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Public Support for Policies to Increase Housing Stability During the COVID-19 Pandemic



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Introduction: The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated longstanding housing precarity. This study measures the public support for policies designed to increase housing stability and gauges whether support levels are associated with views about the role of evictions in COVID-19 transmission and the existence of racial inequities in the housing market.

Methods: A cross-sectional survey with a representative sample of U.S. adults in November 2020 assessed support for 4 housing policies. Logistic regression models estimated the adjusted levels of support for each policy, with separate models testing the association with whether or not a respondent recognized the role of evictions in increased COVID-19 transmission or acknowledged racial inequities in the housing market.

Results: Most U.S. adults supported policies aimed to increase housing stability during the COVID-19 pandemic, including extending moratoriums on evictions (63%) and foreclosures (67%) and increasing emergency rental assistance (63%). In total, 54% supported increased government spending on housing vouchers. Adults who agreed that averting eviction would slow COVID-19 transmission had higher support for housing stability policies, as did those who agreed that it was easier for White families to find affordable, high-quality housing than Black families.

Conclusions: Support for housing stability policies was strong among U.S. adults, particularly among those who agreed that preventing evictions slowed COVID-19 transmission and among those who acknowledged racial inequities in the housing market. Raising public awareness of the connections among unstable housing, infectious disease transmission, and racial inequity could broaden the support for policies to keep people in their homes through the pandemic.

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INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has highlighted the longstanding crisis of unaffordable housing in the U.S.¹ Pandemic-related economic insecurity, including job loss, has increased the risk of eviction and foreclosure for millions of households.² In September 2020, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a nationwide eviction moratorium under its authority to help prevent COVID-19 transmission, an order that was extended by the Biden administration.^{3,4} Simultaneously, there has been a growing recognition of the disproportionate burden of both COVID-19 and housing insecurity among

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Black and Latinx communities connected to the movement to address racial inequities in the U.S.^{5,6} Perceiving stable housing as foundational for public health and social movements focusing on racial inequities in the U.S. may influence support for policies to improve housing stability, which may increase the likelihood of the policies being enacted.⁷ The authors conducted a national survey of U.S. adults in November 2020 to assess the support for 4 policies aimed at increasing housing stability and gauge whether public support varied by whether adults recognized the role of eviction in COVID-19 disease transmission or acknowledged the existence of racial inequities in housing markets.

METHODS

Study Sample

Wave 3 of the Johns Hopkins COVID-19 Civic Life and Public Health Survey was fielded on November 11–30, 2020. The panel is designed to be representative of the U.S. adult population and is drawn from NORC's area probability sample covering 97% of U.S. households. Of 1,468 Wave-1 respondents in April 2020 (70.4% completion rate), 1,222 respondents completed Wave 2 in July and Wave 3 in November (83.2% completion rate). Wave-3 data were the focus of this analysis ([Appendix Table 1](#), available online). This study was approved by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health IRB.

Measures

Respondents were asked about their support for 4 policies. The first 3 related to COVID-19: extending the federal rental eviction moratorium enacted in response to COVID-19 through June 2021, extending a federal rule preventing homeowners with federally backed loans who are unable to pay their mortgage from losing their homes enacted in response to COVID-19 through June 2021, and increasing government spending on emergency rental assistance for people unable to pay their rent owing to COVID-19. The fourth examined preferences for increasing government spending on housing vouchers for low-income households. Responses were collected on a 5-point Likert-type scale and were dichotomized as *strongly favor* and *favor* versus other responses. [Appendix Text 1](#) (available online) shows the survey questions.

To measure respondents' knowledge of the connection between housing insecurity and COVID-19 transmission, the survey asked: *Do you agree or disagree that preventing landlords from evicting tenants is important for slowing COVID-19 transmission?* Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* and were dichotomized. To measure the knowledge of racial inequities in housing markets, respondents were asked: *Do you think it is easier for Black families or White families to find affordable, high-quality housing in the U.S.?* Response options included *easier for Black families*, *easier for White families*, or *about the same*. Responses were dichotomized as *easier for White families* versus *no difference* or *easier for Black families*.

Respondent characteristics included gender, race/ethnicity, age, household income, education, current employment status,

political affiliation, region, and urbanicity. Home ownership and pre-COVID-19 housing cost burden (in a typical month before March 2020, spending less than or equal to versus spending >30% of monthly household income on rent or mortgage) were assessed.

Statistical Analysis

Overall, unadjusted support was estimated for each policy using summary statistics. Logistic regression models were used to estimate adjusted levels of support for each policy, with separate models testing the association with respondent recognition of the role of evictions in increased COVID-19 transmission or acknowledgment of racial inequities in the housing market. Models adjusted for respondent characteristics, recognizing that policy is often more responsive to the opinions of some groups over others.⁸ Average predicted probabilities were calculated overall and within subgroup using the observed values in the sample for all other variables. Respondents with missing data (<3% of respondents) were excluded. All analyses were weighted to be nationally representative and were conducted in Stata, version 15.

RESULTS

Majority of the U.S. adults supported 4 policies aimed at increasing housing stability: 63% supported extending the federal ban on evictions, 67% supported extending foreclosure moratoriums, 63% supported expanding emergency rental assistance, and 54% supported extending rental subsidies for low-income renters ([Figure 1](#) and [Appendix Table 2](#), available online).

In total, 51% of U.S. adults agreed that preventing landlords from evicting tenants is important for slowing COVID-19 transmission. In adjusted analyses, those who connected evictions with COVID-19 transmission were significantly more likely to support extending the eviction (45 percentage point difference) and foreclosure (36 percentage point difference) moratoriums and increasing emergency rental assistance (37 percentage point difference) than adults who did not recognize the connection. There was significantly higher support for expanding housing vouchers among those who connected eviction with COVID-19 transmission (41 percentage point difference) ([Figure 1](#) and [Appendix Table 3](#), available online).

Half of U.S. adults (52.8%) agreed that it was easier for White families than for Black families to find affordable, high-quality housing in the U.S. Those who recognized racial discrimination in housing markets were significantly more likely to support eviction (19 percentage point difference) and foreclosure (15 percentage point difference) moratoriums and increased spending on rental assistance (26 percentage point difference) than those who did not recognize racial inequities. Support for expanding housing vouchers was also higher among those who agreed that there were racial housing

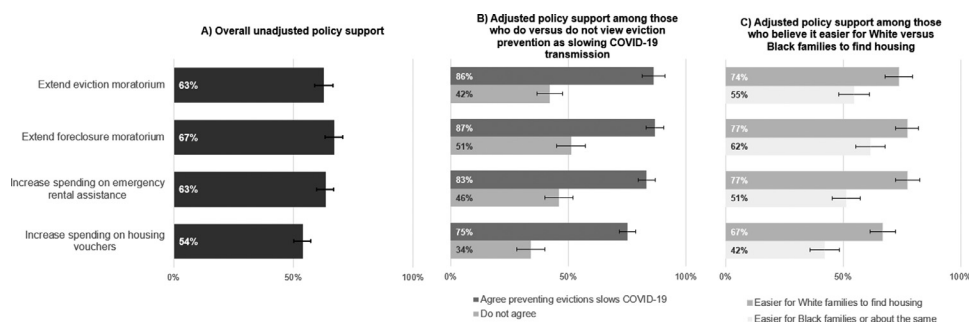


Figure 1. Unadjusted support for policies to promote housing security among a nationally representative of U.S. adults (Panel A) and predicted probabilities for support, stratified by whether or not a respondent recognized the role of eviction moratoriums in slowing COVID-19 transmission (Panel B) or acknowledged racial inequities in the housing market (Panel C), November 2020.

Note: Panel A shows the unadjusted results. Panels B and C use logistic regression models to generate predicted probabilities, adjusted for gender, race/ethnicity (White non-Hispanic, Black non-Hispanic, other non-Hispanic, Hispanic), age in years (18–29, 30–44, 45–59, or ≥60), household income (<\$35,000, \$35,000–\$74,999, ≥\$75,000), education (high school diploma or less, some college, bachelor’s degree or greater), current employment status (employed, not employed, retired), political affiliation (Democrat, Republican, independent), home ownership (renter, owner), pre-COVID-19 housing cost burden (in a typical month before March 2020, spending ≤30% of monthly household income on rent or mortgage, spending >30% of monthly household income on rent or mortgage, or having no rent payment or mortgage paid in full), region, and urbanicity. All pairwise differences are significant at $p < 0.05$ level.

inequities (25 percentage point difference) (Figure 1 and Appendix Table 4, available online).

Democrats were more likely than Republicans to support each policy (Appendix Table 2, available online). Among Republicans, those who agreed that preventing eviction slows COVID-19 transmission and who acknowledged racial inequities were more likely to support each policy (Appendix Tables 5 and 6, available online).

Models including state fixed effects, controlling for state COVID-19 incidence, examining policy support as a continuous variable, and excluding respondents who neither favor nor oppose each policy produced similar results to those of the main analysis (Appendix Tables 7–10, available online).

DISCUSSION

More than 60% of U.S. adults supported eviction and foreclosure moratoriums and emergency rental assistance to increase housing stability during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 54% supported increased spending on housing vouchers. Support for policies to increase housing security was stronger among respondents who recognized the connection between eviction and COVID-19 transmission, among those who acknowledged racial discrimination in housing markets, and among Democrats than among Republicans. These results suggest that increasing public recognition of housing instability as a public health or equity problem may increase support for housing policies among people with varied backgrounds, including across party lines.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. The AmeriSpeak panel used probability-based recruitment, but results may be vulnerable to sampling biases. The measure of racial inequity was assessed in 2020 when the Black Lives Matter movement gained more support after several publicized fatal shootings of Black people by police⁹ and may be subject to social desirability bias.

CONCLUSIONS

The majority of the Americans support policies to enhance housing stability in the context of COVID-19 and expand housing vouchers for low-income people more broadly. Heightening attention to the roles of eviction and racial inequity in housing in disease transmission may help garner support for policies aimed at increasing housing stability.

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CEP contributed to study conceptualization, methodology, resources, writing (original draft preparation), supervision, project administration, and funding acquisition. KML contributed to study conceptualization, methodology, visualization, and writing (review and editing). EEM contributed to study conceptualization, writing (review and editing), supervision, project administration, and funding acquisition. ASL contributed to study conceptualization and writing (reviewing and editing). CLB contributed to study conceptualization, writing (review and editing), supervision, project administration, and funding acquisition. SL contributed to study conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing (review and editing), supervision, project administration, and funding acquisition.

CEP owns stock in Gilead Pharmaceuticals. The work detailed in this paper does not evaluate any specific drug or intervention produced by Gilead. CEP was an unpaid member of Enterprise Community Partners' Health Advisory Council and works part-time on a temporary assignment with the Department of Housing and Urban Development, assisting the department on housing and health issues. CEP, KML, and SL signed on as amici to several Amici Curiae briefs in support of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's national moratorium on eviction as a public health measure. KML has also provided expert testimony to legislative bodies regarding the potential public health impacts of eviction. No other financial disclosures were reported.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplemental materials associated with this article can be found in the online version at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2021.05.006>.

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