Eviction isn’t just about poverty. It’s also about race — and Virginia proves it.

By Terrence McCoy

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What happens during an eviction couldn’t seem more straightforward: A tenant doesn’t have the money to make rent, so the landlord gives him or her the boot.

New research, however, is complicating that picture of eviction in America. It’s not only a matter of poverty. It’s also a matter of race.

That’s the striking conclusion of researchers at Virginia Commonwealth University, who published a report this fall that found eviction rates are disproportionately high in minority communities. Across the state, roughly 60 percent of majority African American neighborhoods have an annual eviction rate higher than 10 percent of households — roughly four times the national average — even after controlling for poverty and income rates.
In Richmond, where some neighborhoods have rates of eviction higher than 33 percent, the results have been even more stark. For every 10 percent increase in African American share of the population, the eviction rate increases by 1.2 percent. But if the white population increases at the same rate, the eviction rate shrinks by .9 percent.

“This is about understanding the ‘why,’ ” said Benjamin Teresa, an assistant professor at VCU who conducted the research and has co-founded a think tank at the university to study eviction in the state. “Why are [evictions] more concentrated in parts of the state and cities?”

The research comes amid increasing attention to evictions in Virginia, sparked by a sweeping analysis published in April by Princeton University researchers that found the state’s eviction rate of 5.1 percent is twice the national average, based on data from 2016. And within Virginia, some cities have some of the country’s highest urban rates.
The examination, led by Pulitzer Prize-winning sociologist Matthew Desmond at Princeton’s Eviction Lab, showed that half of the 10 large-population cities with the nation’s highest rates of eviction were in Virginia. And among midsize cities, three of the top five were in the state as well. Of all large cities, Richmond had the second-highest eviction rate, with 11.4 percent of tenant households evicted in 2016, for a total of more than 6,300 evictions.

The question that was then asked:

"What is it about Virginia?" asked Kathryn Howell, a VCU assistant professor who also co-founded the university's eviction lab.

The answer, housing advocates and academics theorize, may lie in a combination of circumstances that make Virginia stand out in the region. They include a low state minimum wage of $7.25, pockets of concentrated poverty, fewer social services, less housing activism and fewer tenant organizations, and laws that advocates say are tilted in favor of landlords.
In Virginia, it can take as little as six weeks to evict someone after they’re late with rent. Tenants aren’t guaranteed legal representation. And, unlike in Washington, which has an eviction rate of 2.6 percent, there’s no rent control. Maryland, by comparison, is also a landlord-friendly state, according to housing lawyers, but has a higher minimum wage of $10.10, less poverty and an eviction rate of 3.6 percent.

Then there’s the matter of race, which research suggests is a factor in evictions across the country. The Princeton analysis found evictions are most concentrated in the Southeast, with its large historic African American population, and even more so in counties with large black communities. And an Apartment List survey of 41,000 responses last year determined that black households were more than twice as likely to face eviction as white households, after controlling for education.

Still, when Teresa started digging into Richmond’s eviction data, it wasn’t clear what he would find. The first startling discovery came when he saw that the poorest pockets of Richmond weren’t also the places with the highest eviction rates, challenging explanations other Richmond housing experts had offered. Something beyond poverty, he began to think, was at work.
“It definitely was surprising,” he said. “It was unraveling the mystery. . . . It’s not just poverty.”

The findings make sense when viewed through the prism of history, according to Teresa and other experts: Residential segregation patterns shunted African Americans into certain neighborhoods. Discriminatory lending practices made it harder for African Americans to buy a house, then build equity to pass down to subsequent generations. Richmond’s absolute poorest live in public housing, where the public housing authority filed eviction lawsuits against 25 percent of residents, according to the Richmond Times-Dispatch. But the eviction rate creeps up higher still in private housing, often controlled by companies that have all but automated the eviction process, immediately taking someone to court for overdue rent.

Then there’s simple bias, said Marty Wegbreit, director of litigation for the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society in Richmond.
Wegbreit has witnessed the interplay of race and eviction at work. He spent 24 years in Southwest Virginia, where there is as much poverty, in the mountain hollows and coal fields, as anywhere in the state. The only difference, however, is that it’s white poverty. Buchanan County, for instance, which is 96 percent white and has a poverty rate of 25 percent, has an eviction rate of less than 1 percent, according to Eviction Lab.

“A lot of people don’t want to talk about the racial issue, but we’re going to,” Wegbreit said. “White people simply have a deeper bench, more access to wealth than black and brown people. . . . And there’s a subconscious belief that, ‘We can let the white folks slide; they’ll be good for it. And the black folks, not, because they won’t be good for it.’ ”

Others worry, however, about the consequences if the conversation about Virginia’s high eviction rates becomes mired in the fraught terrain of race and discrimination.

“People shut down when you talk about race in this state, which is unfortunate,” said Christie Marra, an attorney with the Virginia Poverty Law Center who is leading a campaign to reduce evictions. “But you’ve got to look at what happened before: Who owns houses, and who rents, and how did we get here.”
That’s why Teresa is now pressing for more information and will probably publish an additional report later this year that will bring a finer analysis to race and eviction in the state.

“There are very poor parts of the state that may not have that high of an eviction rate,” he said. “Why would that be?”

**Terrence McCoy**

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