials, research was ongoing as of November 2023 and initial results are expected in fall 2024.

In addition, Census' Household Pulse Survey includes questions about respondents' perceived likelihood of eviction, and since October 2023 has included questions related to forced moves, including threatened evictions.²² This survey was designed to collect data to measure household experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Legal Services Corporation

The Legal Services Corporation developed an Eviction Tracker web application that collects and standardizes eviction filing data.²³ However, it is limited to eviction filings and those jurisdictions that make data publicly

²⁰Specifically, HUD collects information on tenants through the following information systems: Public and Indian Housing Information Center, Tenant Rental Assistance Certification System, and Enterprise Income Verification.

²¹Form HUD-50058 collects and validates tenant data on the families who participate in the Public Housing or Section 8 rental subsidy programs.

²²The Household Pulse Survey, an experimental data product, is a rapid response survey that was designed to measure how the COVID-19 pandemic affected households. It has evolved to include content on other emergent social and economic issues facing households. Census conducts the survey in partnership with 18 other federal entities, including HUD.

²³Legal Services Corporation is a nonprofit independent agency created by Congress that receives the majority of its annual funding from the House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies. It partnered with the Center for Public Health Law Research at Temple University to create the Eviction Laws Database.

available or to researchers.²⁴ As of December 2023, the Legal Services Corporation had at least one year of eviction filing data from 2016 through September 2023 for all counties in 18 states, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. It also had data for at least one county in an additional 11 states.²⁵ For the 1,310 counties and municipalities with eviction filing data, the eviction filing rate ranged from zero percent to 40.33 percent in October 2022–September 2023.

The Legal Services Corporation also created an Eviction Laws Database to identify variation in eviction laws and procedures and the potential impacts on eviction outcomes.

Regional Studies

Some academic or nonprofit entities have created local data sets and estimates, typically based on one-time surveys or court record eviction data. However, these local survey estimates are outdated, and data exist only for some localities. Additionally, local court data often do not include the judgment in the case, whether the tenants moved out, or the demographics of the parties involved.

In at least two metropolitan areas, one-time surveys estimated the prevalence of physical evictions. The Milwaukee Area Renters Study, conducted from 2009 to 2011, surveyed more than 1,000 households. It estimated the area’s physical eviction rate over a 2-year period to be approximately 9.4 percent (formal evictions at 3.1 percent and informal evictions at 6.2 percent).²⁶ In 2017 and 2018, Columbia University and

²⁴According to the Legal Services Corporation, the Eviction Tracker provides access to multiyear trend data on eviction filings for over 1,250 counties and municipalities in 30 states and territories.

²⁵The Legal Services Corporation compiles eviction filing data from Alaska, Arkansas, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Minnesota, Missouri, New Hampshire, New York, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Utah, Vermont, Virgin Islands, Virginia, and Wisconsin. It also compiles eviction filing data for at least one county in Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Mississippi, North Dakota, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas.

²⁶The formal and informal eviction rates do not equal the physical eviction rate due to rounding. The Milwaukee Area Renter Survey estimated that approximately 13 percent of renters experienced at least one forced move due to an eviction (informal or formal), property owner foreclosure, or building condemnation from 2009 through 2011. Approximately 3 percent of renters experienced forced moves due to property owner foreclosures and approximately 0.7 percent due to building condemnations. See Matthew Desmond and Tracy Shollenberger, “Forced Displacement from Rental Housing: Prevalence and Neighborhood Consequences,” *Demography*, 52, no. 5 (Oct. 1, 2015).

Robin Hood's Poverty Tracker project surveyed approximately 4,000 households. The project estimated New York City's physical eviction rate to be approximately 1.7 percent.

These two estimates provide an example of the potential variation that likely exists in physical eviction rates across the country. However, because eviction rate estimates are unavailable for many localities, the range of physical eviction rates across the country is unknown. As a result, it is unclear which areas of the country have higher physical eviction rates.

Studies Found that Certain Demographic Groups Are More Likely to Experience Eviction

Characteristics of People Experiencing Eviction

Census partnered with Eviction Lab to research the characteristics of parties involved in evictions. Census and Eviction Lab researchers successfully linked 38 million court record files (for 2007-2016) to administrative data, primarily from the American Community Survey.²⁷ An October 2023 study based on this work provided demographic and other information on tenants who faced evictions during that time period.²⁸

The study found that of the matched records, Blacks or African Americans accounted for 51.1 percent of individuals affected by eviction filings and 43.4 percent of those who received an eviction judgment. The study also found that adult renters with at least one child in their home were about twice as likely (10.4 percent) to receive at least one eviction filing as adults without a child (5 percent).²⁹

²⁷Census officials stated that while the success rate for linking data sets with name and date of birth usually is about 97 percent, the success rate for matching eviction case court records to other administrative data was less than 70 percent. The report authored by Eviction Lab and Census researchers had a match rate of 65 percent. Court record data often lack identifiable information other than name and address.

²⁸Nick Graetz et al., "A Comprehensive Demographic Profile of the US Evicted Population," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, vol. 120, no. 41 (2023); <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2116169119>.

²⁹This difference was statistically significant in the study. See Nick Graetz et al., "A Comprehensive Demographic Profile of the US Evicted Population."

Additionally, studies of evictions in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and King County, Washington, found that eviction filing rates were higher in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods where real estate values are low and households may use a substantial part of their income to pay rent.³⁰ The national study conducted by Eviction Lab and Census researchers and studies of evictions in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Cleveland, Ohio, also found that in those areas households with children headed by Black or African American women experienced evictions at higher rates than other types of households.³¹ Another study that examined evictions in Washington, D.C. found that a disproportionate number of evictions happened in wards with larger Black or African American populations.³²

Characteristics of Property Owners Initiating Eviction

Little is known on a national level about the demographics or characteristics of property owners who initiate evictions. Local studies in Atlanta, Georgia; Washington, D.C.; and Las Vegas, Nevada suggested that larger property owners may be more likely to file for eviction than

³⁰The study of Philadelphia evictions used data from 2009–2017, and the study of King County evictions used data from 2013. Gregory Preston and Vincent J. Reina, “Sheltered from Eviction? A Framework for Understanding the Relationship Between Subsidized Housing Programs and Eviction,” *Housing Policy Debate*, vol. 31, no. 3–5 (2021); <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511482.2021.1879202>. Also see Timothy A. Thomas, “Forced Out: Race, Market, and Neighborhood Dynamics of Evictions,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington 2017); <http://hdl.handle.net/1773/40705>.

³¹Other households could include those headed by men or women who identify as non-Hispanic White, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and men who identified as Black or African American. The study of Milwaukee evictions used data from 2003–2007, and the study of evictions in Cleveland used data from 2013–2016. Nick Graetz et al., “A Comprehensive Demographic Profile of the U.S. Evicted Population”; Matthew Desmond, “Eviction and the Reproduction of Urban Poverty,” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 118, no. 1 (2012); and Francisca Garc a-Cobi n Richter et al., “An Integrated Data System Lens into Evictions and Their Effects,” *Housing Policy Debate*, vol. 31, no. 3–5 (2021); <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511482.2021.1879201>.

³²This study used eviction data from 2014–2018. Brian J. McCabe and Eva Rosen, “Eviction in Washington, D.C.: Racial and Geographic Disparities in Housing Instability” (Washington, D.C.: Fall 2020); <https://georgetown.app.box.com/s/8cq4p8ap4nq5xm75b5mct0nz5002z3ap>.

smaller owners of rental properties.³³ Another study that interviewed over 70 property owners and managers found that small-scale property owners and managers (less than 20 units) preferred to work with tenants who were behind on rent payments through payment plans and exchanging services for back rent.³⁴ For example, a tenant might conduct maintenance on the property in lieu of paying some back rent.

Additionally, studies suggest that property owners, especially larger and corporate property owners, may file for eviction at higher rates as a tool to collect rent.³⁵ Certain property owners may file a disproportionate number of eviction filings in a given locality, according to studies on property owners who filed evictions in Washington, D.C.; Cleveland, Ohio; Fayetteville, North Carolina; Tucson, Arizona; and Richmond, Virginia. These properties may disproportionately drive overall eviction filing levels in the area.³⁶

³³The study of evictions in Atlanta used 2015 data, and the study of evictions in Las Vegas used 2008-2019 data. Elora Lee Raymond et al., "From Foreclosure to Eviction: Housing Insecurity in Corporate-Owned Single-Family Rentals," *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2018); and Brian J. McCabe and Eva Rosen, "Eviction in Washington, D.C. Also see Eric Seymour and Joshua Akers, "Our Customer Is America: Housing Insecurity and Eviction in Las Vegas, Nevada's Postcrisis Rental Market," *Housing Policy Debate*, vol. 31, no. 3-5 (2021).

³⁴John Balzarini and Melody L. Boyd, "Working with Them: Small-Scale Landlord Strategies for Avoiding Evictions," *Housing Policy Debate*, vol. 31, no. 3-5 (2021); <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511482.2020.1800779>.

³⁵Dan Immergluck et al., "Evictions, Large Owners, and Serial Filings: Findings from Atlanta," *Housing Studies* vol. 35, no. 5 (2020); <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2019.1639635>. Also see Henry Gomory et al., "The Racially Disparate Influence of Filing Fees on Eviction Rates," *Housing Policy Debate*, vol. 33, no. 6 (2023); <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511482.2023.2212662>. Also see Lillian Leung, Peter Hepburn, and Matthew Desmond, "Serial Eviction Filing: Civil Courts, Property Management, and the Threat of Displacement," *Social Forces*, vol. 100, no. 1 (2021); <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soaa089>.

³⁶The study of evictions in Cleveland, Fayetteville, and Tucson used data from 2003-2016, and the study of Richmond evictions used data from 2015-2018. Brian J. McCabe and Eva Rosen, "Eviction in Washington, D.C."; Devin Q. Rutan and Matthew Desmond, "The Concentrated Geography of Eviction," *The Annals of the American Academy*, vol. 693, no. 1 (2021); <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716221991458>. Also see Benjamin F. Teresa and Kathryn L. Howell, "Eviction and Segmented Housing Markets in Richmond, Virginia," *Housing Policy Debate* vol. 31, no. 3-5 (2021); <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511482.2020.1839937>.

Court Records and Surveys Collect Different Eviction Information and Have Constraints as Sources for National Data

Court records and surveys each capture different aspects of evictions, and they present different limitations and challenges for collecting eviction data nationally. Data from courts potentially can be challenging to collect and aggregate at a national level, in part because of the local nature of evictions. Surveys may not accurately estimate the prevalence of evictions because responses to survey questions may be missing or inaccurate, the survey design may not cover all evictions, or response rates may be low for populations that are more likely to face evictions.

Court Records and Surveys Differ in the Types of Evictions Captured, Measures Used, and Information Obtained

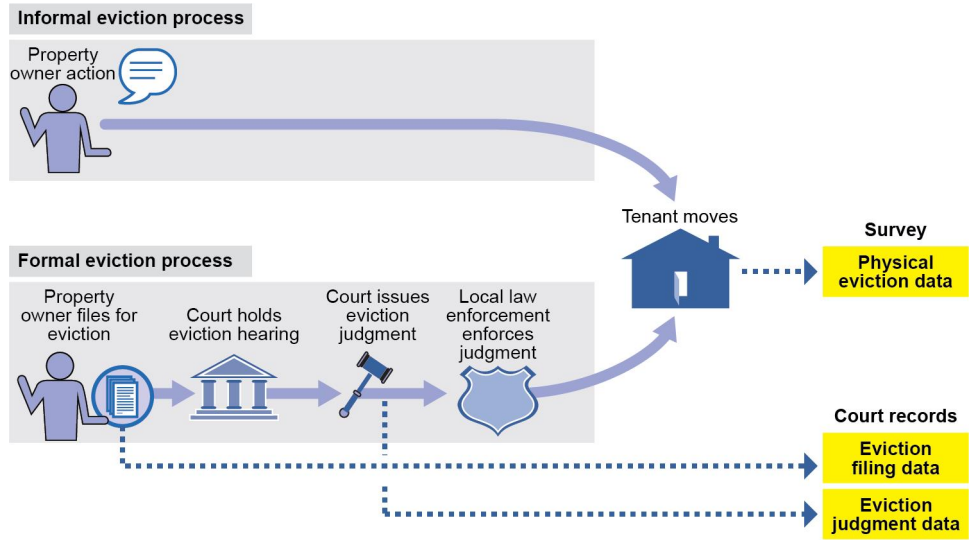
Court records and surveys differ in the types of evictions they capture, the measures of eviction they use, and their ability to capture demographic information.

Type of eviction. Court records capture only formal evictions because informal evictions take place outside the court system. Surveys can capture both informal and formal evictions and can provide some data and insight on the proportions of evictions that occur through the informal eviction processes.

Measures used. Court records can indicate whether an eviction has been filed in court and may indicate whether a household receives a judgment to leave the premises (see fig. 2). However, eviction filing and eviction judgment metrics cannot be used to estimate the prevalence of physical evictions because the eviction process may be diverted or stopped at any point. For example, after a landlord has filed for eviction, the tenant may leave the premises before an eviction hearing or judgment is issued. Alternatively, the property owner may drop the eviction filing if the tenant and property owner reach an agreement for paying any rent owed. Eviction filing data would not differentiate between these two outcomes.

Similarly, an eviction judgment may not result in a tenant's physical eviction. Even after an eviction judgment, a property owner may allow the tenant to remain on the premises if certain conditions are met.

Figure 2: Eviction Data That Can Be Collected by Court Records and Surveys During Informal and Formal Eviction Processes



Source: GAO analysis and icons. | GAO-24-106637

Accessible Text for Figure 2: Eviction Data That Can Be Collected by Court Records and Surveys During Informal and Formal Eviction Processes

Category	Step	Eviction information
Informal eviction process	Property owner action	
Informal eviction process	Tenant moves	Survey (physical eviction data)
Formal eviction process	Property owner files for eviction	Court records (eviction filing data)
Formal eviction process	Court holds eviction hearing	
Formal eviction process	Court issues eviction judgement	Court records (eviction judgment data)
Formal eviction process	Local law enforcement enforces judgement	
Formal eviction process	Tenant moves	Survey (physical eviction data)

Source: GAO analysis and icons. | GAO-24-106637

Note: The formal eviction process may be diverted or stopped at any point due to an agreement between the tenant and property owner or if the tenant moves before the enforcement of an eviction judgment.

Surveys can measure the prevalence of physical evictions—whether a tenant has been forced to move from the residence. However, surveys do not always provide information on the prevalence of households who

were filed against for eviction, the number of eviction filings a household may have received, or eviction judgments.

Parties' characteristics. Courts generally do not collect information on the demographics and other characteristics of tenants (such as income, race, and family size) and the other parties involved in evictions. In contrast, surveys can be used for collecting this information. Surveys may collect such information directly from tenants to estimate demographic information and other characteristics of tenants who experience evictions (see table 1).

Table 1: Capabilities and Constraints of Court Records and Surveys for Collecting Data on Evictions

	Court records	Tenant surveys
Types of evictions captured	Formal evictions only.	Both formal and informal evictions.
Eviction measures	Eviction filings and eviction judgments (a court order to leave the premises), where available.	Physical evictions.
Ability to capture information about the parties involved	Do not typically capture demographic information about tenants or property owners.	Can directly capture tenants' demographic and other information. Do not capture information on property owners.
Data limitations and challenges	Courts vary in the data they collect and make accessible, and their processes.	May undercount the prevalence of evictions because of question design, low response rate, and whether the questions are asked of individuals or households.

Source: GAO. | GAO-24-106637

Collecting, Accessing, and Aggregating Eviction Data from Court Records Is Challenging

Court record eviction data are challenging to collect, access, and aggregate at a national level because of the local nature of evictions. For example, some courts do not digitize any eviction data and instead store the data in paper files, and those that do may have data that are not publicly accessible. Aggregating eviction data nationally also is challenging due to differences in eviction processes and the number of data sources for eviction court records.

Data Collection Challenges

Court officials in eight jurisdictions we interviewed discussed collecting different elements of eviction data. None of the eight jurisdictions collected data on demographics or other characteristics of tenants or property owners involved in evictions. Officials from five of the eight jurisdictions cited staffing constraints, with one noting their clerks lacked capacity to collect additional information because of their high caseloads. In addition, four jurisdictions discussed lack of adequate technology to capture more detailed information about tenants or cases.³⁷ Moreover, HUD officials and a court expert said most tenants do not appear in court or provide any written response to an eviction filing, which could create challenges in capturing demographic information.

³⁷In some jurisdictions, court clerks will manually enter a case's information into the case management system.

Additionally, officials from one jurisdiction stated there was little benefit to them in collecting additional eviction data. Some officials said the purpose of the court was to process cases, and collecting additional eviction data is not really a concern. For example, one court official noted the demographics of parties involved do not affect the court's procedures. Demographic questions on court forms are usually optional, according to HUD.

In addition, only some of the eight courts we contacted could search or filter data on the outcomes of eviction cases. Outcomes recorded in eviction cases may include what the recorded judgment was, whether law enforcement enforced an eviction judgment, and whether a tenant experienced a physical eviction. Eviction Lab reported that about 32 percent of the 2000–2018 proprietary data they collected lacked information on judgments.

Two court officials also reported that they did not collect additional information on the outcomes of tenants. One official explained that the court's role ends once an eviction judgment is issued. Law enforcement agencies, rather than the courts, execute the judgment. Therefore, many courts do not collect information such as whether the judgment has been enforced. Further, some courts may have case management systems that do not record whether an eviction judgment was enforced or court officials might not consistently collect this data.

Data Access Challenges

For courts that maintain some eviction data, the data may not be accessible due to how the court stores records, court policy, or state and local law. Some courts may maintain eviction information, but this information may not be readily accessible. One court official noted that the state's case management system cannot be queried to easily count the number of eviction judgments.

The accessibility of eviction data from court records also varies due to differences in state laws and court policy:

- **Free access to summary statistics or individual court records.** According to the Legal Services Corporation, 35 states and territories provide annual eviction summary statistics on a website or in a public report. The Legal Services Corporation also found that 25 states and the District of Columbia have websites with free, public access to civil records, including eviction case information. For example, the New

York State Court website has a dashboard that provides the number of eviction filings and warrants across the state. This dashboard is publicly accessible, and the data can be viewed at no charge. One court said that they provide researchers with anonymized individual eviction court records.

However, court reporting of eviction summary statistics may vary within states. For example, Eviction Lab found that within two states, not all courts consistently reported eviction case counts from 2000 through 2018. As a result, these states' summary statistics may have undercounted eviction cases.

- **Paid access to individual court records for a fee.** The Legal Services Corporation identified 10 states that provide access to individual court records at a cost. For example, one state court system stated that they charge \$125 per hour for compiling court data. The court estimated that most requests take approximately from 1 to 2 hours.
- **Inaccessible eviction records.** The Legal Services Corporation identified nine states that have laws regulating access to eviction records as of 2021, and they either seal or expunge records under certain conditions.³⁸ For example, Minnesota courts, upon motion by the tenant, will remove eviction case records from public access and may expunge eviction records. The sealing or expungement of eviction records may result in the undercounting or incorrect estimate of evictions.

Data Aggregation Challenges

According to HUD, state and local eviction terminology varies among jurisdictions.³⁹ Researchers must reconcile different legal terms to accurately estimate eviction filing or judgment counts. Court officials told us they used varying terms to refer to evictions, including “landlord/tenant dispute,” “unlawful detainer,” and “forcible detainer.” States also use several different terms to refer to a court order to remove a tenant, such as “writ of eviction” or “restitution of premises.” Additionally, officials from

³⁸Legal Services Corporation, “LSC Eviction Laws Database” (Washington, D.C.: 2021); accessed January 4, 2024, <https://www.lsc.gov/initiatives/effect-state-local-laws-evictions/lsc-eviction-laws-database>.

³⁹Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Evidence Matters: Transforming Knowledge into Housing and Community Development Policy*.

one jurisdiction stated that they used one term for eviction due to nonpayment of rent and another term for eviction due to other reasons.

Aggregating eviction data nationally may require accessing numerous case management systems and then reconciling the types of data they contain. According to state court experts, some states use a single (universal) case management system to store and process data related to cases. In these states, case data are standardized across all jurisdictions, and court officials may aggregate case information across jurisdictions in the state. Other states use multiple systems across jurisdictions in a state. For example, a 2023 report by the National Center for State Courts cited that trial courts in one state used 16 different case management systems and 150 different computer systems.⁴⁰ State court experts stated that aggregating court data to a state level is time-consuming and takes significant staff resources when jurisdictions use different case management systems.

Surveys May Not Accurately Estimate the Prevalence of Evictions

Surveys may not accurately capture the prevalence of evictions nationally because responses to survey questions may be missing or inaccurate, the survey design may not cover all evictions, or response rates may be low for populations that are more likely to face evictions. Several factors can contribute to this.

Survey question design. Although surveys have been used to measure physical evictions, researchers have noted that survey question design may affect the extent to which eviction questions accurately capture these events.⁴¹ For example, tenants may not define their eviction-related experiences as an eviction or a forced move, and the specific wording of

⁴⁰National Center for State Courts, Assessment Michigan Courts Statewide CMS - Final Report (Williamsburg, VA: Mar. 22, 2023); https://www.courts.michigan.gov/4966b4/siteassets/committees,-boards-special-initiatves/case-management-system/mi-cms-assessment-report_final.pdf.

⁴¹Bucholtz, "Can the American Housing Survey Provide Reliable Estimates of the Prevalence of Eviction?"; and Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Report to Congress on the Feasibility of Creating a National Evictions Database*.

eviction questions in a nationwide survey may affect how they respond.⁴² In 2015, researchers identified that tenants may define an eviction very narrowly, such as law enforcement physically removing tenants.⁴³ Using such a definition, a tenant who experienced an informal eviction or received an eviction judgment but moved out without law enforcement's involvement might not report having been evicted in a survey.

Sample unit. National surveys also may undercount the prevalence of evictions if they are administered to households and do not account for the possibility that multiple individuals who experienced different evictions may reside in the same household. One study noted that because AHS only asked a single household respondent about evictions, the 2017 AHS may have excluded physical evictions experienced by other household members.⁴⁴ It noted that AHS also would exclude households that move to unstable housing or a shelter after an eviction because those types of housing are not included in the AHS sample.⁴⁵

Population surveyed. Populations that experience evictions at the highest rates also tend to be the hardest for surveys to reach, according to a HUD report.⁴⁶ To address a potential lower response rate, a national survey may benefit from interviewers trained to connect with harder-to-reach populations.⁴⁷ For example, interviewers for the Milwaukee Area Renters Study had 3 days of training and achieved a response rate of over 80 percent. Studies have noted that training also can mitigate the

⁴²The 2017 AHS eviction module—which HUD designed to capture the prevalence of physical evictions—also included a question asking whether tenants had been forced to move by a bank or property owner. However, the eviction module classified a portion of respondents who responded that they were not forced to move. Similarly, a portion of respondents who said they were forced to move by a bank or property owner did not experience a physical eviction as classified by the eviction module. See Shawn Bucholtz, “Can the American Housing Survey Provide Reliable Estimates of the Prevalence of Eviction?”, and Department of Housing and Urban Development, “*Report to Congress on the Feasibility of Creating a National Evictions Database.*”

⁴³Desmond and Shollenberger, “Forced Displacement from Rental Housing: Prevalence and Neighborhood Consequences.”

⁴⁴Gromis et al., “Estimating the Prevalence of Eviction in the United States: New Data from the 2017 American Housing Survey.”

⁴⁵The 2017 AHS also asked households where they would go if evicted. Of households that said they had been threatened with eviction in the past 3 months, more than 10 percent said they would move to a shelter.

⁴⁶*Report to Congress on the Feasibility of Creating a National Evictions Database.*

⁴⁷*Report to Congress on the Feasibility of Creating a National Evictions Database.*

effect of an interviewer's personality or questioning style on respondents' answers. However, one study noted that the effect of conducting such training for eviction surveys is unclear because comparative studies do not exist.⁴⁸

Sample size. A large sample size is required to accurately estimate the national and local prevalence of evictions because evictions occur at a low frequency, according to a study published by HUD.⁴⁹ The study noted that the sample size of the 2017 AHS may have been too small to provide sufficiently accurate local estimates to allow for validation of the AHS results against available local administrative data.

Key Considerations for a Federal Eviction Data Collection Effort Include Its Goals, Data Reliability, and Required Resources

Stakeholders Identified Potential Federal Data Collection Efforts and Associated Goals and Considerations

Given the constraints of available data sources, we interviewed 20 stakeholders to identify ways in which the availability of eviction data might be improved. These stakeholders included federal agency officials and researchers, and officials from a nongeneralizable sample of eight state and local court jurisdictions.

The stakeholders collectively identified two potential efforts as options for the federal government to improve eviction data:

- **Develop a national database** that would collect eviction filing data from each court jurisdiction nationwide, as filing information is generally the most consistently available.
- **Strengthen national surveys** to develop reliable national and local estimates of the prevalence of forced moves, including eviction.

⁴⁸Bucholtz, "Can the American Housing Survey Provide Reliable Estimates of the Prevalence of Eviction?"

⁴⁹See Bucholtz, "Can the American Housing Survey Provide Reliable Estimates of the Prevalence of Eviction?"

Stakeholders also identified four potential goals overall for such an eviction data collection effort: (1) target eviction-related resources to areas of need, (2) measure the impact of policy actions to reduce eviction and housing instability, (3) facilitate Fair Housing Act enforcement, and (4) promote understanding of evictions.

As shown in table 2, the two options for improving eviction data each have benefits and limitations, and neither option is well-tailored to realize every goal.

Table 2: Potential Goals, Benefits, and Limitations of Two Options to Improve National Data on Evictions

Potential goal	A national database of court eviction filing data	National surveys on eviction
Target eviction-related resources to areas of need	Could allow for comparison of eviction filing rates across jurisdictions and identification of areas with high eviction filing rates.	Could help identify regions with higher levels of informal evictions but may not provide sufficiently granular information to help target resources to areas of need.
Measure impact of policy actions to reduce eviction and housing instability	Could help measure changes in eviction filing rates in localities over time but may lack information on physical evictions to measure outcomes of policy actions.	Could provide information on national eviction trends but may not generate reliable estimates of impacts of policy actions in local areas due to sample size issues.
Support Fair Housing Act enforcement	Could help identify the parties involved in eviction, but it may lack tenant demographics, limiting its ability to identify potential violations of the Fair Housing Act.	Statistics derived from the survey can inform Fair Housing Act enforcement activities, but survey responses cannot legally be used to enforce the Fair Housing Act.
Promote understanding of evictions	Could facilitate comparison of eviction filing rates across jurisdictions but may not capture information on demographics and outcomes.	Could provide the context surrounding an eviction and match responses to tenant demographics in ways that could facilitate further eviction research.

Source: GAO. | GAO-24-106637

Note: These goals and their attributes were identified in our interviews with officials from five federal agencies, seven research organizations and housing advocacy groups, and a nongeneralizable sample of eight state and local court jurisdictions.

There also may be opportunities to leverage information from both a court database and survey data to realize the identified goals more fully. For example, HUD funded one research grant to explore linking eviction court data to HUD administrative data to better understand housing insecurity. However, other attempts to link eviction court data to administrative records have been limited by a lack of unique identifiers for the parties involved. As discussed previously, court records and surveys capture information at different points in the eviction process, which may make information difficult to reconcile.

Stakeholders also identified the following factors that federal agencies would need to consider in implementing either a national court database or national survey on evictions.

Extent of potential benefit to existing programs. There are limited opportunities to use improved eviction data to better target or measure the impact of existing federal programs, partly due to existing programs' temporary status or limited size and scope. For example, the Emergency Rental Assistance program provided assistance to help prevent evictions during the pandemic. But as of June 2023, nearly all of the \$46.55 billion in program funding had been committed (funding will expire in September

2025).⁵⁰ In addition, HUD's Eviction Protection Grant Program is small. It provided \$40 million to support provision of free legal assistance to low-income tenants at risk of or subject to eviction. As of September 2023, the program had served nearly 25,000 households in 19 states.

However, some jurisdictions we interviewed identified potential benefits at the local level from improved eviction data. For example, one state office uses eviction data to target eviction mitigation services to areas with high filing rates, according to officials. In addition, the ability to compare eviction filing rates across jurisdictions could be valuable, officials from three jurisdictions said.

Potential for incomplete or unreliable data. According to HUD, the agency does not have the legal authority to require states and localities to collect eviction data or report the data to a national database. As a result, an evictions database might not yield results that are generalizable to areas that choose not to report data.

An enhanced national survey also faces such risks. For example, as discussed previously, findings from the 2017 AHS eviction module were deemed unreliable, in part due to an unrepresentative survey sample.

Resource requirements. The resources and capacity required to collect uniform data from all courts to use in a national database could be substantial, particularly for states in which all courts do not use the same case management system. According to HUD's 2021 report, any national collection efforts would require buy-in from—and resources for—state and local court systems to standardize and modernize the collection and sharing of eviction data. For example, one state appropriated \$150 million in fiscal years 2022–2023 for implementation of a statewide judicial case management system. Resources also would be required to train clerks to reliably enter information in a new system.

Efforts to field national surveys also could involve substantial costs, one stakeholder said. HUD has not estimated the cost of increasing the sample size of an eviction-related survey to allow for local estimates of eviction rates. However, HUD's 2021 report estimated that the 2023 AHS would cost \$69 million in total. The 2021 report estimated an annual cost

⁵⁰Officials stated that HUD has funded three studies to link administrative data from the Emergency Rental Assistance program to eviction data to assess the impact of the program on eviction, with results expected in 2025.

of \$227 million for the American Community Survey, which has a sufficient sample size to generate estimates for each county.

Privacy and legal issues. To protect tenant privacy, any publicly released eviction filing data cannot include identifiable information such as name and address. Records also would need to be aggregated geographically, which could limit the granularity of the research. In addition, sealing laws in certain jurisdictions may limit courts' ability to report data on eviction cases.⁵¹

Key Practices Emphasize Clear Goals, Data Quality, and Sufficient Resources for Any Federal Data Collection Effort

Stakeholders cited key practices to facilitate planning and decision-making for improving federal eviction data. We also discuss selected key practices we have previously identified for evidence-based policymaking and stakeholder perspectives relating to these practices that could underlie federal efforts to improve eviction data through a national eviction filing database or improved national survey.⁵² We also discuss program activities the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) undertakes to maintain its mortgage database to meet requirements of the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA).⁵³

⁵¹According to the Legal Services Corporation, as of 2021, seven states had laws regulating the sealing of records for eviction cases. "Eviction Laws Database: Local Dataset"; <https://www.lsc.gov/initiatives/effect-state-local-laws-evictions/lsc-eviction-laws-database>. Prepared by the Center for Public Health Law Research at Temple University's Beasley School of Law for Legal Services Corporation.

⁵²GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, GAO-23-105460 (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2023). We previously developed 13 key practices for evidence-based policymaking that can help federal executive branch leaders and employees develop and use evidence—quantitative or qualitative information—to effectively manage and assess the results of federal efforts. The 13 key practices are: (1) define goals, (2) identify strategies and resources, (3) assess the environment, (4) assess the sufficiency of existing evidence, (5) identify and prioritize evidence needs, (6) generate new evidence, (7) use evidence to learn, (8) apply learning to decision-making, (9) communicate learning and results, (10) demonstrate leadership commitment, (11) promote accountability, (12) build and maintain capacity, and (13) involve stakeholders.

⁵³HMDA requires mortgage lenders that meet certain requirements to report applicant, loan, and other information for covered transactions, including certain financial and demographic data on mortgage applicants.

Clearly define goals. Goals communicate the results that an organization seeks to achieve. One key practice for evidence-based policymaking is to define goals for all activities.⁵⁴

Stakeholders told us that any decision about which eviction data collection method to pursue should be informed by the identified goals of the effort. For example, a database of court eviction filings could support a goal of better targeting federal program resources or assessing their effects. In comparison, a survey might have more potential to support goals related to eviction research.

As a point of comparison, CFPB officials told us their goals for HMDA are to collect high-quality demographic and financial information for mortgage applicants and provide such information to the public. Officials further explained how program activities are aligned to achieve these goals. For example, CFPB has taken steps to automate its data validation process to release quality information more quickly, according to officials.

Use clear definitions and standard terminology. Our past work has found that building quality evidence can help decision makers assess, understand, and identify opportunities to improve the results of federal efforts.⁵⁵

To ensure reliable data, stakeholders stressed that a national database of court evictions would need clear definitions and standard terminology across jurisdictions. Similarly, they said to generate accurate results, a national eviction survey would need to be worded in a way that ensured respondents shared a common understanding of the questions.

CFPB officials told us that the HMDA statute and implementing regulation establish filing requirements for all institutions, helping to ensure uniformity in the data. CFPB officials with whom we spoke emphasized the importance of establishing clear definitions when collecting data from multiple sources.

Collect and report data for key purposes. Key practices indicate that using evidence to learn helps an organization assess progress towards its

⁵⁴[GAO-23-105460](#), p. 18.

⁵⁵[GAO-23-105460](#), p. 24.

goals and determine whether results varied based on different factors, such as age, race, ethnicity, geographic location, or income level.⁵⁶

Stakeholders noted that improved local-level data on evictions could help better target resources for assisting tenants at risk of or experiencing an eviction. In addition, such data could help policymakers understand differences in local eviction rates by race and ethnicity.

CFPB officials discussed disclosing data to the public in ways that facilitate further analysis. For example, they publish both loan-level datasets and online tools that allow users to filter, aggregate, download, and visualize HMDA data. For example, results can be filtered by metropolitan statistical area, ethnicity, and other factors for loan application and denial rates.

Ensure sufficient resources. Our past work has found that having sufficient capacity is critical to federal organizations' efforts to generate and use a full range of evidence.⁵⁷

Because current efforts among local courts to collect eviction data vary across jurisdictions, stakeholders noted that federal technical assistance and training for local court staff would be needed to support data collection. In addition, one stakeholder noted that standardization of these data could require a significant federal investment to build capacity. A national eviction survey also would require resources, particularly to ensure an adequate sampling for local estimates and for transient and homeless populations, according to stakeholders.

To ensure sufficient capacity to report and collect quality HMDA data, CFPB officials told us the agency commits customer service resources year-round to support institutions with their data collecting and reporting, often assisting small- and mid-tier institutions. When making updates to the HMDA platform, CFPB officials stated they also incorporate feedback from vendors, researchers, and other stakeholders.

To the extent that a national eviction data collection effort involves multiple federal agencies, key considerations for implementing

⁵⁶[GAO-23-105460](#), p. 32.

⁵⁷[GAO-23-105460](#), p. 45.

interagency collaborative mechanisms also could be informative and help ensure effective coordination across agencies.⁵⁸

Balancing Considerations and Goals Could Inform Selection of Data Collection Effort

Given the inherent constraints of court records and surveys, determining whether to select either potential effort may benefit from balancing considerations and each effort's potential to achieve different goals. A court record database could provide more authoritative reporting of formal eviction filings to target eviction-related resources, while an enhanced survey could help improve understanding of the national eviction landscape and tenant demographics.

Selection of either effort would involve balancing its goal with different challenges and resource needs. Two stakeholders noted that an enhanced survey could be more feasible to implement in the short-term than an eviction court record database, given the current variation in local courts' ability to collect and report eviction data. As noted above, development of a court record database would require significant time and federal entities would need to address resource challenges and overcome legal limitations. In comparison, strengthening an eviction survey could be less costly to develop, build on existing federal agency efforts, and face fewer legal obstacles. However, it would need to consider sample size and appropriate question design to ensure data were sufficiently reliable. Implementation of either effort would require dedicated initial and ongoing resources such as program staff, funding, or technology upgrades.

Federal agencies taking steps to improve data by establishing a national eviction court filing database or strengthening national eviction surveys would need to balance the intended goal for the data with either effort's challenges. Key practices provide important considerations for federal agencies in determining whether and how to pursue either potential data collection effort.

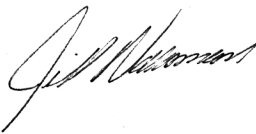
⁵⁸Key considerations for implementing interagency collaborative mechanisms include outcomes and accountability, bridging organizational cultures, leadership, clarity of roles and responsibilities, participants, resources, and written guidance and agreements. GAO, *Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms*, [GAO-12-1022](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2012).

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to HUD, the Department of Commerce, CFPB, the Federal Housing Finance Agency, and Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System for review and comment. HUD, CFPB, and the Census Bureau provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. The Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System and the Federal Housing Finance Agency informed us that they had no comments.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Secretary of Commerce, Director of the Census Bureau, Director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Director of the Federal Housing Finance Agency, Chair of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, and other interested parties. This report will also be available at no charge on GAO's website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-8678 or naamanej@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix II.



Jill Naamane
Director, Financial Markets and Community Investment

List of Committees

The Honorable Brian Schatz
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Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and
Related Agencies

Committee on Appropriations

United States Senate

The Honorable Tom Cole

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Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and
Related Agencies

Committee on Appropriations

House of Representatives

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The objectives of this report were to (1) describe existing information about evictions and its limitations, (2) examines the capabilities and constraints of using court data and surveys to get national information on evictions, and (3) examines potential goals and options for federal data collection on evictions.

To describe the prevalence of evictions and the characteristics of parties involved, we conducted a search of academic and government literature of eviction estimates in the United States. To identify existing studies, we conducted searches of various databases, including EconLit, ProQuest, Westlaw, and Social SciSearch. From these sources, we identified 12 relevant studies that appeared in research journals from 2018 through May 2023. We then conducted reviews of each study's research methodology, including selection of measures and major findings. Based on these criteria, we identified four studies applicable to our report. Additionally, we identified another 13 relevant studies through background research or stakeholder recommendations. Data from all studies we reviewed ranged from 2003 to 2019. We also reviewed research from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and documentation from the Census Bureau (Census) related to the 2017 American Housing Survey (AHS) eviction estimates. We also reviewed other survey documentation related to housing instability in the Household Pulse Survey and American Community Survey.

We interviewed researchers from three organizations who have analyzed eviction data (Eviction Lab, New America, and Legal Services Corporation). Researchers at Eviction Lab reviewed sections of this report related to their estimates before the report was finalized. We also interviewed HUD and Census officials about the 2017 AHS eviction estimate and using existing federal surveys to gather information related to evictions.

To describe the limitations of existing eviction estimates, we reviewed academic literature on eviction data. We also interviewed court officials from eight jurisdictions on their collection of eviction data. We randomly selected the jurisdictions to include different mixes of characteristics (such as renter population and geography), public availability of eviction

data, and recommendations from stakeholders (to the extent that the jurisdictions' characteristics aligned with our other criteria). For jurisdictions we contacted that declined to participate or did not respond, we selected an alternate jurisdiction with comparable criteria. Additionally, we interviewed four research organizations (Eviction Lab, Legal Services Corporation, National Center for State Courts, and New America) that have analyzed or worked with eviction data, as well as three housing advocacy groups (National Low Income Housing Corporation, National Multifamily Housing Coalition, and the Council of Large Public Housing Authorities) to obtain their views on eviction data collection. We discussed the feasibility of collecting eviction data and the limitations for its collection and use.

To examine practices and models to facilitate federal decision-making about collecting eviction data, we reviewed key practices for evidence-based policymaking and applied them to potential options for expanded eviction data collection.¹ We also interviewed 22 stakeholders—the federal agencies, research organizations, and housing advocacy groups identified below as well as eight state and local court jurisdictions mentioned above. We discussed potential efforts federal agencies could consider to facilitate the collection of eviction data, potential limitations of these efforts, and potential uses for the data. Finally, we interviewed officials from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) on their management of Home Mortgage Disclosure Act data and how their experience could be instructive for the potential development of a national effort to collect eviction data.

To address all three objectives, we reviewed relevant reports, such as HUD's October 2021 *Report to Congress on the Feasibility of Creating a National Evictions Database*.² We also reviewed a nonrepresentative

¹GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, [GAO-23-105460](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2023). We developed 13 key practices for evidence-based policymaking that can help federal entities develop and use evidence—quantitative or qualitative information—to effectively manage and assess the results of their efforts. They are (1) define goals, (2) identify strategies and resources, (3) assess the environment, (4) assess the sufficiency of existing evidence, (5) identify and prioritize evidence needs, (6) generate new evidence, (7) use evidence to learn, (8) apply learning to decision-making, (9) communicate learning and results, (10) demonstrate leadership commitment, (11) promote accountability, (12) build and maintain capacity, and (13) involve stakeholders.

²Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research, *Report to Congress on the Feasibility of Creating a National Evictions Database* (Washington, D.C.: October 2021).

sample of eviction case data, where available, from a subset of eight state and local jurisdictions. We used this review to inform our understanding of statements made by jurisdiction officials.

In addition, we interviewed officials from HUD's Office of Policy Development and Research, Census, CFPB, Federal Housing Finance Agency, the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, and the eight state and local court jurisdictions described earlier.³ Additionally, we interviewed representatives from the National Center for State Courts, Council of Large Public Housing Authorities, Eviction Lab, New America, National Low Income Housing Coalition, National Multifamily Housing Council, and the Legal Services Corporation. We also interviewed representatives of two public housing authorities, which we judgmentally selected to reflect two different sizes and geographic regions, and because they were recommended by the Council of Large Public Housing Authorities.

We conducted this performance audit from February 2023 to February 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

³See Hal Martin, "Making Sense of Eviction Trends during the Pandemic," *Economic Commentary* EC-2022-12. (Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland: Aug. 23, 2022); <https://doi.org/10.26509/frbc-ec-202212>.

Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

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Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above Tarek Mahmassani (Assistant Director), Jordan Anderson (Analyst in Charge), Nicole Hewitt, Jill Lacey, Lee McCracken, Zina Merritt, Marc Molino, Evalin Olson, Julia Robertson, Barbara Roesmann, Jessica Sandler, and Farrah Stone made key contributions to this report.

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