

**COVID-19 RENTERS AND HOUSING INSTABILITY:
COMBATting THE EVICTON EPIDEMIC DURING THE COVID-
19 PANDEMIC IN KNOX COUNTY, TENNESSEE**

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has exacerbated preexisting inequities in Knox County, Tennessee. The disruption to employment caused by the pandemic has imposed a great financial burden for many individuals who rent housing. The primary relief that was afforded to renters during the pandemic was enabled by a federal eviction moratorium order, where covered renters could defer payments to avoid eviction while the moratorium was in effect. Some additional rental assistance was provided to local governments through the federal CARES Act pandemic relief package. Despite these provisions, many people experienced housing crises in Knox County, where over 3,000 renters have faced eviction filing from March 2020 – April 2022. The COVID-19 health crisis has emphasized flaws in the United States' racial capitalist system and intensified socioeconomic inequalities as renters have been neglected and those with the means to own property have been protected. The constantly looming threat of not only contracting a deadly virus, but also being (re)submerged into the process of eviction burdens renters. In Knox County, Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment (SOCM) acted to pave pathways towards housing justice working on anti-eviction efforts during COVID-19, disseminating information to tenants facing the threat of eviction and supporting them throughout the eviction process. The project examines the multi-layered rental housing and displacement landscape from many perspectives and current and potential pathways towards a more just housing system. Using mixed-methods, I attempt to capture and

analyze the many perspectives of those burdened by eviction and those involved in anti-eviction infrastructure in Knox County, Tennessee using community geographies and housing justice methods.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Knox County Context	4
How I came to study eviction	8
Defining eviction and resistance	13
Chapter 2 Relevant literature review	18
Community geography.....	18
Property.....	19
Intersectional understanding of COVID-19 displacement.....	23
Renting during a pandemic	25
Chapter 3 Methods.....	28
Participant Observation.....	34
Court-watching	36
Semi-Structured Interviews	44
Mapping	47
Coding.....	49
Chapter 4 Geographies of Displacement and Practices of Emplacement.....	52
The Importance of Housing and the Impact of Displacement	53
Discrimination.....	56
Public Housing; Nowhere to go	59
Mapping the problem.....	65
Housing Court and Eviction.....	67
The Contradiction of Representation	68
An Unequal Structure	75
Strategies of Resistance and Emplacement.....	78
Renting in Knox County During COVID-19.....	81
COVID-19 in Court	84

Jet Fuel: COVID and the Housing Market	88
From Displacement to Emplacement.....	92
Chapter 5 Conclusion: Envisioning Housing Justice.....	94
References.....	99
Appendix.....	106
Tenant Consent for Research Participation.....	108
Eviction Process Stakeholders Consent for Research Participation	115
Telephone Recruitment Scripts.....	120
Sample Email Recruitment	123
Sample Reminder Email	124
Interview Protocol with a Knoxville Tenant.....	125
Interview Protocol with a Housing Court Advocate.....	127
Interview Protocol with a member of Knox Housing Justice Collective.....	129
Sample of Court-watching Field Notes.....	130
Vita.....	136

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Summary of Fieldwork.....	60
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LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Knoxville redlining map.....	15
Figure 2. Main Assembly Room Diagram.....	47
Figure 3. Recruitment Flier.....	55
Figure 4. Eviction Filing Map in Knox County.....	63
Figure 5. Public Service Areas Map: Central, North, East, South, and West.....	67
Figure 6. Housing Court Line.....	72
Figure 7. Eviction Filing and Percent Poverty in Knox County Map.....	75
Figure 8. Courtroom Hierarchy Diagram.....	85
Figure 9. SOCM Canvassing Flier.....	88
Figure 10. Knoxville, TN Housing Market Data Visualization.....	99

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

“The scale of the eviction crisis shocked us all. It’s a tragedy whenever anyone gets evicted, and it was a tragedy before 2020. The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. The second best time is now. It took this to make us realize the status quo was unacceptable.”

– Matt, Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment East Tennessee
Community Organizer

Property has always been used by those in power as a mechanism for dispossession and limiting access to land, information, and resources (McElroy, 2020). Property continues to be a mechanism of dispossession. Structures that enforce and uphold property ownership have been designed around our historical perception of what it means to be a landowner. In the United States, housing and property ownership are the biggest contributors to economic inequality (Traub, 2016). In rental housing, dispossession through eviction filing is a key means by which wealth is destroyed and poverty is (re)produced (Desmond, 2012; Shelton, 2018). Eviction is commonly defined as the unwilling removal of tenants from their homes and the property they inhabit. There are many reasons a landlord may evict a tenant, but the most common grounds for eviction include not paying rent, lease violation, property damage, or illegal activity.

While it is easy to view eviction on a micro scale, understanding it as a one-off event following an individual tenant's failure, eviction is actually patterned socially and geographically. Concentrations of dispossession in certain locations, in certain times, and involving many of the same key actors have led scholars to argue that eviction is a systemic issue. Deliberate choices of powerful property owners have shaped the social processes and logics of local housing schemes throughout the United States (Shelton, 2018). For this reason, geographers have observed that "it is critical that we think of housing not as a neutral, passive landscape merely reflecting and manifesting wealth and income inequalities of various (other) types; the housing system is, instead, a vital, dynamic nexus for the active shaping and reshaping of inequality" (Christophers, 2018, p. 114). Rental housing plays a unique role in the overall housing system.

Housing scholars have increasingly understood eviction as following a long history of colonial violence through dispossession. The land that now comprises Tennessee was once occupied by the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Muscogee (Creek), Seneca, and Shawnee nations. The 1830 Indian Removal Act passed by Congress under President Andrew Jackson gave the federal government the power to take Native land east of the Mississippi in 'exchange' for land to the west, outside of the existing national borders (Pauls, 2019). The United States federal government deemed this plunder legal, enforcing the colonial operation (Murrey, 2020). Indigenous land was desired for white settlement due to its rich agricultural potential. Many tribes resisted through warfare, protest, political mobilization, and legal action, but ultimately over an estimated 100,000

Indigenous people were violently displaced during the removal era (Cowen, 2020; Pauls, 2019). Throughout the formation of the United States, governmental policies, like the Indian Removal Act, have violent racialized understandings of space and property. The United States was born of settler colonialism and chattel slavery. Capitalism and racism evolved together in the United States, reproducing racist systems and social ordering that Cedric Robinson (2000) calls racial capitalism. As Gilmore interprets, “Capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it” (Gilmore, 2017, p. 241).

Capitalist colonists have focused their efforts on Southern Appalachia since early stages of European conquest and colonization. The Appalachian Mountains act as a natural barrier between the Atlantic coast and the rich inland, making it a ‘key’ resource in achieving power (Dunaway, 1996). Property was an essential technology used by colonizers to violently establish the settler state of the United States and justify their actions in Appalachia. The creation of private property was directly tied to the making of settler state institutions and infrastructures and violent economies of enslavement and dispossession (Cowen, 2020). Infrastructure is rooted in the colonial contexts through which it emerges and expands, which can be observed in rental housing infrastructure in Appalachian cities today.

Settler-colonial and white supremacist logics have prevailed through spatial projects that have done their best to marginalize the histories and spatial imaginaries of Black, Indigenous, and poor people in the United States, in doing so, preserving unequal property. These cyclical spatial projects of urban renewal, predatory home-lending

practices, gentrification, financialization, and other repackaging of racialized dispossession and displacement have been justified by the promise of property. In the tradition of critical urban and Black geographies, it is important to historicize analyses by situating contemporary housing and property accumulation into an unbroken timeline of racial capitalism (Fields & Raymond, 2021). Racialized, class, and gendered dimensions of capitalism are embedded into the housing system and evictions are part of a wider process of socially reproducing racial difference and the working poor (Desmond, 2012; Fields & Raymond, 2021; Soederberg, 2018).

Knox County Context

Knoxville is in the heart of the Great Valley of Tennessee where the Holston and French Broad Rivers merge to form the Tennessee River, between the Cumberland Mountains to the northwest and the Great Smoky Mountains to the southeast. Following its colonial establishment as a fort in the American Revolution and occupation during the American Civil War, the geographic location made Knoxville an attraction for regional economic and social development, where the rivers and access to railroad connections made the area a distribution hub in the 1800s (Dunaway, 1996; City of Knoxville, 2022). The University of Tennessee, established as Blount College in 1794, and the historically Black Knoxville College, established in 1875, have also attracted students and scholars. Natural resources, such as lumber, coal, marble, and river-generated power helped establish Knoxville as an important city in the 20th century. The Tennessee Valley Authority's (TVA), a federally owned electric utility corporation, established in the

1930s as part of President Roosevelt's New Deal, is headquartered in Knoxville (Tennessee Valley Authority, 2022). Initially, TVA was created to provide economic development and regional planning for the Tennessee Valley, focusing on natural resources. By the end of World War II, the Tennessee River became one of the nation's largest electricity suppliers, attracting industries that rely on electric power and supplying energy to other federal government sites such as the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. Other public investments in the Great Smoky Mountain National Park and other local outdoor recreational areas further advanced Knoxville's economy and the region depends heavily on tourism today. However, the spatial logics engrained into these infrastructures that continue to organize the city were coupled with other urban transformations that drove the uneven development of housing.

In Knox County, the urban renewal project of the 1950s, following decades of redlining, displaced hundreds of Black families and was justified by the need to engineer solutions to prevent a creek from flooding in East Knoxville, preserving property value for future inhabitants (Figure 1). As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor describes in her book, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership*, the Fair Housing Act of 1968, that came into effect soon after Knox County started demolition for urban renewal, worked as a veil of anti-discrimination; racist structures and individuals maintain housing discrimination and preserve concepts of property in the exploitative housing institution long after discrimination was banned by the Fair Housing Act (Taylor, 2019). In Knox County this is especially obvious in rental

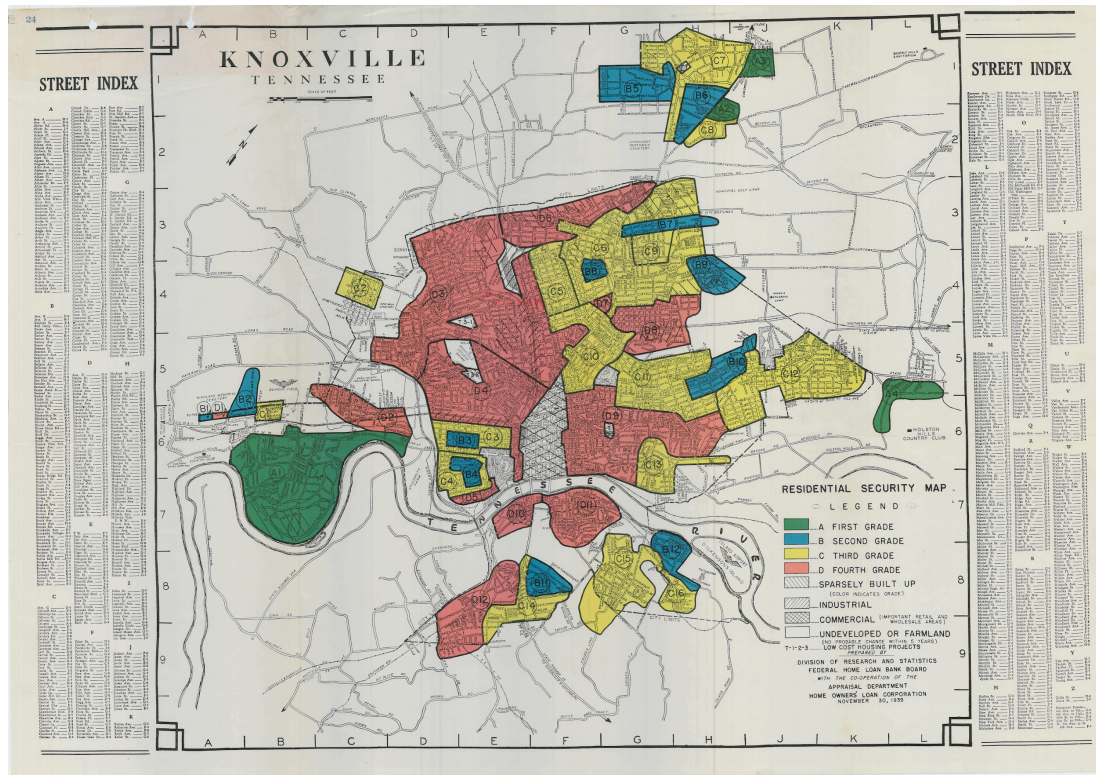


Figure 1. Knoxville redlining map, 1939.

housing, where the colonial legacy of property and dispossession lives on in the Knox County General Sessions Court. Here, Judge Andrew Jackson VI, six times great grandson of President, enslaver, and violent proponent of ethnic cleansing, Andrew Jackson, decides the fate of Knox County renters weekly. While Judge Jackson VI is not his great grandfather, the lineage eerily conveys the lasting power of white family and property relations.

Today, Knoxville is a southern mid-sized metropolitan area with a growing population. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, Knox County has a total population of 478,971 people, with white people making up 79 percent, Black people making up 8 percent, Hispanic or Latinx people making up 6 percent, and Asian people making up 2 percent. Knox County remains a very white area in East Tennessee. Thirteen percent of people in Knox County live in poverty and twelve percent of people in Knox County are disabled. In this research, I examine how the intersections of race and class impact renters in Knox County. The U.S. Census found that the median rent in Knox County in 2020 was \$933 a month which increased eight percent in three years. Renters are being priced out of their place of residence that they have called home for years and some decades. Additionally, in 2020, 3.6 percent of the Knox County population moved from a different state in the last year, compared to the statewide 2.9 percent (U.S. Census, 2022). Knoxville has become one of the most popular places to move by people leaving New York City, Los Angeles, and Washington D.C., according to the Knoxville Area Association of Realtors (KAAR) (McDermott, 2021). Knox County's industry, proximity

to federal public land, and relatively affordable housing nationally has attracted those with the means to move across the country during COVID-19. This influx of out of state homeowners and renters has impacted the local rental landscape, causing an increase in rental prices and a shortage of affordable rental units. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed people into unemployment, peaking at thirteen percent in April 2020, making it increasingly difficult for renters facing unemployment to make monthly payments. This cacophony of economic triggers impacting the housing market has led to a rental housing crisis in Knox County during COVID-19. Renters and those looking to acquire property are facing a seller's market, where property owners, developers, and landlords are in control of housing forces, maintaining power through property law while renters continue to face COVID-19 economic impacts.

How I came to study eviction

In the summer of 2020, I was attempting to envision the next chapter of my life and academic career at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville as a single person with two cats starting grad school during the COVID-19 pandemic. I was unable to visit Knoxville before signing my lease and moving because of the pandemic, and one-bedroom apartments that allowed pets and didn't consume my entire stipend were far and few between from what I could find online. This was my first interaction with rental housing during the national health crisis and subsequent housing crisis in Knox County which sparked my questions about tenants' experiences during this turbulent time. My move also coincided with national political reckoning in response to the murder of

George Floyd. In the months following May 25, 2020, people across the U.S. were called to action by blatant racial injustice. Nationwide protests for racial justice against the racially disparate effects of COVID-19 drew attention to inequity built into healthcare, housing, policing, and at the broad nexus of many of these disparities, private property.

Housing organizers, activists, and policy experts were working, and continue to work, to bring injustices felt by tenants during COVID-19 into the national discussion. National news coverage paired with local action inspired many to get involved. Organizers physically blocked housing courts from hearing eviction cases, created online disruptions shutting down court dockets for days, launched rent cancelation campaigns, and many other forms of action focused on tenant solidarity. Nonetheless, landlords filed more than 95,000 evictions in only eight major Southern cities in 2020 (Russek, 2021; Eviction Lab, 2021). The South's unique history and pro-landlord housing laws required that Southern advocacy groups forge distinctive strategies to combat the rental housing crisis. I was inspired to get involved and further investigate questions I had about housing (in)justice during COVID-19 in my mid-sized Southern city.

In the spring of 2021, I joined Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment (SOCM, pronounced "sock-em"), a "member-driven organization that utilizes civic involvement and collective action to empower rural and urban Tennesseans to have a great voice in determining their future" (SOCM, 2020). The organization believes that ordinary people have the power to create change and work towards a Tennessee where "all people are treated with dignity, where our environment is preserved

and protected, and where corporations and public officials are held accountable to the needs of the people” (SOCM, 2020), working for social, economic, and environmental justice for all. The Knoxville Chapter was founded in 2012 as the first urban chapter of the 50-year-old organization and since 2019, the Knoxville chapter has focused on housing justice issues throughout Knox County and anti-eviction efforts during COVID-19. My involvement grew as a participant in an anti-eviction campaign in which SOCM members went to housing court and door-to-door canvassing to inform tenants facing eviction about resources and protections available to tenants at the time.

The primary relief that was afforded to renters during the pandemic was an eviction moratorium order adopted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), where renters that were covered could defer payments to avoid eviction while the moratorium was enacted. The federal nationwide eviction moratorium was in place from March 2020 and ended July 31, 2021 when the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the Biden administration’s effort to extend the moratorium on evictions. The five questions that determine whether someone qualifies as a ‘covered’ person in the CDC declaration include:

1. Have I attempted to get government assistance for rent or housing?
2. Do I earn less than \$99k per year? OR If I file my taxes jointly, do we make less than \$198k yearly? OR Did I receive a stimulus check this year?
3. Am I unable to pay my full rent or housing due to substantial loss of income, loss of work hours, a lay-off, or extraordinary out-of-pocket medical expenses?

4. Am I making my best effort to make on-time payments to my landlord, as close to the full payment as possible?
5. If I am evicted, would I probably become homeless, be forced to move into a shelter, or move into a shared residence who live in close quarters?

If the answer to all five questions above was ‘yes’ then they were considered a ‘covered’ person (CDC, 2021). To substantiate this coverage, the tenant had to submit a signed CDC declaration to their landlord stating that they are eligible and that they are telling the truth, under legal penalty. Additionally, rental assistance was provided to local governments through the federal CARES Act pandemic relief package. While eviction court in other cities closed, in Knox County it was continuing on and off throughout the beginning of the pandemic. Proceedings stopped from March to June 2020 and December to March 2021. Some judges accepted the moratorium, others were skeptical despite a ruling from the TN Supreme Court upholding it. This meant that legal and housing services organizations including the Community Mediation Center, Legal Aid of East Tennessee, the Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee (CAC), and the Knox Housing Assistance Program were very important throughout the pandemic. The Community Mediation Center (CMC) provides mediation services to people in court for free with the hope to help resolve and manage conflicts amicably and efficiently. CMC is a nonprofit organization that serves low-income individuals that could not otherwise afford mediation, helping tenants in housing court negotiate agreements with landlords in Knox County. Judges advocate for mediation in housing court to find solutions that both

the landlord and the tenants are pleased with for no cost. Legal Aid is another organization that provided important resources for tenants during COVID-19. Legal Aid of East Tennessee (LAET) provides civil legal representation for those who need it most and advocate for under-served communities across 26 counties in Eastern Tennessee. They provide legal services to victims of domestic violence, seniors, and low-income individuals and families free of charge. Their limited funding makes it impossible for them to help everyone, but they have a vision for “An East Tennessee where justice is a community value and no one faces a legal problem alone” (Legal Aid of East Tennessee, 2022). At the beginning of the pandemic Knox County only had one Legal Aid attorney working on landlord / tenant cases. They found that COVID-19 brought unprecedented legal challenges for tenants and hired two new attorneys to serve Knox County communities. In addition to CMC and LAET, the Knox Housing Assistance Program aided renters financially impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic to help income-qualified residents make monthly utility or rental payments. The Knox Housing Assistance Program was established through federal stimulus funding and started in summer of 2021. To qualify, renters must have experienced one of the following since March 2020: qualified for unemployment benefits or experienced a reduction in income, incurred significant costs negatively impacting the financial stability of the household, or experienced other financial hardship negatively impacting the financial stability of the household (Knox Housing Assistance, 2022). Under this program, rent and utility assistance were available and eligible renter households could receive up to 18 months of

assistance but required a signed agreement by the landlord to substantiate the funding. Local community-based organizations also partnered or were contracted to share information about housing assistance including the CAC, public libraries, Knoxville Area Urban League, Knoxville Leadership Foundation/Compassion Coalition, Volunteer Ministry Center, East Tennessee PBS, HomeSource East Tennessee, Centro Hispano, and Socially Equal Energy Efficient Development (SEED).

I wanted to know how eviction continued to accrue during the pandemic, despite, what I would soon learn to be, the lackluster COVID-19 rental housing protections. My goal in this project is to examine how COVID-19 has impacted rental housing and how the housing system continues to protect property and facilitate dispossession through eviction. Complimenting this, I am also interested in sites of intervention and resistance against displacement.

Defining eviction and resistance

There are many ways to define eviction, but my personal exploration of this concept and process of displacement stems from two definitions. I first investigate *eviction filing* throughout Knox County when the eviction process begins with a landlord filing a legal claim to recover their property from a tenant. Within the Tennessee court system, a tenant must be given at least 14 days' notice by their landlord, sometimes with the opportunity to remedy the threat of eviction, prior to the landlord filing with the court for an eviction lawsuit. Once the eviction is filed, the tenant is served a detainer warrant and a trial is scheduled. While unofficial or informal evictions are surely happening

throughout Knox County, most of my analysis focuses on evictions that follow steps defined by state law that occur through law enforcement and the court system. Tennessee is under the Uniform Residential Landlord and Tenant Act (URLTA) which requires compliance from both the landlord and the tenant, intending to make the law fairer to both parties. URLTA requires that a landlord keep the building up to code for the health and safety of their tenants, make all repairs and do whatever is necessary to keep the property in habitable condition, and keep common areas clean and in safe condition in multi-unit complexes (TN Department of Health, 2022). URLTA does not include specifications about the handling of security deposits, rent increases, and rent control.

Much of my project has been collaboratively guided by SOCM and at the time that I joined the organization, SOCM was tracking eviction filing and had created an eviction filing database. This set-in motion my investigation of eviction filing in Knox County for my thesis research. A key distinction in this definition of eviction is that, while these tenants have been propelled into the eviction process, including the emotional and economic uncertainty of displacement, not all tenants that face eviction filing are evicted at the end of their court trial. This being said, based on the data, that I elaborate on in following chapters, most tenants during COVID-19 that face eviction filing are evicted, despite the protections enacted by the federal government. My second definition of eviction is loosely defined by the tenants who I interviewed that had experienced eviction. Some tenants I interviewed had faced the court system, others were able to negotiate agreements with their landlords with the help of mediation, Legal Aid, and

rental assistance but all were ultimately displaced from their homes. By this definition, the experience of displacement is centered, rather than the legal process.

Similar to the many forms of displacement tenants in Knox County face, there are many strategies of resistance in the housing landscape that strive to protect tenants' right to stay and right to make life and home in place. I focus on the formal Knox County housing system that protects those who own property and aids dispossession, but I also focus on pathways of resistance to this displacement system in the form of housing court advocates and community organizing, most publicly carried out through SOCM. These are examples of established, but constantly developing, pathways to a more just housing system that I was in conversation within my research. To build effective pathways, I believe understanding the context of the issue at hand is necessary. I attempt to help capture the eviction processes taking place and the rental housing landscape in Knox County to envision a more just future while highlighting current pathways towards housing justice.

This project is informed by my involvement in SOCM. I see this work as a part of the organizational effort towards housing justice. I employ a community geography framework, where my data and knowledge collection strive to serve the organizing community I belong to, the people working on anti-eviction efforts within the current housing system, and, ultimately, the tenant communities of Knox County. Shannon et al. (2020, p. 1148) define the emerging subfield of community geography as, “a praxis rooted in collaborations between academic and public scholars resulting in mutually

beneficial and co-produced knowledge... A commitment to praxis entails a fundamental integration of research and action, one that explicitly values excluded and marginalized perspectives and fosters just and sustainable communities.” In this project, I have done community geography in practice.

Using mixed-methods, in this thesis I examine three main questions about rental housing and property in Knox County:

1. What is the impact of COVID-19 on the stability of rental housing?
2. How does housing court facilitate eviction and protect property?
3. How is SOCM intervening in the rental housing landscape? What are the sites of intervention? What has shaped the responsibilities of SOCM to respond to the problem?

My thesis is arranged as follows: the next chapter reviews the literature that has informed this project, helping to contextualize my theoretical analysis of dispossession during COVID-19 in Knox County. I review the work of community, critical urban, and Black geographers to explain the roots of my investigation and research questions about housing justice, property, housing displacement, and activism during COVID-19. The third chapter is where I detail my housing justice methodological approach and collaboratively developed mixed-methods. I have employed participant observation as a researcher and member of SOCM, court-watching, semi-structured interviews, and mapping. The fourth chapter is where I weave together patterns I observed throughout my

mixed-methods research to answer my research questions in my Geographies of Displacement and Practices of Emplacement section. I examine the multi-layered rental housing and displacement landscape from many perspectives. My final chapter, Envisioning Housing Justice, describes current and potential pathways to a more just housing system that does not hinge on dispossession.

CHAPTER 2 RELEVANT LITERATURE REVIEW

Community geography

I ground my community geography framework in the work of Shannon and colleagues who define that community geography is an “interplay between theory and practice” (p. 1149), that seeks to integrate research and action in order to recenter marginalized perspectives and support just social change. Community geography focuses on local partnerships with community members and organizations to do collective work that supports their preexisting goals for change. As partners, geographers must maintain a sustained relationship that values communication and reflection with their community partners. Community geography is committed to flexible epistemologies and methods that value diverse modes of knowing from collaborators. Data collected from this research aims to serve specific audiences and goals for change, therefore contextual methods that forefront contextual knowledge systems are key (Shannon et al., 2021).

Community geography’s foundational principles are deeply rooted in feminist and Black geographies, where the situatedness of knowledge production is fore fronted (Shannon et al., 2021). Feminist and Black geographies emphasize the importance of centering alternative means of spatial knowledge in research, especially those marginalized in society and the academy. Community geography values diversity and inclusion and seeks to equitably embrace positionalities across racial, classed, gendered boundaries. This requires reflexivity and constant evaluation of the conditions and

context of the knowledge production. Given that Geography is a historically white discipline, bringing a community-centered epistemological perspective must be in dialogue with Black geographies is crucial to recentering Black life, agency, and spatiality, especially for researcher in the U.S. (Eaves, 2017; Shannon et al., 2021; McKittrick & Woods, 2007). Additionally, community geography often focuses on communal modes of resistance that shape our worlds, emphasizing that people make place, and refusing to focus on the oppressive structures they live in.

I have used this disciplinary framework to guide my research, investigating questions of housing (in)justice during COVID-19 in Knox County. My scholar activism requires that I move beyond the bifurcation of my academics and my activism because they are impossible to separate. I'm constantly learning ways to see the world, in and out of the classroom, and my organizing work is in direct response to my learning (and vice-versa). The methods chapter, following this chapter, details my mixed participatory methods that shape my community geography research in practice. I employ these methods to investigate how the Knox County rental housing system, and more specifically, the Knox County court system preserves property and facilitates eviction.

Property

This project chronicles the Knox County rental housing and eviction landscape during COVID-19 where I focus on the formal Knox County housing court system that has legal jurisdiction over property and housing cases. There is vast literature and theories of property, making it difficult to concisely define. Today, it is commonly

understood in housing court as a structure or piece of land that an owner has an exclusive right to. In this project I do not engage with Indigenous concepts of ownership and relationships to land, instead these conceptions come out of colonial logics based in British law and the U.S. empire acting against Indigenous patterns of land stewardship and anti-Black understandings of property (Bhandar, 2018; McElroy, 2020). Property law is used for racist housing violence that targets Black people and neighborhoods. Within a racial capitalist system, property law is a mechanism that maintains racialized differential power relations across the housing landscape, reflecting the conditions from which it emerged.

Black geographers have established that capitalism is perpetuated through anti-Black conditions that restrict Black people's access to capital and land and create conditions that uproot Black communities (Gilmore, 2002). Geographers Adam Bledsoe and Willie Wright (2019) argue that this renders Black lives a-spatial. Urban renewal, gentrification, and other reiterative urban spatial projects have used property to support the displacement of Black communities from their homes, rendering Black life a-spatial and maintaining racial capitalism. Capitalist explorers (colonists) discover (plunder) empty (populated) property for (re)development, which requires dispossession. Erin McElroy (2020) suggests that property acts as an anti-Black device used for dispossession and racial capitalism, where racialized understandings of land, property, and ownership are iteratively recoded and embedded into the housing displacement system. The housing displacement system can be understood as the network of structures,

actors, and processes propelling socio-spatial change through displacement. Current U.S. property law protects whiteness and has anti-Black historical logics rooted in slavery and its afterlives (Harris, 1993). As Brenna Bhandar (2018, p. 4) puts it,

The evolution of modern property laws and justifications for private property ownership were articulated through the attribution of value to the lives of those defined as having the capacity, will, and technology to appropriate, which in turn was contingent on prevailing concepts of race and racial difference. The colonial encounter produced a racial regime of ownership that persists into the present, creating a conceptual apparatus in which justifications for private property ownership remain bound to a concept of the human that is thoroughly racial in its makeup.

Property law was, and I argue still is, the foundational tool used to appropriate land and resources (Bhandar, 2018). The purpose and power of property law is to maintain the economic system of racial capitalism that reproduces in part through reliance on racist cultural and social norms. Therefore, property law is relational; it is woven into society as a means of control over people's lives and spatiality whereby property owners and those with some rights are more powerful than others. Property ownership remains a means to acquire and maintain social and political power. In the American social and spatial imaginary, dominated by white imaginaries, property ownership entails an absolute right to do whatever one desires with the space, piece of land, or object (Bhandar, 2018; Lipsitz, 2011). These imaginaries leach into property law.

This is evident in rental housing, where renters inhabit property owned by a landlord and eviction is a common practice of housing displacement. Tenants must negotiate what the expectations are on that property, such as utilities, maintenance, parking, etc., often in the form of a lease, but according to property law and the court system, the landlord's voice takes precedence. The landlord owns the property and pays taxes for the property, deeming their position more valuable and powerful within the court system. They have the power to surveil their property how they see fit as the property owner, and the right to evict a tenant for mistreating rules of their property. Eviction is a mechanism that maintains colonial property logics of dispossession through legal practices that make displacement possible. Legally, evictions function as a device to enforce exclusive rights over property within the rental housing system.

Matthew Desmond, a sociologist, founder of The Eviction Lab, and author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, has played a major role in situating eviction within a broader political-economic context and bringing eviction into the academic discussion. Desmond (2012) described the compounding stressors brought to those evicted and the vicious cycle of displacement that follows eviction. Material hardship, such as the loss of housing, loss of one's material items, and loss of access to fundamental resources like running water, electricity, and heat is followed by decreased residential security (Desmond, 2012). Eviction may lead to one losing their job or make it more difficult to secure a job. It often decreases one's ability to secure decent affordable housing and one's likelihood of benefiting from

affordable housing programs. Additionally, it may increase the likelihood of one living in a disadvantaged neighborhood in the future and ultimately facing eviction again. Material hardship followed by decreased residential security, as described by Desmond (2012), illustrates the consuming nature eviction can have on tenants: the cycle of unemployment leaves renters unable to pay rent, leading to eviction, leading to further employment instability, leading to increased difficulty securing a new rental unit, so on. When families face eviction and must find new housing, children are often forced to leave their school for a more geographically relevant school, disrupting normalcy. Eviction becomes a lasting process that people endure rather than a single event. For many, eviction propagates eviction. COVID-19 has exacerbated these preexisting stressors with dramatic increases in employment instability, medical care costs, time or resources dedicated to childcare, along with other stressors. My questions and analysis of property is an attempt to better understand racial, classed, gendered regimes of ownership, with the hope to make these relations more equitable for people who live in Knox County through community action pathways of resistance (Bhandar, 2018).

Intersectional understanding of COVID-19 displacement

Geographers have documented inequalities in eviction based on race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender in rental housing systems in the U.S. (Desmond, 2016; Medina et al., 2020). Housing justice is an intersectional project that requires attention to the overlapping structures of oppression that differentially impact tenants. Intersectionality is a Black feminist way of thinking and praxis that academics,

activists, and policymakers recognize as necessary in critical inquiry and research, specifically within social justice frameworks (Eaves & Al-Hindi, 2020; Collins, 2019).

As Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013, p. 795) assert:

What makes an analysis intersectional is not its use of the term ‘intersectionality,’ nor its being situated in a familiar genealogy, nor its drawing on lists of standard citations. Rather, what makes an analysis intersectional... is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power.

Intersectionality is a necessary lens of analysis in research that aims to capture processes of injustice and promote change.

Additionally, Eaves and Al-Hindi (2020) argue intersectional analyses of COVID-19 that turn the attention to how health crises differentially shape communities generates better research, scholarship, organizing, and policies. The spread of the virus, access to and attitudes toward healthcare institutions during COVID-19, and COVID-19 related policy and protections differently interact and impact varying intersections of race, gender, and class (Eaves & Al-Hindi, 2020). Eaves and Al-Hindi (2020, p. 134) argue that by,

[a]sking questions that acknowledge varying genealogies, including the role of human and land exploitation as well as the exertion of power by economic and social means, can help geographers operationalize terms such as ‘disadvantaged’ in ways that do not reify structures. Oversimplified observations regarding the

‘where’ of rates of COVID-19 infection overlook deeply embedded structures of marginalization employed by the U.S. empire.

Therefore, using intersectional theory, methods, and spatial understandings in research focusing on rental housing during COVID-19 is necessary.

Renting during a pandemic

COVID-19 has brought new attention to the relationship between existing inequalities such as intersectional poverty and poor housing in relation to differential disease and death, revealing existing and new health, economic, and political discrimination playing out across space (Ho & Maddrell, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic pressed the United States and the larger global economy into an economic crisis. Though the virus presents a threat to the entire population, the impact of COVID-19 has not been felt uniformly. Asymmetric patterns have been documented, both in terms of the health impact and the economic impact of the virus (Moreira & Hick, 2021). COVID-19 has brought a great financial burden for many renting individuals and families. Renters, making up a great portion of sectors most severely affected by the pandemic’s economic impact on employment, have been disproportionately affected by the economic crisis (Hepburn et al., 2021). American Community Survey data show that 31 percent of the population that was employed by the four industries most likely to be affected by the virus (food, entertainment, retail, and transportation) were renters (Goodman & Magder, 2020). People renting housing faced a cut in working hours or unemployment, as well as increased medical bills and other financially straining pulls due

to the pandemic. In a global health crisis, when everyone needs to be prioritizing their families' health and safety from the threat of the virus, the economic crisis brought on by COVID-19 acts as a compounding threat. Renters across the United States still face eviction, forcing displaced tenants into precarious positions that may threaten their health and safety during a global pandemic (Hepburn et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic is a public health crisis but also a capitalist crisis where property owners have been prioritized over workers (Madden, 2020). Deeply rooted socioeconomic inequalities have been exacerbated by the “Zoomification” process, where select positions have transitioned to online work through video conference software like Zoom, while others don't have this luxury (Madden, 2020, p. 678). Those working in essential positions, such as minimum-wage food-service or retail positions, must continue to show up in person and risk infection. Those working in non-essential positions that don't merit the Zoomified format of COVID-19 capitalism have faced unemployment. Meanwhile, rent continued, and continues, to accrue and people face eviction despite the COVID-19 protections created to protect tenants, like the moratorium, calling local organizers to action. COVID-19 has exacerbated preexisting inequalities.

The looming threat of eviction is reminiscent of the stealthy nature of COVID-19: the constant invisible threat of contracting the virus that has very visible outcomes on its victims and has transformed our everyday lives (Shaw, 2020). The stress of contracting COVID-19 has a consuming nature for those that are in touch with its material outcomes. Similar to the constant stress brought on by the virus, tenants face chronic uncertainty

and precarity renting at this time as the looming threat of displacement impacts the stability of their home and housing (Muñoz, 2018). Renters during the pandemic are thus juggling two ‘invisible’ threats that act as compounding stressors.

The COVID-19 health crisis has emphasized flaws in the United States’ racial capitalist economic system and exacerbated socioeconomic inequalities as renters have been neglected. The constantly looming threat of not only contracting a deadly virus, but also being (re)submerged into the process of eviction burdens renters.

CHAPTER 3 METHODS

My research builds on the methodologies of Roy et al., *Methodologies for Housing Justice Resource Guide*. This resource foregrounds innovative methods used by researchers in academia and activism interested in housing justice and liberation (Roy et al., 2020). The authors assert that methodology is political and rooted in discourse about power and knowledge relations within situated worlds. They ask what an orientation towards housing justice looks like in research methods geared towards social change? First, they posit methodologies should focus on structural mechanisms of dispossession and displacement in unequal cities, illuminating how state-organized violence has reinforced difference and policed racialized bodies and communities. Second, they describe the importance of research tools and technologies that are attentive to the politics and ethics of data. Housing justice requires research justice, emphasizing the importance of who collects and controls data and how these tools, platforms, and archives are used and for what purpose. Third, they assert that an orientation towards housing justice requires an attention to strategies and imaginaries of emplacement. Emplacement is used here

to indicate how communities reclaim lived territories in the face of racial banishment and against the empire of finance. If methodologies for housing justice are to live up to [Clyde] Woods's call to be something more than an "autopsy," then such methodologies have to contribute to the right to remember,

the right to stay and the right to actively create new territories of life (p. 14; Woods, 2002).

The orientation of my methodology is guided by these three features in conversation with community geographies with the goal to collect data that record mechanisms of displacement and think alongside organizers working to emplace housing justice in Knox County.

Following the work of feminist scholars, I understand knowledge as situated and partial. Researchers create and frame knowledge through their perception of the world that is specifically grounded and socially situated by their race, gender, class, and ability (among others) making knowledge body-specific and site-specific (Collins, 1998; Haraway, 2020). The ideas and information that researchers acquire through education, training, and practical experience often strongly inform what researchers understand as facts. Feminist geographers and Black geographers ask us to take a step back and question *how* we have come to know these facts (McKittrick, 2021). Which knowledge systems have been privileged as the truth in our educational systems and how do research agendas reproduce these unquestioned perspectives? There is a long history in social science of researchers who are members of dominant groups (especially white researchers from privileged classes, like me) who set out to investigate the ways in which the world functions. This research is often soaked in academic language and theory that prioritizes fellow academic readers, serving others that belong to the dominant groups rather than those the research investigates. This research fails to be reflexive in presenting

findings by not interrogating how methods and analysis is embedded within *their* situated knowledge system that serves their perspectives, concerns, and experiences (McKittrick, 2020; McCorkel & Myers, 2003). For many geographers, reflexivity is a situating practice and central to their methods (Rose, 1997). Knowledge is always tangled with personal perspectives that have been accumulated across time and space and as a researcher I must reflect on the effect of identity and structural systems that impact the perception of identity. Rather than treating identity as an obstacle to objective understanding, I investigate identity as the object of political struggle (McCorkel & Myers, 2003). The racialized, class, and gendered dimensions of capitalism are embedded into the housing system so what does it mean for a young, white, middle-class woman to conduct this research?

I have never faced eviction. I'm a midwesterner living in the South for the first time. I rent from *The Hive*, a large apartment rental company in Knox County that mainly rents to college students. I live very close to campus at the edge of Fort Sanders where the streets end, and train tracks begin. While my rent eats up more than 70 percent of my funding, I was able to choose where I live in Knox County with the ease of student loans. If I cannot pay my rent, my parents would support me. My street appears to be inhabited by mostly white, middle-class, college students who engage in Greek-life. Their parties litter the street with red solo cups and cheap beer cans that are later scavenged by houseless people who make money by collecting and recycling aluminum cans. Where I live has shaped my perception of Knox County. I have never faced eviction, but I identify

with renters. I am a graduate student activist and I have let my core values concerning justice and dignity and my personal feelings directly inform my research questions about eviction during the time of COVID-19 (Derickson & Routledge, 2015).

Throughout the pandemic, the dispossessionary logics that compose the United States' justice system have become increasingly evident. Collective anger, frustration, and heartbreak have sparked action and a call for reform. Through my research, I utilize my personal and collective emotions with other activists and tenants in Knox County to strategically mobilize and build solidarity for anti-eviction efforts. I came to this project wanting to better understand the issue of eviction in Knox County and more broadly understand how housing acts with structural systems of oppression in the Southern United States. How did eviction filing continue to accrue when the CDC had provided an eviction moratorium protection for renters nationally that was intended to be *minimum* protective provisioning?

I use mixed methods to grasp the many perspectives of those involved in and burdened by eviction in Knox County. I have employed the methods of participant observation, court-watching, semi-structured interviews, and mapping to approach my research questions from many perspectives. Additionally, by using mixed methods I am investigating the many layers of scaffolding that prop up eviction in Knox County. My methods attempt to capture the multi-scalar (individual, neighborhood, county, state, regional) issue of rental housing displacement.

My methodological approach is informed by feminist and scholar-activist geography. I apply intersectionality as a lens for understanding the persistent spatial inequalities in housing and resources available to people throughout my methods. Race, class, gender, and ability (among others) are intersecting, unequal systems that systemically disadvantage some people to the benefit of others (Crenshaw, 2017). Intersectionality as a method requires investigating difference and its relation to power (Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 1998). It is a lens for analyzing overlapping power structures that differently enable and disable peoples' livelihoods. Eviction has cultural, economic, and political impacts, making intersectionality a necessary feature of my mixed method analysis, therefore, my methods are grounded in intersectional theory. I use qualitative methods to explore the many, and at times contradictory, perspectives of those involved in the Knox County eviction system and process. I acknowledge that these stories are partial, but they work together to represent the construction of the rental housing landscape and displacement system (Rose, 1993).

Additionally, following the work of scholar-activist geographers, I have let resourcefulness and collaboration inform my methods (Derickson & Routledge, 2015). My research questions are directly informed by my involvement in organizing around anti-eviction efforts in Knox County. My methods have been guided by the goal of creating resources that could be used by SOCM and other organizations supporting tenants. As a member of SOCM's data team, I have worked in collaboration with SOCM, asking questions, learning, and developing methods and strategies of resistance together.

As a graduate student asking questions *with* SOCM, I have helped guide what is defined as useful and because my thesis research questions overlap with questions being asked by SOCM. To organize our efforts efficiently and effectively, methods have been collaboratively developed. My research aims to support the efforts of SOCM, working to, first, understand the current rental housing system and eviction landscape of Knox County to, second, better the lives of tenants in Knox County with the support of this knowledge. Additionally, I triangulate these findings through my mixed-methods approach.

My methods have evolved since I first asked questions about rental housing in Knox County. As feminist geography literature advocates, research must be flexible and dynamic from conception to completion (Billo & Hiemstra, 2010). Various constraints present themselves throughout research agendas physically, socially, and emotionally shaping methods. My methods' evolution has been guided by four main factors. The first factor is that each county has a unique eviction process and situation (Howell & Immergluck, 2021), making it necessary for me to take time to learn and evaluate the unique Knox County eviction process. As I learned more about the Knox County context, my methods morphed. The second factor guiding the evolution of my research process is that eviction legislation during the time of COVID-19 was a moving target. As legislation and state response to the pandemic shifted, organizing strategies shifted, impacting methods. The third factor, like any research performed at this time, was the pandemic. COVID-19 has made resourcefulness and flexibility necessary, forcefully impacting what

my methods look like. The final factor that has impacted my methods is that I'm a graduate student and still in training. I am absorbing information from my mentors and courses that is intended to better my research. I have implemented things I have learned along the way, guiding the evolution of my methodological approach.

Participant Observation

The first method that became a jumping off point for the rest of my data collection was participant observation. I joined SOCM while the organization was at a crossroads in the spring of 2021. Almost all the volunteer efforts were going into coordinating a weekly canvas to try and help as many tenants as possible. SOCM members weekly updated the database, listing all tenants on the docket for that week with their addresses. This list was split up into sublists based on geographic area (North, East, South, and West Knox County) and distributed to volunteers to canvas. Like many volunteer-based organizations, capacity is a constant consideration in our organization strategy, where organizing power considerably varies week to week impacting the best fit tools for our goals. Capacity was even more strained during COVID-19. As a result, SOCM prioritized efforts in canvassing by trying to reach residents that were under the most pressing threat of eviction. We would canvas the Sunday before the upcoming court date, that Tuesday, handing out fliers with information about how to access help, such as rental assistance, utility assistance, and information about the CDC moratorium before going to court. There was a shared sentiment that we were doing our best with our current strategies but that we did not have the best tools for the tenants that we were in

conversation with through canvassing. The CDC moratorium declaration was our primary form of help, and we were learning that it was not as successful in the Knox County court system as the CDC had envisioned. Additionally, the CDC moratorium was about to expire as an available resource for tenants and SOCM needed to shift our volunteer efforts. I became a part of the data collection team which has heavily influenced the methods I use in my thesis project. Data collection aimed to help SOCM better understand the rental housing landscape to target new organizing goals in the absence of the CDC moratorium.

The organization knows that I am a geography graduate student and researcher and that my project intends to illuminate the injustices that mobilize the organization to help find effective pathways towards housing justice. Members of SOCM welcomed the work that I do and I began to participate with the goal of developing my research protocol. I followed the flow of the organization's structure by taking on roles that needed to be filled and that I'm equipped to do. Most of the weekly work entailed compiling weekly dockets into SOCM's database, canvassing, attending housing court, attending SOCM meetings, and keeping in touch with other local community organizers, activists, and politicians. As a member, I have the opportunity to understand the organization from an insider's standpoint, participating and observing other member's weekly efforts that go into anti-eviction action. I have the opportunity to understand the decision-making processes and the ups and downs that come along with this work. Additionally, I have the opportunity to fill in gaps and triangulate data collected in my other methods. I have kept

a log of my activities and observations in the field through detailed notes, photos/videos, collecting resources such as flyers, among others.

According to scholar activist Laura Pulido (2008), accountability and reciprocity are fundamental in approaching research on community organizing. As a member of SOCM, I see myself as a part of the community struggle and have continuously aimed to be accountable to the organization and the relationships I have developed through my membership. Additionally, SOCM has given me access to resources, such as access to their database and has put me in contact with local networks that I otherwise would not have if I were not a member or researcher. This work requires mutual give and take and simply writing about the organization's efforts is not enough (Pulido, 2008). My intention is not to critique SOCM but I have to be reflexive in the organization's positionality as an overwhelmingly white group that works with other, more diverse organizations in the city. SOCM is a membership organization and has tried to let tenants lead in identifying concerns for the group to organize around, but the group remains mostly white.

Court-watching

Court-watching involves observing the process of decision making in the justice system which includes observing the legal actors who have the power and job to make life-changing decisions and the defendant and plaintiff whose lives are directly impacted by said decisions. The legal process of eviction is carried out in housing court, where landlords and tenants present their case and the judge reviews documentation related to the case and issues a ruling and often an eviction judgment. SOCM's data team employed

court-watching as a method to better understand the eviction process. This is how court-watching became a key method in my thesis research.

Figure 2 shows the unique layout of the Main Assembly room of the Knoxville City County Building where housing court was held beginning in spring 2021 to allow for social distancing after courts reopened as vaccines began to become available.

Defendants, plaintiffs, and observers entered through the main entrance where we were met by metal detectors. We then took a right turn towards the courtroom entrance where rental assistance interns had an information table, as a last resort help station for tenants facing their hearing that day. This help station was made available during the pandemic. In this hallway, attorneys spoke with their clients formulating last-minute strategies to unhouse people (displacement) /maintain housing (emplacement). The courtroom is a large, auditorium-like gallery with inclined, row seating and a stage in the front.

Additional, more accessible bench seating lines the back of the courtroom (Figure 2).

Often throughout the summer months of 2021, the gallery was full due to the very long housing docket. The shape of the courtroom creates an open atmosphere, making it possible to see everyone in the courtroom from almost every vantage point, emphasizing the lack of privacy in these vulnerable moments for tenants. The courtroom acts as a very different space for each person that enters. For some it is a place of work, where the same group of lawyers collect and discuss their golf plans for the afternoon in between cases and the judges catch up with the bailiffs they have known for decades. For the landlords and property managers that have lawyers, it is an annoying aspect of their weekly work

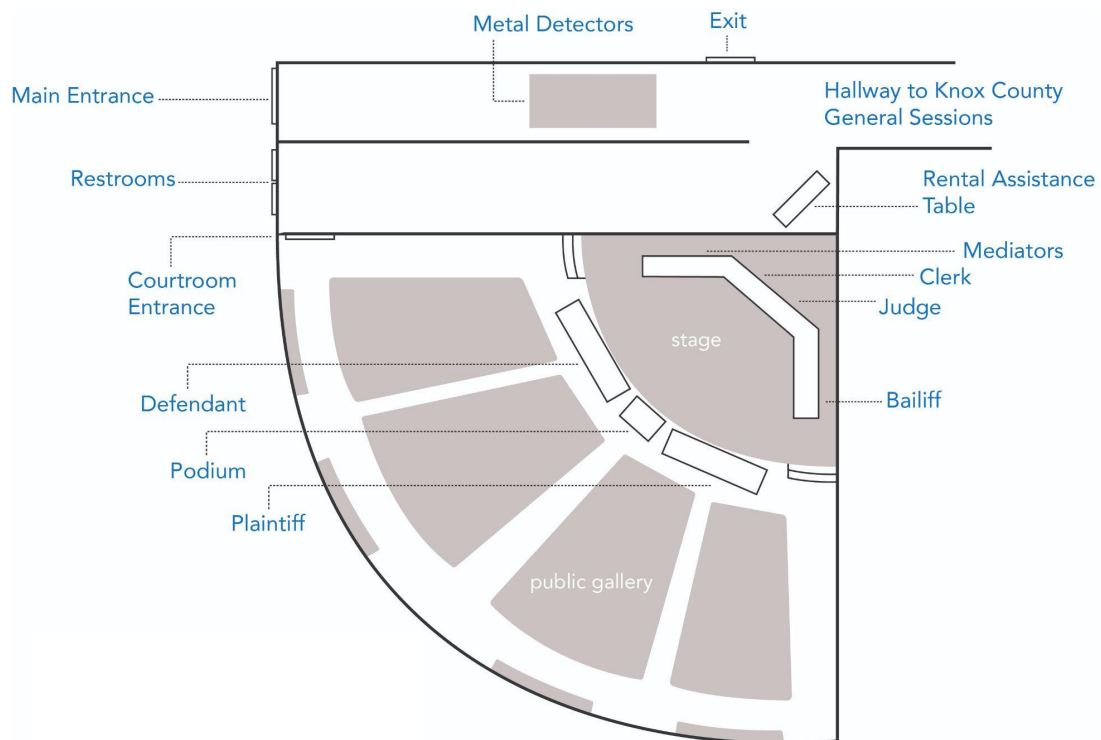


Figure 2. Main Assembly Room of the Knoxville City County Building Diagram. This is where I did most of my court-watching. Diagram made by Samantha Myers-Miller, 2022.

life. They show up and do what they are told by the attorneys, and they get the job (the eviction) done with. But for the majority of those that inhabit the courtroom space, it is a high-pressure space of uncertainty. The courtroom presents very different realities for those that cohabitate the space. People laugh, people cry, people cuss under their breath, all of which can be heard and observed in the echoing auditorium courtroom at the same time.

Throughout my court-watching, I sat in the third group of the public gallery row seating from the left (where Figure 2's "public gallery" label is). I brought a notebook and a pen to take field notes. I wore clothing that would help me blend into the courtroom atmosphere (nice pants, nondescript tops, closed toe shoes). Judges and other courtroom actors sometimes comment on what people wear, using it as an excuse to call people out in the space. I silenced my phone when entering. I didn't want to interrupt court proceedings or pull attention my way. I wanted to be respectful of the process while taking advantage of the public setting.

Initially, like fellow SOCM members, I was there to learn the ebb and flow of the courtroom. I took notes on how the eviction process was legally carried out, including questions and noteworthy patterns that subjectively seemed useful for SOCM. For example, the first day I court-watched I had no idea that "for possession" meant that the tenant was evicted. After my first couple of visits, I began taking (what I thought at the time were) consistent field notes. I kept track of which judge was ruling that day, interesting quotes said by tenants and landlords, side remarks made by observers,

anything I deemed “noteworthy” at that time. As a researcher asking questions about how COVID-19 was impacting rental housing, I was very interested in how the moratorium and rental assistance was discussed in the courtroom and whether it protected tenants in practice. Additionally, I began keeping a tally of the perceived race and gender of the tenants being evicted and whether these evictions were defaults (meaning the tenant did not attend court so the case was in favor of the landlord by default), and due to missed rental payments or other lease violations. I was also tallying how often the CDC moratorium declaration was presented and whether it successfully delayed the tenants’ eviction. Jane Place Neighborhood Sustainability Initiative, a New Orleans based housing rights organization and Community Land Trust, had developed this tallying method to be used to support a right to counsel program, revealing who was most at risk of eviction when their courts reopened on June 15, 2020 (Jane Place Neighborhood Sustainability Initiative, 2022). They found that households headed by Black women and tenants who were unable to secure legal representation were at the highest risk. I was inspired by their methods in tracking patterns of eviction in court.

The courtroom’s pace is something to adjust to as an observer. I often felt overwhelmed by the legal jargon I was still learning and the fast-paced nature of housing court. My notes were subjective and had many holes, but I was learning a lot about the housing system and ways that anti-eviction organizing could intervene with this well-oiled displacement system. Additionally, the people who were facing eviction’s complex entangled stories of social, economic, and political struggles but also resistance that were

systematically being ignored throughout the court process struck me. Court-watching was a localized method of learning about the Knox eviction site and situation at this time.

Through collaborative brainstorming with SOCM's data team, we formed a new court-watching method intended to collect data that could be used to support pro-tenant campaigns in the future. We created a standardized court-watching survey, reminiscent of Jane Place's method, to be filled out by any member court-watching on a given day that kept track of outcome (default eviction, tenant eviction, dismissed, consent judgment, continued), attorney for tenant (no, yes private attorney, yes legal aid), perceived race of tenant, perceived gender of tenant, perceived race of landlord, perceived gender of landlord, cause for eviction (nonpayment, lease violation, lease term expired, not listed), mention of visible disability, and any additional notes. Additionally, we kept track of who collected the data, which judge was ruling that day, number of cases observed, number of cases on the docket, and the date.

In the meantime, I improved my qualitative field note methods. I began writing down as much as I could about each case I observed, including the survey information. I wrote down as many direct quotes as possible between the judge, plaintiffs, defendants, and attorneys. I wrote down observer remarks, bailiff body language and monitoring, things mentioned by the clerks, and anything else that I heard or observed. After leaving court, I filled in gaps in my field notes that I may have missed due to the pace of court while my memory was still crisp (see appendix). While still written from my position as a researcher asking questions about COVID-19, property, and eviction, this development in

my field note methods was a huge improvement. Rather than cherry-picking information that seemed relevant, I began to capture what was happening in the public courtroom, my ears being the audio recorder and my notes a live transcription service.

A wealth of data about legal decision-making simply does not exist outside of the courtroom, making it an important space for data collection. According to feminist geography scholars, court-watching is sensitive to connected micro- and macro- power relations and can “offer rich insights about legal space, subjectivity, and power” (Faria et al., 2020). I aimed to do just this. The courtroom is an in-between space where any outcome is theoretically possible depending on the day, the time, the judge, the attorney, the landlord, COVID-19 legislation, the cultural-political stance on COVID-19, whether there are mediators, whether tenants use the right language, whether tenants dress up enough, whether tenants are able to reschedule conflicting scheduling such as work, childcare, doctors appointments, whether tenants are able to get a ride to the courthouse, and any other factors affecting a tenant’s ability to attend and defend themselves in court. The courtroom is a vital decision-making space where the lives of residents in Knox County are directly impacted; it is a space where subjectivity and power relations are central.

As a crucial space for tenants, the courtroom presents an opportunity to investigate questions of publicness in the legal life of eviction (Gill & Hynes, 2020). The publicness of court and the nature of the life-altering decisions that take place in the courtroom space also present ethical issues for those witnessing. Court trials are very

personal for tenants, yet they are public processes intended to allow the general public see that the justice system is functioning properly and treating people fairly. I became a witness to court processes, doing just this; I documented when and where the justice system succeeded or fell short, enabling or disabling Knox County tenants' livelihoods. Court-watching has been a method employed by legal geographers and activists due to its categorization as a public space (Faria et al., 2020). Geographers have long been intrigued by the public / private dichotomy used to police and surveil urban spaces, as well as the reality of *who* is enabled to access public goods and spaces. "Publicness" is often murky and complex in practice (Gill & Hynes, 2020).

I witnessed this complexity as a researcher court-watching. Courtroom bailiffs monitor observers' behaviors, regulating who is allowed in the courtroom. No shorts allowed in the courtroom. No electronic devices allowed (unless you are an attorney). Additionally, during COVID-19, many people must consider their medical status when entering the courtroom. Masks were required at the beginning of the pandemic and were distributed to people at the entrance of the Knoxville City County building. In the summer of 2021, the mask mandate was lifted. Due to judges' hearing impairment, masks were often encouraged to be removed while speaking, specifically for tenants. This creates a barrier of entry for observers, and some tenants, with underlying health conditions. Another challenge to the "publicness" of court is observers' practical ability to observe and understand the flow of hearings (Gill & Hynes, 2020). The use of legal jargon and the speed at which hearings are carried out may impede observers'

understanding, challenging the courtroom as a “public” space. Thinking about the complexity of the publicness and accessibility of the courtroom informed my court-watching method.

Semi-Structured Interviews

I have conducted semi-structured interviews with tenants facing eviction and housing court advocates. As previously mentioned, through court-watching I had heard the complex entangled stories of social, economic, and political struggles and resistance that I wanted to document through conversational interviews. My semi-structured interviews intend to capture the informants' perspectives and allow them to tell their experiences in their own words (Dunn, 2000). These interviews focused on real people and their stories and treated the data gathered from these interviews as such. Within the past few decades, geographers have debated the validity of qualitative methods, especially among feminist geographers like Gillian Rose (Longhurst, 2003). The ability to truly portray an informants' voice is difficult in an interview setting, where a power imbalance is inherent between informant and the researcher. While I acknowledge this, I am constantly reflexive in my positionality as a researcher and I have done my best to understand the informants' perspectives. In order to maximize my understanding of my research findings, I have triangulated my data with multiple informants, informant sources, and multiple methods (Longhurst, 2003). I have interviewed five tenants and six housing court advocates.

I utilized what Kreuger (1988) refers to as ‘recruiting on location’ to recruit informants that were facing eviction. I posted tenant recruitment flyers at the bus station in front of the Knox County Courthouse, Knox County Area Transit station, bus stations near apartments with the most evictions during COVID-19 (according to the SOCM database), in the mail centers of these apartments, as well as at information centers downtown (Figure 3). With the help of the McCroskey memorial fund, a University of Tennessee geography department grant created to support student research, I was able to advertise Kroger gift cards in return for the tenants’ time and care put into my project. I used Google Voice, a free service that allows you to set up a number that you can call or text from, to set up an 865 phone number to advertise on the flyers. The goal of the local area code was to make potential participants feel more familiar and possibly willing to reach out, rather than my foreign 815 phone number. Additionally, as a new member SOCM, I asked to interview members of the organization that I have come to know. I utilized the relationships I developed through SOCM to get in contact with other advocates.

Due to COVID-19, I gave informants the choice to do face-to-face, Zoom, or phone call interviews. The goal was that both the informant and I felt comfortable. Comfort is a delicate issue in the time of the pandemic. I was fully vaccinated, boosted and wore a mask when interviewing people in person. I used informed consent in my semi-structured interviews and gave the informant a copy of the consent form prior to beginning the interview as a resource for them to keep (Dunn, 2000). This was done to



FACING EVICITON?

**TENANTS FACING
EVICTION
NEEDED FOR A
RESEARCH STUDY**

We'd like to talk to you about your
experience with eviction in
Knoxville, Tennessee.

Participation will take 1 hour or less.

Interview participants will be
compensated with a Kroger gift card.



WANT TO PARTICIPATE?

If you're interested in participating, please contact:
Sam Myers-Miller
smyersmi@vols.utk.edu
(865) 325-9087

If you have any questions for the primary investigator of this project, please contact:
Nikki Luke
knluke@utk.edu
(865) 315-8447
University of Tennessee, Geography

Figure 3. Recruitment Flier, also see appendix.

empower the informant and attempt to enable a more equitable dynamic between the researcher and informant.

With their consent, which they could retract at any time, I recorded the interviews. I used an audio-recorder and took notes on visual cues that I later weaved together in my transcription phase of research (Dunn, 2000). Audio recordings were kept secure on a personal external hard drive. I use pseudonyms in this research, and I let the informants know that the interviews were to be reported anonymously. The names of all interview participants have been changed to pseudonyms. I followed an interview guide when conducting the semi-structured interviews that contained a list of carefully crafted questions, keywords, and concepts to guide the discussion. Each informant group (tenants and housing court advocates) had a different interview guide that was appropriate for their semi-structured interviews. I did not restrict myself with the guides, rather, they acted to ground my questions. My interview design was dynamic throughout my research progress; each informant was unique, and I used the guide in an individualized manner that felt appropriate for each interviewee.

Mapping

I used my GIS skills to create maps that helped with SOCM organizing efforts. Mapping was needed to help organize canvassing. It has been used as a tool to communicate with stakeholders the scale and magnitude of the eviction problem in Knox County. As Richa Nagar has said, I intended to “produce research agendas that [did] not merely address what is theoretically exciting or trendy *here*, but also what [was]

considered politically imperative by the communities we work with or are committed to over *there*” (Nagar, 2002, p. 184). I let the organization articulate what was needed from a mapping perspective and then apply my university relationships, GIS resources, and knowledge to create maps SOCM needed. Throughout my mapping method, the goal was to create tools that support the anti-eviction cause. I approach digital geographies and GIS as subdisciplines that require equal attention to positionality and reflexivity as other disciplines that engage with more qualitative methods. I understand space, subjects, and processes as co-produced and constantly evolving and transforming (Elwood, 2018). My maps are a limited, partial snapshot of Knox County’s eviction landscape intended to be used as a tool for organizing tactics that are dynamic in nature, rather than a perfect representation of the situation. I understand that in the process of trying to combat the production of difference and a landscape of displacement, my maps and digital representations may unintentionally reproduce that same difference. I do my best to use my training and experience to avoid this at all costs by checking in with my collaborators and constantly reassessing who will have access to and what is the purpose of these data visualizations, but I must acknowledge this risk.

As mentioned earlier, SOCM has built a database compiling information about eviction filings. This data presented many opportunities for mapping the eviction situation in Knox County. I mapped all addresses from the database, creating a map illustrating the hotspots of renter displacement. I worked with SOCM to create a draft of this map that could be used as informational material supporting anti-eviction efforts.

This map helped SOCM, and other organizations focusing on housing in Knox County, focus efforts on neighborhoods and apartment complexes that have higher concentrations of evictions. This map also was used as evidence of the Knox eviction crises for SOCM organizers and tenants contacting local city council members, compelling them to support a Right to Counsel campaign.

Mapping was an integral part organizing canvassing and surveying tenants throughout Knox County. Collaborating with members of SOCM and UTK, we designed GIS methodology and tools for dividing and designating addresses for anti-eviction canvassing. Accessibility and functionality was central in designing tools for volunteers to use to access the targeted canvassing addresses and to collect survey data. Throughout this process I worked to maintain the privacy of tenants, understanding that this is very sensitive information accompanying a sensitive moment in someone's life. Mapping as a method in this project was focused on doing community geography in practice.

Coding

As mentioned earlier, I understand all knowledge as situated and this is reflected in my interview analysis. I have transcribed interviews and approach the data from a narrative analysis perspective: "Narrative researchers treat narratives as socially situated interactive performances – as produced in this particular setting, for this particular audience, for these particular purposes" (Chase, 2008, p. 657). I understand that the setting of the interview, my position, and the context of our relationship is very important in shaping the narratives. Narrative is a retrospective method of communication where

the narrator organizes information and events into a meaningful whole. A narrative communicates the narrator's perspective through emotions, thoughts, and interpretations, featuring the uniqueness of each interviewed subject in their construction of their reality (Chase, 2008). I approach each interview subject as a narrator, as well as myself a narrator of my situated interests in this project, developing my own interpretations and finding ways to present the vast array of stories I encounter.

While I highlight the uniqueness of each actor, I also analyze the narratives for similarities and differences, emphasizing patterns in the stories, subjectivities, and realities that each narrator creates about their experiences in Knox County during COVID-19. I used NVivo to code transcribed quotes from people's stories, helping me organize and catalog patterns across interview subjects. Also using Nvivo and the same codes, I categorized interactions I witnessed court-watching and as a participant observer. I looked for patterns as a form of analysis that required triangulation and extensive sorting, comparing, contrasting, aggregating, and synthesizing of data collected in the form of narrations (Fetterman, 1998). My four methods are braided together to tell a multi-level story of the Knox County rental housing system during COVID-19 in my Findings / Analysis section.

Table 1. Summary of Fieldwork.

Research Approach	Category	Number	Individuals	Hours
Participant Observation	Canvassing	4		8
	Data Team Meeting	3		4
	Housing Retreat	1		7
	Right to Counsel Campaign Strategy Meeting	1		6
	Database Management			8
	Event tabling	1		3
	Sub-total			36
Court-watching	CDC Moratorium in Effect	5		15
	No CDC Moratorium in Effect	5		15
	Sub-total	10		30
Semi-Structured Interviews	Tenants		5	4
	Housing Court Advocate		6	6
	Sub-total		11	10
Mapping	Map for SOCM	1		1
	Canvas maps	2		3
	Thesis maps	2		10
	Sub-total	5		14
Total				90

CHAPTER 4 GEOGRAPHIES OF DISPLACEMENT AND PRACTICES OF EMPLACEMENT

In this chapter I weave together the findings from my mixed-methods data, following patterns I observed throughout my data collection. First, I examine the broad importance of housing and the pervasive impact of eviction and housing displacement for tenants. Second, I discuss patterns of rental housing inequity and discrimination in Knox County and the role public housing plays. Third, I examine how housing court facilitates eviction and housing precarity, neglecting tenants in many forms as well as strategies of resistance and pathways of emplacement in the current housing network. And finally, I summarize how COVID-19 has impacted the overlapping experiences of renting housing, eviction, housing court, the housing market, and the overall rapidly changing housing landscape of Knox County.

My thesis research examines rental housing during COVID-19 from many perspectives. I understand it as a multi-layered analysis of the broader Knox County rental housing and displacement landscape. I use the knowledge and experiences of people that live across Knox County in tenant and activist communities to create a mosaic of the complex system that has impacts on many scales. It is my snapshot of the rapidly transforming rental housing system.

One of the first opportunities I had as a researcher in SOCM was to map the thousands of eviction filing addresses compiled in the SOCM database to help us get an idea of the geographic patterns of displacement in Knox County during COVID-19. It

also serves as an effective communication tool to visualize the scale of the eviction problem in our rental housing system. Figure 4 is an updated version of this map from April 2022. Gray points represent 2,900 individual eviction filings (darker piles of points represent an eviction hotspot such as an apartment complex that is a repeat evictor) and the heat map indicates concentrations of eviction filing (yellow indicating a hotspot, blue indicating lower concentrations) (Figure 4). This map shows the spatial patterning of eviction, with concentrations of filing in North, East, and South Knoxville. SOCM plans to publish a version of this map to inform the broader community of housing injustices taking place and to demand change.

The Importance of Housing and the Impact of Displacement

To answer my first research question - what is the impact of COVID-19 on the stability of rental housing? - I needed to understand the rental housing system and the experience of housing displacement in Knox County independently. It immediately became apparent in my fieldwork and interviews that rental housing and eviction in Knox County has been a problem for a long time and that the pandemic has only exacerbated preexisting struggles. Throughout my tenant interview recruitment process, even though I specifically requested tenants that had gone through eviction during COVID-19, Knoxvilleans were contacting me about their experience with eviction from years ago, some even decades ago. Eviction had lasting effects on their lives and they were interested in telling their stories. These tenants offered rich insights in how Knox County's rental landscape had changed. These conversations made me want to better

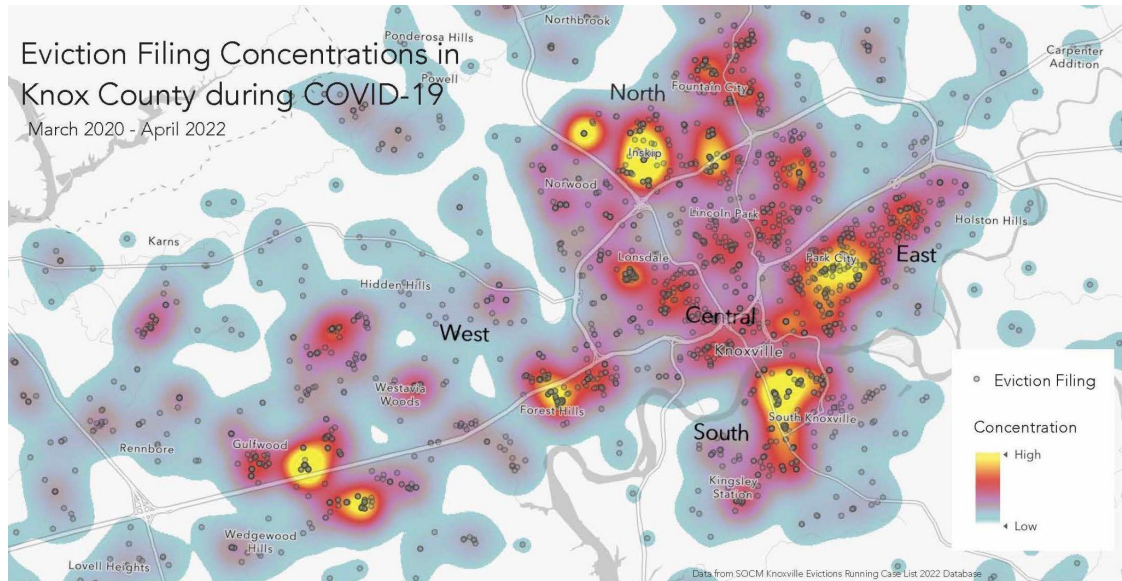


Figure 4. Eviction filing concentrations in Knox County using data from the SOCM Knoxville Evictions Running Case-list 2022 database, March 2020 – April 2022. Map made by Samantha Myers-Miller, 2022.

understand the lasting impact of housing precarity and its overlapping impacts on other aspects of life.

The importance of housing was clear throughout interviews with tenants, conversations with tenants during canvassing with SOCM, and court-watching. The stressful potential of cascading life-changing impacts was a common sentiment expressed by Knox County tenants when discussing their housing instability and eviction. I witnessed tenants in court asking judges: “Where will I go and what will I do? How will I pay for that? How will I find an apartment?” These questions emphasize how central housing is to daily life. They also express how dire the outcome of these cases is for tenants.

Throughout my findings, I return to one housing court advocate’s perspective. Alex, a white person, works directly with tenants facing eviction within the housing court system. Alex understands the centrality of housing. They described the importance of housing, and the lasting impact housing instability and eviction has for the tenants they work with:

Our clients are being forced farther and farther out into the edges, even past the city limits into another county, and that’s disruptive to most things. Obviously, personally into their families, but also, let’s say they were getting regular mental health treatment downtown at the community mental health center. Well now they don’t have a good way to access that or it’s just too hard to access because we don’t have enough public transportation and Knoxville public transportation is

bad enough, but now we're asking somebody to do a bus transfer from Powell or out of the county to access fundamental resources, which is impossible.

Alex described the interconnectedness of access to housing, healthcare, and transportation for Knox County renters. Housing is a fundamental resource that impacts almost all aspects of peoples' lives. It influences necessary everyday components of life, such as sleeping, eating, and family habits, and can have lasting implications. Eviction and debt built up from rental payments have lasting effects on peoples' ability to secure resources for their future. The debt system impacts residents' credit, having serious implications for obtaining a phone, credit card, car, loan, insurance and many other tools and resources that enable daily life. Both the everyday and enduring importance of housing have social, economic, and political effects. These implications overlap with the spatial entanglements of access to fair, affordable, well-maintained housing as well as access to other fundamental resources, such as healthcare, childcare, work, and transportation. Housing is a key component of maintaining community and family health which has lasting implications for current and future generations. Housing can thus be understood as a cornerstone of social reproduction, which feminist geographers have examined as the network of social practices and institutions necessary to sustain everyday life (Katz 2001). Eviction represents a crisis of social reproduction for renters.

Discrimination

For many Knox County tenants, discrimination is a defining component of renting and eviction. Discrimination throughout the Knox County housing system takes many

forms. This requires an intersectional framework of analysis, understanding housing in relation to poverty, race, gender, disability, mental health, and age. Otis, a lifelong Knox County resident, said his biggest challenge as a renter is: “Being Black. People don’t treat me fair.” He grew up in East Knoxville with his family in public housing and has lived in South and West Knoxville (Figure 5). Knoxville’s Community Development Corporation (KCDC) is the public housing authority of Knox County. They rent close to 4,000 units across 20 properties and distribute 4,000 Section 8 vouchers (KCDC, 2022). Otis has a lot of experience living under the management of KCDC and he discussed the discrimination he has faced as a disabled, Black man with a stutter renting in Knox County. Otis expressed how hard it has been to find secure, sustainable housing with a criminal background:

I thought KCDC would let me rent from somebody else so that I could move but still use the vouchers, but I guess everyone has their own rules. I got approved for a voucher but when I went to get an apartment, they wouldn’t let me in because of my criminal background check. I have stuff on my record from 12 years ago. I had bad experiences with drugs... but that’s old news, I’ve been clean for 8 years. Background checks are a way landlords and rental companies judge a rental candidate’s past mistakes and character as a form of, what they frame as, risk management for their property. Background checks in rental housing are a mechanism for discrimination. Criminal background checks don’t provide accurate information about a person’s life or character. Rather, they show who the police target and charge with criminal offenses.

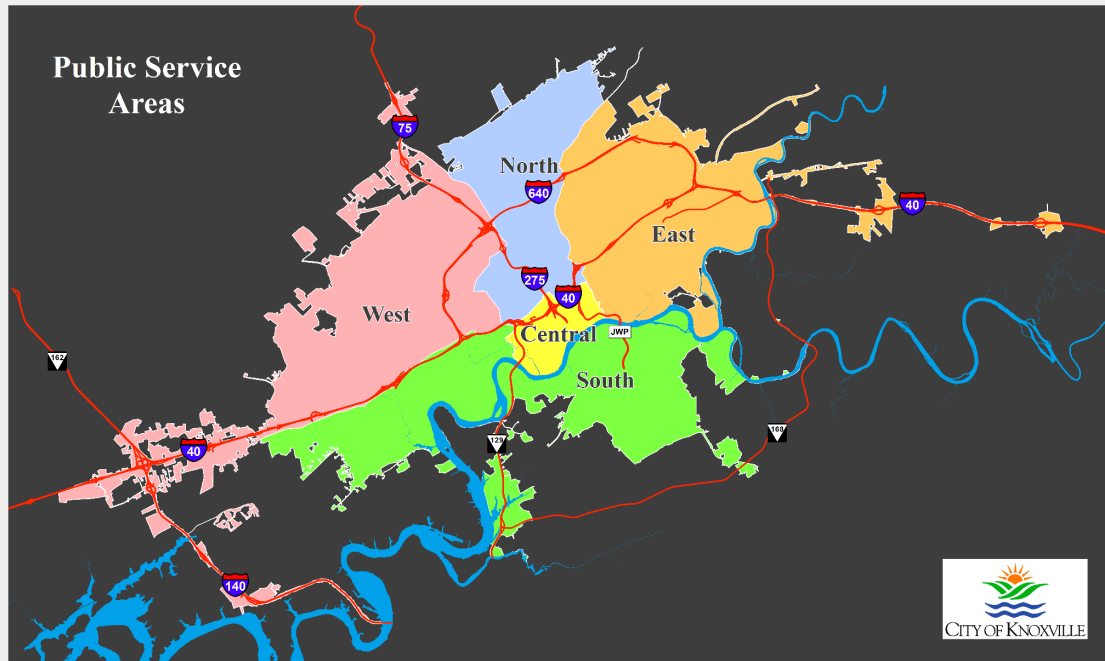


Figure 5. Public Service Areas map from Knoxville’s Public Service Department, showing Central, North, East, South, and West Knoxville (April, 2022).

Discrimination Black people face in the justice system is used to prop up discrimination in housing, where criminal records are used to exclude people from accessing apartments. Otis's experience with the police 12 years ago continues to be a barrier of entry for securing housing, despite his drug use being 'old news'.

Public Housing; Nowhere to go

I found that KCDC and vouchers were important pieces of the Knox County housing system. It is often an opportunity advertised to people facing eviction as a last resort option. Like Otis, all of the tenants I interviewed expressed how difficult it was to get into public housing programs in Knox County. Each person was met with a long line, a waiting period, and more housing uncertainty. There are waiting lists for every KCDC property and priority is given to applicants with verified information for why they are seeking public housing under KCDC's list of criteria. These criteria include: lost home due to disaster, accessibility issues, domestic violence; homeless; disabled; working at least 20 hours per week; over the age of 62, and/or disabled, and homeless (KCDC, 2022). People that meet these criteria and validate their qualification are prioritized in the waiting list. Additionally, KCDC requires a screening of criminal and housing record history, creating another barrier of entry. Those with criminal offenses or evictions on their record are excluded.

Alex reflected on their work with tenants and expressed that Black women, often mothers, face discrimination and are disproportionately evicted. Frequently, public housing doesn't provide the relief it's supposed to:

I've seen eviction disproportionately affect marginalized communities, particularly for Black women that I've represented. They often have one or multiple children, are fairly frequently single parents and under the threat of eviction, and a lot of times they're there for things that are complications of that [family] situation, which starts disadvantaging them just for being in the position they are in life. They are constantly torn between trying to work or acquire income and then take care of their kids and that becomes difficult.

Single parents must balance childcare, household responsibilities, and work to make monthly payments, like rent and utilities, on their own. This puts single parents at a disadvantage in the rental housing system when their capacity to make rental payments and balance other responsibilities is stretched thin. The average cost of a 2-bedroom apartment in Knoxville in March of 2022 is about \$1,200 while minimum wage in Tennessee is \$7.25 (Zumper, 2022; Rent.com, 2022; Apartmentfinder, 2022). To make \$1,200 monthly payments with a minimum wage job, the parent would have to work at least 42 hours a week. While the average does not accurately reflect the population of renters I am discussing, it does help illuminate how difficult it is to be a single parent renting in Knox County. This calculation does not even consider the time and care that goes into paying for, coordinating, and doing childcare. Some children are left on their own, out of necessity, and can cause trouble for their parent while they are at work. On top of this, the COVID-19 economic crisis disproportionately impacted the service

industry, women, and specifically women of color. Alex has seen cases where children have caused disruptions leading to eviction for the family:

Say they were in the private landlord market and then they get evicted and they try to get a section 8 voucher. If they get evicted from section 8 or one of the public housing complexes for some sort of violation in the lease agreement other than just not paying, then it starts prohibiting them from accessing other public housing in the near future. Well, that's the whole reason we have public housing, is to provide a place for people in those situations to land. And then, when they don't even have that, you have a massive risk to those peoples' well-being: physical health, mental health, everything. Kids can't go to school and learn anything when they didn't get enough sleep last night because they had to stay at their grandmother's house or their aunt's house, or they're worried about losing their house, or they don't have their things anymore – they don't have their clothes or their school supplies, or they don't have a place to store food. That's how central the problem of lack of housing is. If you don't have housing, most of us don't even realize how it would just completely disrupt your whole life.

Alex described the lasting impact eviction has on tenants' ability to secure housing in the future. In this sense, there is a cyclical nature to eviction. An initial event of displacement can propel a cycle of displacement for the single parent and children and the pandemic has pushed people into this eviction cycle due to job insecurity and other COVID-19 induced stressors on people's financial situations. Alex said that the pandemic

... introduced a lot of people that were never at risk of housing instability or financial instability or falling below the poverty line into a whole new situation because they might have lost their job due to the pandemic. Or they might have had other financial struggles like trying to find childcare when their kids had to be home from school or having to say no to work to stay home with the kids.

Alex's experience within the legal system leads them to believe that Black women are disproportionately evicted in Knox County, and COVID-19 has made this worse, which evidences discrimination in the rental housing system. Finding data to verify this is challenging due to poor record keeping throughout the court system.

I witnessed discrimination taking place while court-watching. On a Tuesday morning in May of 2021, I waited in line outside of the City County Building where housing court had been moved during the pandemic in downtown Knoxville (Figure 6). It was my first day of court-watching and I had arrived around 8:50 am for 9 am court. It had taken me a moment to find street parking, and I had opted to pay for the maximum of 2 hours at the meter. I entered the building through the revolving doors and walked through the metal detectors. I had forgotten I had a pocketknife in my backpack and the security person laughed and said that I could retrieve it when I left court. Flustered and knowing I was running late, I thanked them and, not thinking, I followed a group of people immediately ahead of me down a wide hallway towards where I assumed court was held. After about 2 minutes I realized I was in the wrong place and had to walk back towards the metal detectors to ask the security person where to go.



Figure 6. Housing court line overflowing the City County Building early Tuesday morning in May 2021.

I quietly shuffled into the overflowed municipal assembly room and found a spot in the tight row seating. The judge had already started hearing court cases. If I were a tenant, I very easily could have missed my opportunity to defend myself. The moratorium was still in effect, and I wanted to try to track its effectiveness in helping tenants stay in their homes. Quickly, I realized the pace of court and the jargon were a barrier for me to take coherent field notes on my first day. My notebook was filled with questions I had about the court process. I sat and listened to the tenant and landlord narratives about housing and property in Knox County. They often conflicted. I jot down quotes from tenants about their unfair living conditions. Black mold became a pattern. Tenants described contacting maintenance workers about the toxic fungus that was living in their homes and rather than fixing the problem, landlords filed an eviction for “disgusting living conditions that broke the lease.”

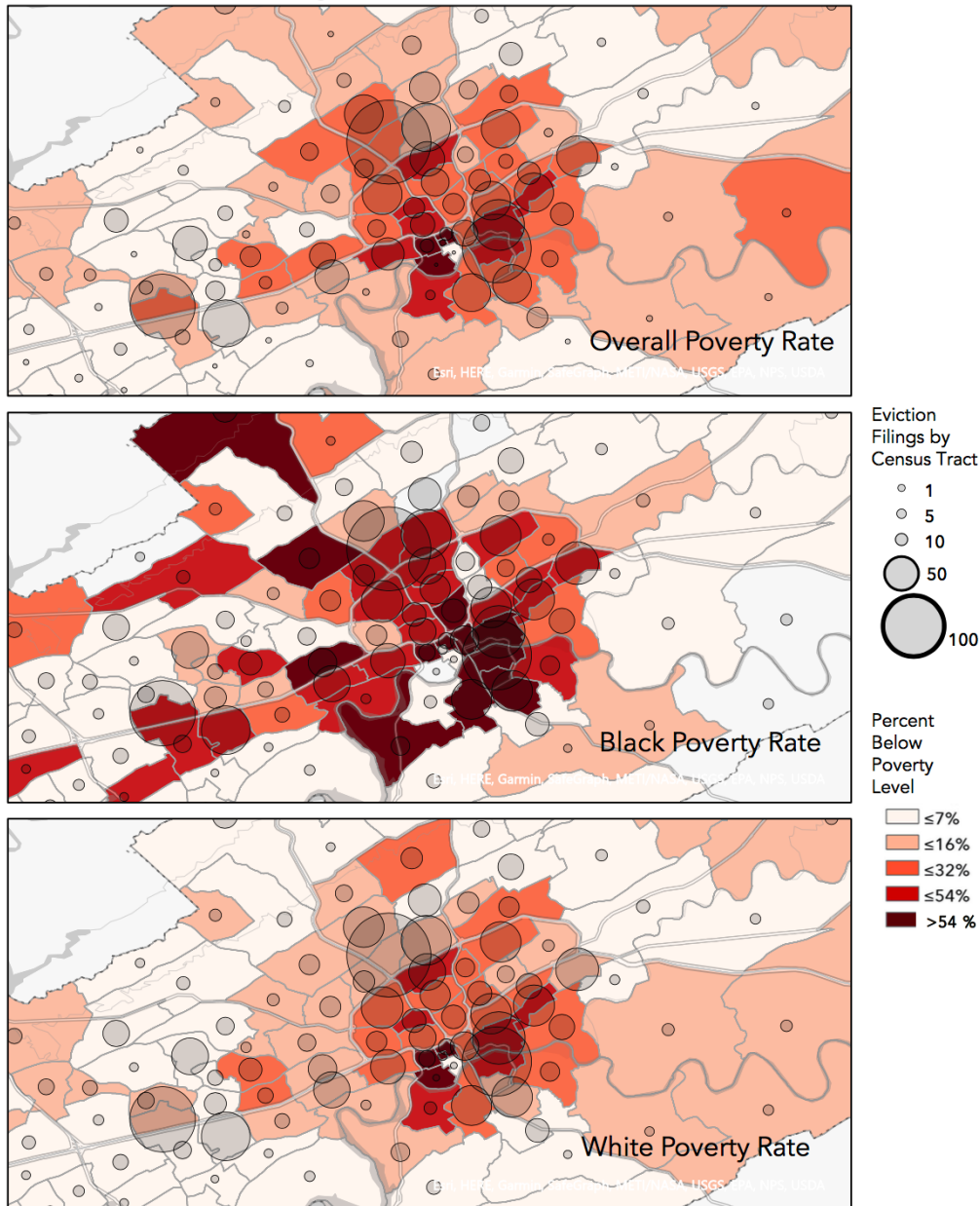
That day I found that the courtroom does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it projects the same discriminatory practices and features built into the broader housing and displacement system. Discrimination was common in the courtroom and coded language about poverty, race, gender, class, ability, age, and health was used by judges and attorneys. As I was leaving the courtroom to pay for my expired metered parking space, a tenant, an older Black man, was defending himself at the front of the courtroom: “I don’t think it’s a crime being broke.” He was describing how detrimental eviction would be for him. The judge responded: “This is a civil court case— we’re not sending you to prison for debt. We used to centuries ago but not anymore.” This exchange has stuck with me

throughout my research. Court cases reinforced preexisting inequity, benefiting those with the money and resources to make monthly rental payments and to access representation in court, ultimately preserving property and criminalizing poverty. The judge made a direct reference to the historical roots of current property law, saying that this tenant would have been sent to prison if the judgment was made centuries ago, referring to when property and liberty were bound and explicitly anti-Black.

Mapping the problem

To get a better grasp on the issue of discrimination based on race present in Knox County eviction filing, I mapped eviction filings and poverty rate in Knox County census tracts (Figure 7). The proportional gray circle symbols represent the number of eviction filings by census tract. The choropleth layer represents percent of people living below the poverty level by census tracts with cream representing lower poverty rates and burgundy representing the highest poverty rates. The top map portrays overall poverty rate, the middle map portrays Black poverty rate, and the bottom map portrays white poverty rate. Census tracts are the lowest geographic level of public data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey. I acknowledge that they are not the most effective level of data visualization for this project. I would like to map neighborhoods in the future. Additionally, analyses suggest that the 2020 Census may have significantly undercounted Black people, following a long history of the Census undercounting racialized communities, reinforcing federal abandonment (McKittrick & Woods, 2007; Bahrapour, 2021). This being said, these maps support what tenants and Alex have

Eviction Filings and Percent Poverty in Knox County Census Tracts during COVID-19 March 2020 - April 2022



Data from: Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment (SOCM) Knoxville Evictions Running Caselist 2022 Database, American Community Survey 2020.

Figure 7. Eviction Filing and Percent Poverty in Knox County Census Tracts during COVID-19, March 2020 – April 2022 using data from SOCM Knoxville Eviction Running Case-list 2022 database and the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey 2020. Made by Samantha Myers-Miller, 2022.

experienced: high concentrations of eviction during COVID-19 were filed in census tracts with higher Black poverty rates. Landlords that own property in neighborhoods with Black communities are evicting their tenants, leading me to believe that Black tenants are disproportionately being displaced in Knox County. The long history of housing discrimination based on race continues in the repackaged rental housing system. Property law remains a tool used to reproduce a racial regime of ownership

Housing Court and Eviction

My second research question - How does housing court facilitate eviction and protect property? - involves the formal housing court system, guiding the next level of my analysis. All of SOCM's organizing was centered around eviction filing with the hope to intervene in the housing court decision making processes, ideally helping tenants avoid an eviction judgment. The Knox Housing court system has legal jurisdiction over property and housing cases. This is where an eviction filing becomes an eviction judgment issued to tenants in the rental housing system and where property is protected. Housing court is a specialized sector of civil sessions court intended to improve housing justice throughout the county. Here, disputes about property are resolved through the legal process and resolution is finalized by the judge. I wanted to better understand how housing court functioned in practice and investigate the intricate network of judges, attorneys, clerks, and bailiffs that work within the formal housing justice system, directly impacting the lives of tenants and landlords consuming that decision-making space on their court dates.

The Contradiction of Representation

In my time spent court-watching, it became apparent that tenants were significantly more successful negotiating an agreement and avoiding an eviction judgment when they had representation. For many tenants, friends and family are the only form of support in the courtroom that they have. They cannot afford hiring a lawyer and they do not meet the qualification for accessing Legal Aid. For those that do have the means, attorneys are hired for their expertise in law, and they assist their clients through the court process. Summer of 2021, SOCM started to track the success rate of those with and those without an attorney and the data dramatically support this observation. In 4 days of court-watching, 101 cases were observed with 4 different judges. Only 13.3% of tenants with legal representation were evicted while 83.7% of tenants without legal representation were evicted. Tenants were significantly more likely to avoid eviction if they had an attorney. While this may seem like an obvious finding, it emphasized that housing court is a system designed to benefit property owners, managers, and those with the means to hire representation; a design that implicitly disadvantages renters. Alex described the fundamental contradiction of who is constitutionally guaranteed representation in the court system:

We have a guarantee of representation when you're charged with a crime because your liberty can be put at risk or put in jeopardy. If it's something where you can be locked up in jail, or potentially lose your life, then you're guaranteed representation. But when you think about everything that could land you in jail for

maybe 30 days, like simple possession, a very simple assault, or something that rose to a very minor but jailable offense and it's really not even all that massive of a disruption when you consider that most people don't go to jail for those things. Most people just pay a fine. It's not a place you want to be, but you've got a lawyer to help you through all of that. You're guaranteed that, constitutionally. But if you're at risk of losing your whole house, you don't get a lawyer. There's no guarantee; there's no protection there for you. You're only at the mercy of what an organization, like we, can provide or you have to go alone and there's a fundamental contradiction there once you consider how pervasive losing one's home is. It's hard to understand why we don't guarantee that for eviction cases.

Why is representation guaranteed for criminal cases but not for housing cases when tenants are at risk of losing their homes? As Alex asserts and is also evidenced in data from Knoxville and other cities across the U.S., losing a home is a pervasive experience and it is possibly more impactful than being charged with a minor legal offense. People deserve a fair shot in court to maintain their homes and livelihoods. This emphasizes the way that the court system protects property over the people who inhabit the space, where representation is not guaranteed for tenants renting property and their livelihoods are jeopardized in housing court.

In a court system where people are not guaranteed representation, it would make sense, if people were taught how to navigate and use the system on their own. Yet, our

society is not trained in how to use our civil court system and the gap in education severely disadvantages tenants without representation. As Alex described:

If you're not educated on how to use your civic systems, your court systems, or your rights under the law then you won't access them. You won't take advantage of them... One of the best ways you could educate people on how the court works is when they show up for court, but they get nothing like that. There's nothing guiding them through the process from when they step into the doors. You see people just wandering around, wide-eyed, asking anybody who looks official, "where do I go and what do I do?" and I think it just highlights how bewildering and confusing the process is, almost to a point where you think it must be by design. If you wanted to design a process that was more confusing or less user-friendly, I think you'd be pretty hard-pressed to find one or come up with something worse or more intimidating than this. The state needs to do a better job designing the courts to counter that.

Alex emphasized that the court system, by design, disadvantages tenants. The Knox County Court system's buildings are confusing and not labeled well. After the court was closed during the spike in COVID-19 cases in December 2020, when it reopened, housing court was moved from the Old Knox County Courthouse to the municipal assembly room of the Knoxville City County Building. Tenants must find the courtroom in time to hear their name called. As I described earlier, on my first day court-watching I was late. The building was not well labeled, and I could not find the courtroom. By the

time I got there, maybe five minutes late, cases had already been heard. If tenants don't respond when their name is called out by the judge, the case may continue without the tenant, and they may be evicted. Jasmine, a tenant I interviewed, was evicted because she accidentally went to the wrong courtroom. She was there on time and had her necessary documents, but she didn't hear her name called and she later found out that she had been evicted.

If tenants hear their name called and respond to the judge, they must follow the established course of a trial. Many tenants do not know to bring any relevant documents that may support their case. Additionally, the use of legal jargon and the speed at which hearings are carried out is intimidating and inaccessible for the public. Legal procedures are rigid in form and have developed over centuries. They follow a formulaic structure in how a case must precede and they're designed for experts who have studied the law. Alex described this experience from the tenant's perspective:

It's like if you were having to step into a boxing ring and you've never thrown a punch in your life and all of a sudden, your opponent is Lennox Lewis [insert any professional boxer here]. It's not going to go well for you. I think that happens a lot, and some judges handle things very differently. Some literally expect the pro se litigant to seemingly be able to perform and have all of the knowledge and all the understanding of the terminology as an educated attorney and that's absurd.

I witnessed this exact absurd scenario play out in court one Tuesday morning in the winter of 2022. Serenity, a young Black woman, was the defendant in a contested

case that had been continued from a previous week. Serenity did not have a lawyer, but the white woman property manager did. Her lawyer was a white man. The property manager claimed that she was responsible for \$800 for the next month's rent and over \$2,908 in damages. Almost \$3,000 of damages were calculated from blind replacement, stove cleaning, wall painting, window air unit replacement, and floor damage costs: average sounding wear and tear damages for an outlandish price. The judge, an older white man, asked Serenity if she wanted to cross examine the property manager: "I hold you to the same standard as the attorney." Serenity smiled, shyly swaying in front of the podium, and said yes. She started to explain her situation when the property manager's lawyer interrupted to say, "This isn't testifying." A white man sitting behind me in the courtroom chuckled to himself, making fun of her inexperience. The judge responded by telling Serenity that a good cross examination question done by a professional is about three seconds long, for reference. She paused to consider this tip as she tried to quickly learn how to represent herself and went on to ask her questions: "Do you have our phone conversation recorded where we complained about black mold in the apartment? How do you know the floor damage was from my dog? I can't pay \$3,000. I don't have that money— where is this paint price coming from?"

The stress of learning while doing in such a high-pressure environment with such high stakes is illustrated in this case. Serenity was able to maintain her poise despite the circumstance but the courtroom system that privileges property owners and those with the

means to hire representation has little room built in for tenants to learn as they represent themselves.

Following Serenity's cross examination questions, the judge said, "When tenants don't have a lawyer, I tend to ask them a special question. Can I ask you this special question?" Serenity, of course, said yes. "A lot of tenants regret not asking certain questions. They realize after they get evicted that they should have asked or repeated a question as they're walking to their car after. So that judge with the crazy sense of humor is going to ask you a question: do you have any more questions?" Referring to himself in third person, the judge had a long off-putting story that directly implied that she may not have asked the right questions and that she may face an unfavorable outcome. Serenity said, in response, that she did not and apologized for her questions. The judge responded: "I'm glad folks sue each other because I don't have any other skills— don't apologize." People throughout the courtroom laughed at this joke the judge made. To him, this is a job where he can showcase his skill and very specific knowledge. He is the comedian sitting at the front of the room with all eyes on him. Everyone is there to make their case to him. In the meantime, the potentially life-altering decision weighs heavily on the tenants. The tenant's experience and the weight of the decision is trivialized. This case went on for probably 15 more minutes, ending with Serenity facing a \$3000 charge that would impact her credit far into the future.

This was a pattern I observed throughout court-watching. Judges often made jokes in the courtroom. A lot of jokes involved tenants and sometimes tenants were the subject of the joke:

Tenant (Black man): I have bed bugs and can't breathe from the black mold, and I have health issues. I'm worried about COVID.

Judge (white man): Well, you need to get out of there, don't you?

Following this exchange, chuckles echoed throughout the courtroom. Here, the judge framed eviction as a beneficial experience. Rather than listening and considering the tenant's perspective, the judge sided with the landlord and made a joke at the expense of the tenant, trivializing this tenant's living conditions, health condition, and story, ultimately making a joke of eviction. In a room full of people facing eviction, this sends a message about how the court understands the eviction process. This is just one example of many instances where judges have trivialized the eviction experience that I observed while court-watching. There is also a need for the judges to have more diverse backgrounds. As Alex described:

There's a gigantic cultural gap when every single judge that we have in Knox County that hears eviction cases is white, there's only one female, they're all over the age of 40, and you've got people who were overachievers and went to law school and now they sit as judges and they try to sort out problems with people that might have an eighth grade education who are Black or Latino or Asian...

Treatment can get very discouraging and it can be a pretty stark difference between white, English speakers that get up to have their case at times.

Judges are elected officials, reflecting the values of those who participate in the voting system. All the judges are white, upper-middle class, English-speaking only, and Republican. White, conservative judges are elected by Knox County residents and maintain historical white perspectives and spatial imaginaries about private property and housing in court. Judges that have, presumably, never faced serious housing instability and don't share perspectives and knowledge systems with the tenants have decision-making power. Here, property is an enduring device used for dispossession and racial capitalism. As Matt, the SOCM East Tennessee Community Leader and Organizer said in an interview: "Our system is set up to evict. It's not set up to protect." There is a need to center alternative and marginalized spatial knowledge in housing court to better reflect the people seeking housing justice. Matt reminded me in our interview that because judges are elected officials, we have the opportunity to go out and canvas neighborhoods to vote for judges that would better represent tenant perspectives. It would take a lot of our organizing power, but it could be one step closer to housing justice in Knox County.

An Unequal Structure

I have come to understand the courtroom as a hierarchical structure that advantages property owners and those with the means to hire representation (Figure 8). In this hierarchy, judges sit at the top, attorneys in the middle, and plaintiffs and defendants at the bottom. The judge's job is to make final decisions, putting them at the top of this

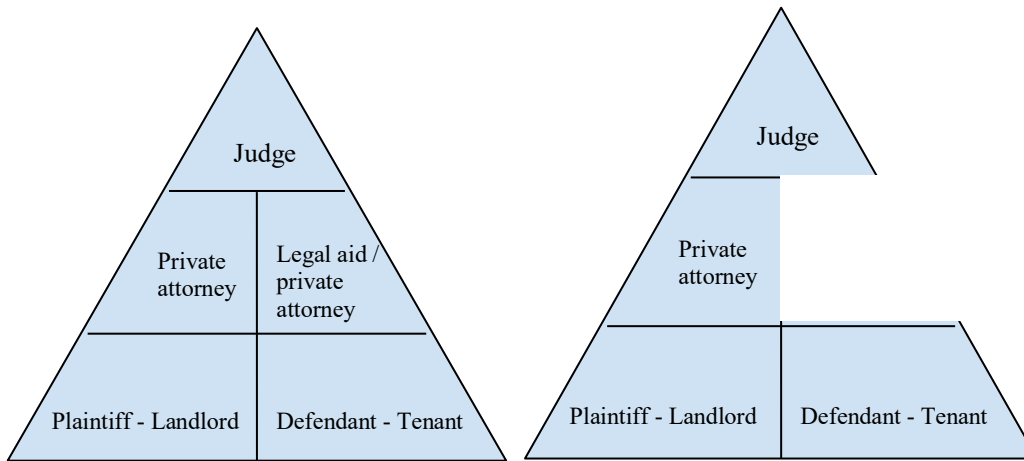


Figure 8. Courtroom hierarchy diagram. Diagram on left shows a fairer courtroom where the defendant has legal representation. Diagram on right shows a less fair courtroom where the defendant is without legal representation and must defend themselves in court, disadvantaging them.

hierarchy. They hold the highest level of authority. Below them sits legal representation. Attorneys know the law and have practiced displacing tenants or helping tenants maintain housing with these laws. Their knowledge is respected by the judges, and they have an intermediate amount of authority. The plaintiff (landlord / property manager) and the defendant (tenant) sit at the bottom of the hierarchy. They predominantly speak in layman's terms, and it is up to them to do their research and show up prepared, according to the courtroom structure. This is the basic hierarchical structure. Of course, there is more nuance, but this is a watered down representation of the power structure I have observed in court.

Because landlords often have multiple properties and spaces that they rent out, they are more likely to have attended housing court before and be familiar with courtroom procedures. Matt has spent a lot of time court-watching:

When someone goes up to face the judge, they have a lot against them. They have a law that's not geared towards them, they have landlords who have evicted dozens of people and those landlords are represented by lawyers who have evicted hundreds or even thousands of people... Judges are often dismissive or outright rude to tenants. I've seen some horrifying miscarriages of justice (Mat).

Landlords, landlord attorneys, and judges have a lot of practice evicting tenants. Based on court-watching and SOCM data, landlords often have legal representation. According to a 70-case sample of data from the SOCM database, 52 out of the 70 landlords had an attorney (74 percent). The database is still being processed but I imagine this pattern will

continue to be seen throughout our data. While most landlords have attorneys, the majority of tenants do not have access to legal representation, creating a gap in the hierarchical structure, disadvantaging tenants. Power is layered in the courtroom.

Strategies of Resistance and Emplacement

Support is also layered and comes in many forms in housing court. On my first day canvassing with SOCM, it became apparent that most tenants did not have the resources or knowledge available to them to feel confident to attend court, defend themselves, and leave with a favorable outcome. Before canvassing the group of SOCM members available that day would meet at a member's house to discuss the plan for the day, distribute lists of addresses that were divided by relative geographic location (North, East, South, and West Knox County, see Figure 5), distribute fliers, and answer any questions volunteers may have. Each weekend, we would knock on the doors of the addresses on our designated list, introduce ourselves, hand the resident the flier (Figure 9), and ask them if they had heard about the CDC moratorium. Most tenants that we spoke with had not heard about the moratorium. Once we explained the qualifications, a great deal of the people facing eviction believed that they qualified for protection, but for many it felt too late.

It was a hot Sunday afternoon in June, and I was canvassing our South Knoxville list with Jamie, a SOCM member. We were going down our list of addresses, marking them off as we went. Jamie parked her car on the side of a steep back road, and we walked up a gravel driveway to knock on the door of a small khaki house, half consumed

FACING EVICTION?

Get Help!

RENTAL ASSISTANCE: CALL 2-1-1

- Dial the 2-1-1 helpline OR (865) 215-4211
- Ask about Rent & Housing Assistance for those affected by COVID-19

UTILITY ASSISTANCE: CALL CAC

- Dial (865) 244-3085 and leave a message
- OR, Visit KnoxCAC.ORG for an application

HOLD YOUR LANDLORD ACCOUNTABLE

- Report Code Violations- Tenants can report them.
- Call 311, Email: pahrens@knoxvilletn.gov, or search "Miscellaneous Request Form" on KnoxvilleTN.gov
- Common Violations include: Damaged Gutters/Roofing/Siding; Electric/Plumbing Issues; Mold; Broken Windows

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS!

YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO A DAY IN COURT. ONLY A JUDGE CAN EVICT YOU.

THE CDC MORATORIUM ON EVICTIONS FOR NON-PAYMENT OF RENT HAS BEEN EXTENDED TO JUNE 30, 2021,

BUT YOU MUST APPLY!

The call operator will refer you to additional resources based on your situation. Have something handy for writing notes from the call!

Figure 9. SOCM Canvassing flier that was distributed to renters facing eviction while the moratorium was in place to help inform tenants of their rights and resources during COVID-19.

by kudzu. We were about to leave the flier at the door when a young white woman in her 20s answered. We introduced ourselves as we handed her the flier and she immediately started telling us her housing story: why she was getting evicted, how long she had lived there, her experiences with landlords renting in Knox County, and struggles to purchase a home. She also started asking a lot of questions. Questions about how she could get help in court and how she could be successful in court if she didn't have an attorney. Jamie taught me that it was important to remind people that we were not attorneys and that we could not provide sound advice for tenants' court hearings, but we did have fliers with contact information for resources and legal advocates. We were there to listen to their stories and help where we could, but we left feeling pretty unhelpful most of the time. We probably spent close to 20 minutes talking to this tenant.

One of the most striking takeaways from my first day of canvassing was how grateful the people we met were for SOCM organizers. In a housing system where very little care is shown for tenants, these residents expressed feeling seen and extremely thankful for the volunteer work we were doing to help them through the user-unfriendly housing court process. This became a theme throughout my research. I heard many stories about gratitude expressed by tenants from organizers and other tenant advocates. All the tenants I interviewed thanked me for listening to their stories. Tenants felt abandoned and helpless in the housing court system. Keisha, a tenant that was evicted at the beginning of 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic, expressed in an interview that she needed more support during that hard time:

What would have helped me the most during my eviction is if I had somebody there to support me and come to court with me. But I had to be independent, so it was definitely a challenge.

Attending court without a support system is intimidating for tenants. Simply having someone there, even if they are not an expert on the jargon used in the courtroom, would have made a difference for Keisha. Throughout the pandemic, SOCM volunteers who had made relationships with people they met while canvassing would come to court to support them. Jamie helped coordinate rides for some tenants who didn't have a way to get to the courthouse and sat with them in court. Matt dedicated a lot of time to one-on-one meetings with tenants to learn what would help them the most throughout the eviction process. Matt learned that, like Keisha, many people wanted someone there with them in the courtroom. Jamie and Matt sat next to them, listened for information from the judge or the attorneys that may apply to the tenants, helped clarify confusing jargon or processes, and were ready to listen to their response to the experience. They were friends to tenants who needed support.

Renting in Knox County During COVID-19

Returning to my initial research question - what is the impact of COVID-19 on the stability of rental housing? - it had become clear to me that, while eviction and the housing court system had been a problem in Knox County long before 2020, the pandemic had exacerbated pre-existing issues of housing instability and put a strain on the present rental housing system. COVID-19 became a compounding stressor on tenants

economically and socially. The pandemic made it increasingly difficult for residents to make monthly payments, leading to increased housing insecurity. Tenants were unaware of COVID-19 protections available to them (CDC moratorium, rental aid), which were intended to combat increased housing insecurity. Additionally, the CDC recommended methods of virus protection, such as social distancing and quarantining, made many tenants feel socially isolated from friends and family and made it more difficult for tenants to get in touch with their landlord, property managers, and maintenance workers. The spread of the virus, access to and attitudes toward healthcare institutions during COVID-19, and access to information about COVID-19 related policy and protections differentially impacted people from varying intersections of poverty, race, class, gender, health conditions in Knox County. In a time where everyone was being told that the safest, most effective COVID-19 defense was staying at home, tenants facing eviction did not have the means to protect themselves and others against the virus or a place to go. Keisha, the tenant who had wanted more support during her eviction described the compounding stress of trying to find a new apartment while she had COVID-19:

I was confronted by a letter, and I had been served a warrant to be removed. I had just come down with COVID. I had been donating plasma, so I was having muscle spasms and I had COVID at the same time. It was pretty hard for me to just move, move and find somewhere to go, especially without transportation. Everything was still booked. They had nothing but waiting lists everywhere. 200, 300, 500 waiting. I was like golly!

Keisha had been donating plasma to help pay her bills, but it was still very hard to stay economically afloat. She was facing eviction from an apartment she secured with a voucher and having to find somewhere to go while she had the virus:

I ended up having a \$1000 light bill. I was praying that I didn't actually have COVID. I was praying my granny didn't have COVID and that she made it through her surgery. I came to find out that the man that bought the house and was suing me was in the emergency room for COVID. My attorney also came in contact with somebody with COVID, so he had to stop working on my case. It prolonged my court date for two or three months.

COVID-19 had touched everyone in Keisha's housing network. She was sick, her landlord was sick, and her attorney was sick, delaying her court date. Simultaneously, her rent continued to build up, making the stress of her trial increasingly consuming. The pandemic had pushed a lot of people out of their homes and many Knox County residents were in a similar situation as Keisha, making the KCDC waiting lists despairingly long. People who worked within the Knox Housing system observed this pattern. Alex described:

It's hard to even put it all into words, right? Largely because there's so many ways it's impacted housing. The pandemic has just been so invasive and perfect. But we don't even realize some of the ways that it's changed things, even though it was just a short time ago that these things didn't have any of this impact – the

pandemic didn't exist. It's changed so many things and they become so commonplace gradually enough to where you don't notice.

The pandemic has impacted every aspect of life. It has “perfectly”, or completely, intruded on every idea we had of normalcy. COVID-19's ubiquity was not handled responsibly by judges. Sitting at the top of the power structure, judges acted as if the pandemic had been uniformly felt so it should be uniformly considered. In many cases, that meant it was not taken seriously and uniform provisioning centered the judges experience with COVID-19. Once again, judges' knowledge systems and spatial understandings ruled over tenants facing increasingly precarious living conditions.

COVID-19 in Court

The courtroom hierarchy was emphasized when it came to COVID-19 courtroom dynamics. Masks were required in the courtroom at the beginning of the pandemic. People would receive a mask when entering the building at the metal detectors and the bailiff would make people wear masks in the courtroom. In the summer of 2021, the mask rule was lifted. At this time, vaccination levels in Knox County were still very low. In May of 2021, 32% of the Knox County populations had received both doses of the vaccine (Tennessean, 2022). Not only were people not required to wear masks anymore, but some judges made tenants and people testifying take off their masks so that they could hear them better. Social distancing was not practiced in the courtroom. The bailiff that policed courtroom behavior, often by yelling or getting very close to people, did not wear a mask. Judge's attitudes about masking trickled down throughout the courtroom.

Meanwhile, most tenants wore masks. Alex described his perspective of housing court during the pandemic:

Court rooms themselves were overcrowded. Especially around November [2020], I remember looking around and seeing close to what must have been 100 to 150 people in the courtroom just there for the landlord / tenant docket and it was just a massive super spreading event. People were generally wearing masks, or this was before there were vaccines. It was just too risky to be pulling that many people together, especially when you know their court order appearance isn't like showing up to the grocery store or a bar where you have some choice in the matter. Either show up and defend your apartment and your place to stay or you don't show up and it's gone. So, I think the court response left a lot to be desired. I felt at risk. I know that tenants that were there felt and were at tremendous risk. And a lot of people were in pretty fragile physical health. People with disabilities, elderly people, people with physical, medical disorders: COPD, diabetes, other issues, and you think about how prevalent those issues are among people that are in poverty. And then you're asking them to – you're forcing them to show up to a courtroom where there's 100 other people, a lot of whom are not wearing masks and stand shoulder to shoulder in a hallway or in a courtroom or in a waiting room and it was just not a good situation.

The courtroom was unusually crowded. Court was closed in the Spring of 2021 to prevent the spread of the virus, leading to a pile up of cases when court reopened in April

2021. A couple of days that I court-watched that spring, the general assembly building was so full that people were overflowing into the hallway. On one of these days the judge yelled into the microphone in an attempt to assure that people could hear their names called. As Alex said, showing up to housing court is not the same thing as going to the grocery store, the bar, or even work. If tenants wanted to avoid eviction after eviction filing, they had to attend court, even if that meant putting themselves in danger of contracting the virus with serious medical and financial implications.

In addition to the failure to protect health in the courtroom, it became apparent while court-watching and talking with tenants that the eviction moratorium was not effectively protecting residents in Knox County. The eviction moratorium was intended to be a lifeline for people facing housing instability during the pandemic, yet eviction filings and judgements continued to pile up on the housing court dockets. SOCM had witnessed a couple of success stories, where tenants successfully presented the CDC moratorium declaration to their landlord and an agreement was made, but most residents were not having success in using the moratorium or rental assistance in time to avoid displacement. Most tenants that were present in court were evicted due to non-payment of rent during the pandemic according to data collected for SOCM. The CDC eviction moratorium came into effect in March 2020, months after the virus was spreading throughout the U.S., and took time for the moratorium to become a practical tool for tenants to use. At that point the help was too little, too late. Alex described this process:

There was not enough help mobilized for a foreseeable problem. The moratorium was a good idea, but the money that came along to keep paying rent to help people stay afloat should have been mobilized a lot earlier. It doesn't take too much imagination to understand what's going to happen when you start telling landlords that they can't evict people because of the pandemic and even if they can pay, it's going to cause problems. The remedy came a little too late. We were already seeing people rack up thousands of dollars in debt by the time the moratorium was presented. And then, a lot of landlords didn't trust the money that was set aside to reimburse landlords. Landlords didn't even participate, and they were literally turning down free money due to mistrust of it. We still face landlords that don't want to participate in those programs because they just don't trust it, or they think that the money should have been spent to cover these people's rent in the first place.

The moratorium and rental aid system required a mutual agreement between tenants and landlords. Landlords were also in precarious financial positions, due to the pandemic, and did not trust the promise of reimbursement from the government. Instead, they took tenants to court to sue them for non-payment. If the protections had been mobilized earlier and better communicated, perhaps both parties would have had more trust in the help. These protections had the potential to keep tenants in their homes, provide steady rental payments for property owners, and maintain a short docket for

courtroom actors. Instead, we saw eviction steadily continue throughout the pandemic, requiring everyone to jeopardize their health in court.

Jet Fuel: COVID and the Housing Market

The pandemic has impacted the rental housing system on many levels. It has directly touched the lives of tenants living in Knox County, created more difficulty in the already non-user-friendly court system, and increased inequity in the rental housing market. We see a bigger process at work as the rental housing market has skyrocketed since the end of 2019.

Tracy, a white tenant who works at a local bar has lived in Knox County her entire life and is currently facing eviction from a house she has lived in since 1997 in the Old North Knoxville neighborhood. She said that she understands her eviction as a direct result of the pandemic, where developers are buying property in Knoxville and trying to make a profit:

Most of it is from out-of-town companies. Mine [buyer that has displaced her] was bought from a local company, but they're house flippers. In my opinion, it's not good people buying them up. They're just gobbling them up and not really paying any attention to the people in them. And I wonder if the COVID eviction ban [the CDC eviction moratorium] was lifted and all of a sudden people can evict so it's all happening at once. I knew this [being displaced] was coming eventually because my landlord is an older man who can't really take care of the house, but he said when he sold the property that he was getting unsolicited calls

about it from all over the country. People had looked up the address and he had finally decided that he got a good enough offer to do it.

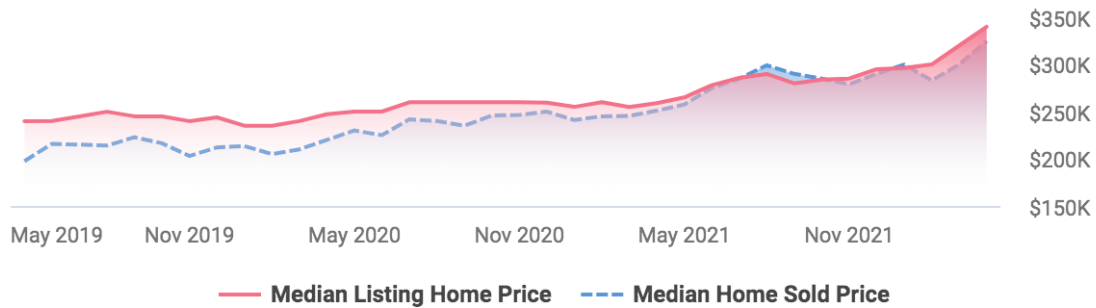
Tracy believed that COVID-19's economic impact has had a ripple effect on the housing market. Her landlord had sold her house to an out-of-town company, pushing out Tracy. Property that was once owned by her trusted Knox County landlord of many years was turned over to a developer looking to make a profit. We see a pattern of national corporate companies and developers taking over the housing market, and in the process, pushing out locals like Tracy. Property values have increased 31.2% this year in Knoxville and it has become a seller's market (Figure 10) (realtor.com, 2022). People are facing displacement as a result of a bigger spatial project at work, where property is being monopolized. Alex echoed this:

A lot of landlords that had been renting decided it was a really good time to sell the house because it suddenly became worth 30% 40% 50% more than it was just a few months ago. But where does that leave the tenant? A formerly affordable house is now completely gone from the rental market. And now these people must look elsewhere to find something affordable in an environment where so many other landlords have done the exact same thing. So, you had rapidly decreasing affordable housing stock... Waiting lists for public housing got longer and longer, and what little rental housing did remain, just started getting more and more expensive because landlords could charge that much— the demand went up so much. So that's just what we're seeing: increasing gentrification issues. I mean, it's

Knoxville, TN Housing Market ⓘ

In March 2022, the median listing home price in Knoxville, TN was \$339.9K, trending up 31.2% year-over-year. The median listing home price per square foot was \$186. The median home sold price was \$324.7K.

Median Listing Home Price vs. Median Home Sold Price



Sale-to-List Price Ratio: 101.04%

Homes in Knoxville, TN sold for **approximately the** asking price on average in March 2022.



Knoxville, TN is a **seller's market** in March 2022, which means that there are more people looking to buy than there are homes available. ⓘ

Figure 10. Knoxville, TN Housing Market graph and data visualization (realtor.com, April 2022).

just like you dumped jet fuel on every housing problem that existed.

COVID-19 has doused gasoline all over an already out of hand fire. Knox County's rent increased 27% between January 2021 and 2022, ranking it the 5th biggest rent increase by city in the U.S (Kolomatsky, 2022). The COVID-19 financial crisis has emphasized flaws in the United States' racial capitalist economic system, where national corporations and those with the resources to accumulate property have used the crisis as an opportunity to continue to accumulate by dispossession through eviction. This pattern of property monopolization coincides with trends of gentrification and urban renewal, which is a commonly discussed topic in Knoxville. Gentrification was mentioned consistently throughout interviews with tenants, and members of SOCM, and throughout my time living in Knox County.

On March 1, 2022, I received a letter notifying me that the company I rent from, The Hive, had sold my apartment building to EEA- Highland Terrace IV, LLC and my apartment building was now being managed by "an Atlanta-based real estate management company that manages approximately 46,000 apartment buildings throughout the United States." I had no choice but to trust this random packet of paper rubber banded to my apartment doorknob. I had not been called, I had not received an email, and I had not had a face-to-face conversation with my previous or new landlord about this big change. The shift was faceless. In the age of misinformation, the skeptic side of me thought it could have been a random person trying to scam me, having me trust this printed letter that told me to pay them my \$800 rental payment. I was in denial

that it was happening to my apartment. I had two days to deliver my March rental payment to Highland Terrace via check. Following this initial letter, I was notified that my rent would increase \$120 a month next year. This research has helped me learn about my rights and the resources available to me as a tenant to maintain housing security, but there are few protections, and a lot of my neighbors don't have access to these resources.

From Displacement to Emplacement

Throughout this research, I have found that housing displacement is a complicated problem that acts on many levels within the Knox County rental housing system. I have tried to introduce the various threads that tie this story and changing eviction landscape together. My data have emphasized the importance of housing and the monumental impact of housing uncertainty and displacement showing that housing is a foundational resource. This landscape features eviction filing in Knox County. The stories of tenants, activists fighting for anti-eviction efforts, housing court judges, attorneys, and landlords are highlighted in my grasp of this system. My data show that housing court privileges some knowledge systems over others through intentionally inaccessible and archaic court procedures that reproduce historic, white narratives of private property. The non-user-friendly housing court favors those with the means to hire an attorney, predominantly benefitting property owners. Additionally, my data have shown that COVID-19 has emphasized the importance of stable, fair housing for all Knox County residents. Eviction and housing displacement is a longstanding issue in Knox County and the pandemic has

only magnified a preexisting struggle. But COVID-19 has also brought the local and national housing crisis to people's attention. Housing justice has become a part of the public conversation presenting an opportunity for action and new pathways of change.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION: ENVISIONING HOUSING JUSTICE

I began my thesis by discussing the legacy of displacement that has shaped the spatial contours of the Knox County housing landscape. Today's rental housing system is a part of an unbroken timeline of racial capitalism (Fields & Raymond, 2021), where private property continues to be a device used for displacement by the white upper class. Through mixed-methods designed collaboratively with SOCM, we have captured a snapshot of the discriminatory eviction landscape during COVID-19 in Knox County. This snapshot includes the many perspectives of the tenants and activists I interviewed and met along the way. The stories of tenants I witnessed in court. The stories of how this place has grown and where more growth is necessary from elders in the activist community. And Alex's story as a housing court advocate who provides frontline support for tenants. This snapshot also includes multiple layers of those that work within the rental housing system: the landlords and property managers, judges, landlord attorneys, and bailiffs.

SOCM is currently building support for a right to counsel campaign. A right to counsel would mean that all defendants would have a right to an attorney, regardless of their financial situation. Data collected with SOCM has led the organization and our partnering community organizations to believe that a right to counsel in Knox County would be an effective way to intervene in the eviction system, materially benefitting tenants' lives. Based on data collected canvassing, interviews, court-watching, and data

compiled in the SOCM database, we know that guaranteed representation would prevent eviction, help tenants throughout the court process to negotiate agreements with landlords that have less lasting imprints on tenants' lives, and help tenants manage a more humane timeline to find a new home. Other Southern cities have paved a path forward in their rapidly gentrifying landscape doing just this. New Orleans, Louisville, and Charlottesville have introduced guaranteed counsel for income qualified tenants amidst the rental housing crisis during COVID-19. This is just one prong to a path towards fair housing. In our conversation about the right to council campaign, Matt expressed this sentiment:

I believe that housing is a human right, but beyond that, safe and stable and secure housing is a human right. It's more than just having a roof over your head at any given time. It's having a place where you have roots, you have the ability to know you won't be moved from in perpetuity. I think a right to counsel definitely does not guarantee that. I think having a lawyer would mean measurable improvements in life for thousands of people a year in Knox County, but it will still allow a system of massive injustice to continue.

We understand that this is just one step in the direction of achieving housing justice in Knox County. It is a way to improve a system that is deeply rooted, rather than more radical forms of change. But if we have tools, such as data and community relationships, to improve a broken system, it is an important step for SOCM. Sophia has been a leader in SOCM's anti-eviction efforts throughout the pandemic. She led multiple

cancel-rent caravan protests and awarded Knox County's worst evictor a trophy for their horrendous lack of empathy (Figure 11). Sophia is a Latinx woman and lifelong activist.

She believes the organization's role in fighting for change is two-fold:

Our understanding of our role in campaigns is not so much on the end goal but the process – yes, the end goal is good and something that we need and should fight for – but our main focus is more on the process of how we get there. In that process, we want to help empower working class people to struggle for this policy or this campaign along with us so that when we win, they will have the experience of we fought, and we won. We struggled, and we won. This is something that I've experienced through union organizing: when you get a group of people to work together, to struggle for something together and they get it, it's a very intoxicating feeling of winning. Our goal is to help people win because when they win, they get hungry for more and they realize that we have the power to enact change for our benefit when we work together, and that's a transformative thing. Our goal is to help empower people to realize we can struggle for our own interests.

SOCM's right to council campaign is about giving tenants a resource in court but it is also about the process. The campaign presents an opportunity to facilitate a change in consciousness within the communities we organize, work, and live within. SOCM's role is to empower people to fight for changes that they need, whether or not those needs fall in line with current policy. The right to counsel campaign can help Knox County tenants feel like a part of a struggle that they have won together, making Knox County

communities hungrier for change. A shift in consciousness evokes ideas central to community geography; this shift is a collaborative, mutual production of change and knowledge which requires explicitly recentering marginalized voices and stories in our path towards housing justice.

In my interview with Keisha, she indicated hope for change within her community: “I hope more people become more involved in the world – more involved in what they’re doing and how they’re doing it. And I hope that they take better care of themselves because if they don’t, nobody else will.” My contribution to this, throughout my research, has been to help amplify the voices of people, like Keisha, living through these hard times and coming out of it ready for necessary change in the Knox County housing system and beyond. As Matt, Sophia, Keisha, and other activists and tenants have asserted, the process is part of the change, and the process never ends. Raising consciousness is important, but within a racial capitalist system, other approaches towards change must take place in tandem.

The looming possibility of contracting a variant of the COVID-19 virus continues to be an invisible threat to us all, but at this point in the pandemic, the material consequences continue to float to the surface. The pandemic has touched every aspect of our lives and reworked the way we navigate and understand the world, country, state, county, and neighborhoods we live in. The Knox County seller’s housing market is rapidly changing the neighborhoods tenants call home, illuminating the effects of economic disruption brought on by the virus. This housing market reinforces

discrimination and inequity in the form of gentrification, continuing the legacy of racial capitalist dispossession, directly impacting the lives of tenants in Knox County communities. In response, there is a push within SOCM to find ways to fund radical housing cooperatives that are run and controlled by generational East Knoxvilleans so that Black neighborhoods can stay Black and investment into the neighborhoods is guaranteed, resisting the monumental market forces at work. We hope that the local and national housing crisis continues to be a jumping off point for radical projects like this in Knox County where we can build upon methods of collectivism, decolonization, anti-capitalism, and more (McElroy, 2020). We hope that the pandemic's destruction of our previously unquestioned, inhumane normal continues to be an opportunity to reimagine a just world and housing system.

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

– Arundhati Roy, *The pandemic is a portal*

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APPENDIX

FACING EVICTION?

TENANTS FACING EVICTION NEEDED FOR A RESEARCH STUDY

We'd like to talk to you about your
experience with eviction in
Knoxville, Tennessee.

Participation will take 1 hour or less.

Interview participants will be
compensated with a Kroger gift card.



WANT TO PARTICIPATE?

If you're interested in participating, please contact:

Sam Myers-Miller
smyersmi@vols.utk.edu
(865) 325-9087

If you have any questions for the primary investigator of this project, please contact:

Nikki Luke
knluke@utk.edu
(865) 315-8447
University of Tennessee, Geography

Tenant Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: COVID-19 Renters and Housing Instability: Combatting the eviction epidemic during the COVID-19 pandemic in Knoxville, Tennessee

Researcher: Sam Myers-Miller, Department of Geography, University of Tennessee

We are asking you to be in this research study because of your experience with the rental housing system in Knoxville, TN. The information in this consent form is to help you decide if you want to be in this research study. Please take your time reading this form and contact us to ask questions if there is anything you do not understand. You should not feel rushed or pressured to make a decision.

Key Information for You to Consider

The information in this box is a short summary to help you decide if you want to be in this research study. More detailed information is listed later in this form. Please ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

- **Voluntary Participation.** You should only participate if you completely understand the study and want to volunteer. You do not have to be in this study.
- **Purpose.** The purpose of this research study is to understand how COVID-19 has affected rental housing and eviction in Knoxville, TN.

- **Research Procedures and Activities.** If you decide to be in this study, we will ask you several questions. The interview will be conversational and focused on your perspective.
- **Duration.** If you agree to be in the study, your participation will last for approximately 45 minutes to one hour.
- **Benefits.** There are no direct benefits from participating in this research. The expected outcomes of this research will include both academic and non-academic literature to guide policy and activist agendas.
- **Risks.** It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures used to protect your information.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of the research study is to learn how COVID-19 has affected renters and eviction in Knoxville. We are interested in how COVID-19 has touched people's lives and how this has impacted their rental housing experiences. We're also interested in the eviction process and want to learn what resources were helpful or would have been helpful during this time. This study is being conducted by researchers at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in this study, your participation will last for about 45 minutes to one hour.

What will happen if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research study”?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to answer several questions about your experience with rental housing and eviction during COVID-19. The interview will be conversational and focused on your perspective. If you agree to be in this study, we will audio record our conversations.

What will happen if I say “No, I do not want to be in this research study”?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won’t affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time. If you decide to stop before the study is completed, contact us and we will dispose of your interview recording and transcript.

Are there any risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out that you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about eviction and rental housing during health crises like COVID-19. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by collecting and storing the voice recording and transcript of your interview confidentially. We will transcribe the interview and may use anonymous quotes in future projects or publications. The interviews will be archived after transcription and kept indefinitely. Your transcript will be given a number and code name. The recording and interview transcript will be stored using the number only on my computer and in my personal Dropbox. The transcript of your interview with direct and indirect identifiable information removed may be shared in future research collaborations building from this project.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used. A code name will be used instead.

I will make every effort to prevent anyone from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there may be times when others need to see the information that I collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires me to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will keep your information to use for future research. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from your research data collected as part of the study.

Will I be paid for being in this research study?

You will be compensated for your time with a \$15 Kroger gift card. The gift card will be issued in-person after the interview. If the interview is via Zoom we will find a time/place to issue the gift card.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers:

- Sam Myers-Miller, 815-761-8376, smyersmi@vols.utk.edu
- Nikki Luke, 540-250-7022, knluke@utk.edu

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the researchers about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

1534 White Avenue

Blount Hall, Room 408

Knoxville, TN 37996-1529

Phone: 865-974-7697

Email: ukirb@utk.edu

Statement of Consent

I have read this form, been given the chance to ask questions and have my questions answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. I understand that I am agreeing to be in this study. I can keep a copy of this consent information for future reference. If I do not want to be in this study, I do not need to do anything else.

Eviction Process Stakeholders Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: COVID-19 Renters and Housing Instability: Combatting the eviction epidemic during the COVID-19 pandemic in Knoxville, Tennessee

Researcher: Sam Myers-Miller, Department of Geography, University of Tennessee

We are asking you to be in this research study because of your experience with the rental housing system in Knoxville, TN. The information in this consent form is to help you decide if you want to be in this research study. Please take your time reading this form and contact us to ask questions if there is anything you do not understand. You should not feel rushed or pressured to decide.

Key Information for You to Consider

The information in this box is a short summary to help you decide if you want to be in this research study. More detailed information is listed later in this form. Please ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

- **Voluntary Participation.** You should only participate if you completely understand the study and want to volunteer. You do not have to be in this study.
- **Purpose.** The purpose of this research study is to understand how COVID-19 has affected rental housing and eviction in Knoxville, TN.

- **Research Procedures and Activities.** If you decide to be in this study, we will ask you several questions. The interview will be conversational and focused on your perspective.
- **Duration.** If you agree to be in the study, your participation will last for approximately 45 minutes to one hour.
- **Benefits.** There are no direct benefits from participating in this research. The expected outcomes of this research will include both academic and non-academic literature to guide policy and activist agendas.
- **Risks.** It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures used to protect your information.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of the research study is to learn how COVID-19 has affected renters and eviction in Knoxville. We are interested in the rental housing system and understanding how and why evictions continued to happen during a pandemic, despite the moratorium and rental assistance. This study is being conducted by researchers at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in this study, your participation will last for about 45 minutes to one hour.

What will happen if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research study”?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to answer several questions about your perspectives on rental housing during COVID-19. The interview will be conversational and focused on your perspective. If you agree to be in this study, we will audio record our conversations.

What will happen if I say “No, I do not want to be in this research study”?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won’t affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time. If you decide to stop before the study is completed, contact us and we will dispose of your interview recording and transcript.

Are there any risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out that you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about eviction and rental housing during health crises like COVID-19. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by collecting and storing the voice recording and transcript of your interview confidentially. We will transcribe the interview and may use anonymous quotes in future projects or publications. The interviews will be archived after transcription and kept indefinitely. Your transcript will be given a number and code name. The recording and interview transcript will be stored using the number only on my computer and in my personal Dropbox. The transcript of your interview with direct and indirect identifiable information removed may be shared in future research collaborations building from this project.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used. A code name will be used instead.

I will make every effort to prevent anyone from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there may be times when others need to see the information that I collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires me to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will keep your information to use for future research. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from your research data collected as part of the study.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers:

- Sam Myers-Miller, 815-761-8376, smyersmi@vols.utk.edu
- Nikki Luke, 540-250-7022, knluke@utk.edu

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the researchers about the study, please contact:

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Email: ukirb@utk.edu

Statement of Consent

I have read this form, been given the chance to ask questions and have my questions answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. I understand that I am agreeing to be in this study. I can keep a copy of this consent information for future reference. If I do not want to be in this study, I do not need to do anything else.

Telephone Recruitment Scripts

Sam Myers-Miller, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Nikki Luke, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Voicemail

Hi, this is Sam Myers-Miller at the University of Tennessee and I was calling to speak with [person's name] to see if it might be possible to set up an interview for a research project on rental housing in Knoxville during COVID-19. [Explain the context that I came to know them] and I was hoping to ask a few questions about your experience/work. If you could please give me a call back at (865) 325-9087 or email me at smyersmi@vols.utk.edu that would be great. I look forward to talking with you and thank you for your time, bye.

Telephone conversation script

Hi, this is Sam Myers-Miller at the University of Tennessee and I was calling to speak with [person's name]. Are they available?

If **no**, I ask to leave the above message.

If **yes**, I talk through this script:

Great, I am a graduate student working on a research project about rental housing in Knoxville during COVID-19 and wanted to see if it would be possible to set up a time to talk with you about your experience/work? The interview should take about one hour.

If **yes**:

Would it work better for you to meet over phone, Zoom, or in-person?

If in person [discuss location to meet].

Is there a time in the next two weeks that would work for you to meet?

Ok, that works for me. I will send a follow up email and calendar invite. May I have your email address?

Great, I look forward to talking then. Hope you have a nice rest of your day, bye.

If **no**:

Well, thank you so much for your time. If you have any questions or need to get in touch with me for any reason, my number is 815.761.8376 and you can email me at smyersmi@vols.utk.edu. Hope you have a nice rest of your day, bye.

Sample Email Recruitment

Sam Myers-Miller, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Dear Ms./Mr./Dr./J. _____,

My name is Sam Myers-Miller, and I am a graduate student researcher in the Department of Geography at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and a member of Knox Housing Justice Collective.

I am contacting you to see if it would be possible to set up a time to speak with you about your experience with rental housing in Knoxville? I am working on a research project about how COVID-19 has impacted rental housing in Knox County and I would love to hear about your experiences.

If you would be interested in having a conversation with me (no more than one hour) we can meet over phone, Zoom, or in person (taking COVID-19 precautions). Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best,

Sam Myers-Miller

she/her

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

815.761.8376 smyersmi@vols.utk.edu

Sample Reminder Email

Sam Myers-Miller, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Dear Ms./Mr./Dr./J. _____,

This is Sam Myers-Miller, the graduate student researcher in the Department of Geography at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and member of Knox Housing Justice Collective working on a research project about how COVID-19 has impacted rental housing in Knox County.

I'm emailing you to follow up and see if it would be possible to set up a time to speak with you about your experience with rental housing in Knoxville? If you would be interested in having a conversation with me (no more than one hour) we can meet over phone, Zoom, or in person (taking COVID-19 precautions).

Again, thank you for your time and consideration.

Best,

Sam Myers-Miller

she/her

Masters Candidate

815.761.8376 smyersmi@vols.utk.edu

Interview Protocol with a Knoxville Tenant

1. How long have you lived in Knoxville?
 - Probe: did you grow up here? If not, why did you move here? How do you like it here? What parts of Knoxville have you lived in?
2. Do you work? Where? How long have you worked there? What is your current employment situation?
3. Tell me how COVID-19 has affected your life? (Socially, economically, politically—friends and family who've gotten sick?)
4. Could you tell me about your current housing situation?
 - What is a reasonable amount for you or your family to pay in housing per month?
 - What size house/apartment do you/your family need? (How many bedrooms)
5. How long have you been renting in Knoxville? What has stayed the same or changed? (The city, the neighborhood, renting in Knoxville, landlord)
6. How has COVID-19 affected your housing?
7. What are the biggest challenges you face as a renter in Knoxville?
8. As you know, I'm interested in people's experiences when they're evicted. I'm going to ask you some questions about your eviction process.
 - What was your relationship with your landlord like before your eviction?
 - How were you notified that you'd be evicted?

9. Did you do any research or reach out to anyone to learn how to respond?
- If you went to court, could you tell me about that experience?
10. Research shows that men and women have different experiences in court. What's your experience? Can you think of a time when you saw women tenants treated different than men?
11. Research also shows that black people, Latinx people, and white people have different experiences in court. What's your experience? Can you think of a time Black people were treated differently by the judge or the landlord's attorney?
12. Do you have friends/family who've been evicted too? If so, how was your experience the same? Different?
13. What would have **most** helped you during the eviction process? Ex: Lawyer, more time, assistance finding new housing, rental assistance
14. Do you know about the CDC moratorium on evictions?
- If yes, how did you learn about the moratorium?
 - If yes, did the moratorium help you? How?
 - If not, do you think the moratorium would have helped you?
15. What (if any) are your fears/concerns for finding new housing?

Interview Protocol with Housing Court Advocate

1. How long have you lived in Knoxville? How did you end up here?
2. Could you describe your position and how that fits into Knox housing court?
3. What motivated you to do this work?
4. How do people access Legal Aid?
5. Can you tell me a little bit about your approach to the law and the cases that you work on?
 - What are common tactics you use to keep Knoxville renters in their homes?
 - How important is time?
6. Can you discuss your view on the CDC moratorium declaration? What experiences have you had with it?
 - Do you think it was successful in achieving the CDC's goal of keeping people in their homes during COVID-19? Why or why not?
7. How has covid impacted your experience? How has covid impacted the tenants you represent? How has covid impacted the court room and the eviction filing process from your perspective?
8. What do you view as the biggest barriers in keeping Knoxville tenants in their homes?
9. Do you think tenants are aware of the minimal rights they have?

10. How important do you think having a lawyer is? What percentage of tenants would you guess have representation?
11. Court is often the last chance for people to delay or prevent their eviction. Are there any changes that you think could serve tenants so that they don't get to the courtroom? (Changes in the law, public services informing tenants about their rights prior to court, etc.?)
12. It is well researched/documented that black people and Latinx people are disproportionately affected by eviction. Do you see this pattern in Knoxville? What's your experience with this?
13. It also is well documented that women are disproportionately (specifically women of color) by eviction. What's your experience with this?
14. What do you think is the future of rental housing in Knoxville?
15. Do you have any favorite cases you've defended? Success stories
16. What does fair housing mean to you?
17. What are positives or potential negatives to a right to counsel in Knox County?
18. Rental assistance

Interview Protocol with a member of Knox Housing Justice Collective

1. How long have you lived in Knoxville? How did you end up here?
2. How/why/when did you get involved with KHJC?
3. Can you describe your role in the group?
 - Can you describe why you started court watching?
4. How has the organization prioritized people's efforts during COVID-19 and the moratorium?
5. How have strategies changed over the past year?
6. What are some successes of KHJC? Where can improvements be made?
7. Can you tell me about a situation that you wish would have unfolded differently?
8. What are goals going forward?
9. What do you think is the future of rental housing in Knoxville?

Sample of Court-watching Field Notes

01/25/22

- Old courthouse, new judge?
- Third floor, windows with stained glass, old historical building → **look into what other cases have been here historically**
- Very congested hallway with legal aid, rental assistance, lawyers consulting (all cases meeting in hallway prior to 9am, mainly landlords/property managers talking to lawyers, tenants talking to legal aid, tenants (often more than one- possibly family and friends come to support) talking to lawyers)
- Man snoring loudly in gallery throughout
- No masks required, 50/50 masked
- T = tenant, LL = landlord / PM = property manager, L = lawyer, LA = legal aid, J = judge
- Tenant: white woman, Landlord: white woman with white man lawyer
 - T: does that mean we have to pay?
 - L: that is up to you and the judge, but it may not look good at your next place
 - T: So then I have 20 days to get out
 - L: No, 10 additional on top of the 10"
 - T: Okay
- White woman LL, default eviction
 - LL holding granddaughter (maybe 3 or 4 years old)
 - Granddaughter cries: I wanted to go up there with you
 - LL: You want to say hi to the judge?
 - Whole courtroom laughs
- PM: white woman L: white man
 - L: Are you asking for possession?
 - PM: no
 - L: Ok, please say why you're asking for possession...?
 - **Shows how even people with lawyers like this PM suffer from language barriers in the courtroom**
- Lawyer doesn't know he has a case on his docket
 - J: you have one more don't you?
 - L: oh do I? We're just asking for possession on that one
 - J: Ok

- Default eviction - **no need to even describe the situation, or clarify which case it was**
- LL = lawyer
 - J: what are the damages
 - LL: the entire apt has been destroyed - paint, fireplace, flooring (no info / evidence to back up claim)
 - Asking for 11k granted default
- T says they have COVID and couldn't come to the courtroom, L asking if J believes T, L trying to convince him to proceed
 - J: this is a first time claim – it would be different if this was a repeat occasion but she says she's been exposed to covid and I'm going to take it while we're all sitting in this small room together
 - COVID-19 attempted to be used against tenants
- LL = Black man, tenant hasn't paid since July 2021, L = White woman
 - LL: He has 2 vicious pitbulls that charged at me so personal service is virtually impossible
 - L: Judge, how do you recommend service in this dog citation?
 - LL: the dogs are still there, he says he's out but I called animal control and they said they've had trouble with these dogs
 - J: let's rest this case to figure out movement going forward
- PM = white woman, T = Black woman, disabled walks with cane
 - Nonpayment, 3rd time late, \$916
 - PM no mask, L no mask, tenant mask
 - PM L: You don't get to ask question (to tenant)
 - T: I'm sorry, I'm not used to this. I'd like to know where these prices are from. I got a detainer warrant but nothing else which isn't fair
 - J: Please tell her how you've gotten this price
 - PM: (snarky tone) reads off fees, mentions KCDC money
 - J: Does it say explicitly that you will charge attorney fees?
 - LA: jumps in to ask if he may speak to tenant (not currently representing legal aid)
 - PM lawyer goes and privately speaks to judge, bailiff chats / laughs with tenant
 - J: I've spoken to the lawyer and it doesn't explicitly mention attorney's fees in the lease
 - PM: she still owes \$80
 - T: I would like time to find an attorney

- 2 weeks granted
- **Mediated** case → reset March 8
- LA: asks for continuance
 - L: I have 5 witnesses here, this was already continued from last week
 - LA: I think she has a childcare issue and may have another one later today”
 - J: I think that we will proceed considering it was continued last week and she spoke to legal aid
 - Trying to find a woman who is the PM
 - J: The lady had the same color hair as her *points to woman in the gallery*
- T = Black man, L = white woman, asking for continuance, spok to legal aid today
 - T: She’s only telling the story that incriminates me, she’s not telling the whole story
 - J: We’re just discussing the continuance and considering this was already continued from Dec and the nature of this case, we’re gonna take this case today
 - LA: I’d like to jump in and let you know we’re about to make the call whether we can help him now
 - J: Well he’s had since December and he’s just now in touch with legal aid, I think that’s on him. We will proceed on this later, so that gives you time to talk
 - *All 3 people working with legal aid leave with tenant as courtroom transitions*
 - Claim that tenant assaulted another tenant that has been caught on camera
- American homes for rent, tenant has L
 - T L: argues that they weren’t properly served → boyfriend served not tenant
 - LL L: many continuances, hasn’t paid rent since June, applied for aid, still facing this problem
 - J: Considering the large amount of money being asked for, I will grant a 1 week continuance but I will be marking it down that this is the third time
- LL = White woman, LL L = white man, T = Black woman, LA, Judge asks for no masks
 - Black woman witness: I have 3 children, 8 & 6 year old. Noise complaints about her kids, tenant constantly “harassing” and bothering me. I’ve had to call security

- LA: Has she ever threatened you?
- Witness: No, just security
- Black women witness 2: *lawyer asks if he pronounced Deneesha right*
Yes - She's aggressive, shouting, outrageous, just negative stuff - her and her mother call DCS on me with some nasty words thrown at me, spitting at the door
- LA: any weapons? See the spitting?
- W2: No. Yes.
- White man maintenance worker at apt building witness: She is very rude - big maintenance complaints at night. She said her heat was broken but it was just off – fake maintenance call
- LA: has she done anything other than make inconveniently late calls? Has she ever threatened you?
- Maintenance: No
- Black man manager witness: She's aggressive... I've avoided her based on what I've heard. She waited to come talk to me until after she was served
- LA: Did you ever update her about the status of her housing prior to being served? Any notices to vacate? Any police calls? Ever felt in danger?
- LL: no - but I'm afraid if something isn't done, someone will get hurt. She's accused me and my coworkers of sexual misconduct and being drug addicts. She's always threatening us. (threats about reporting their bs behavior?)
- LA: Has she ever touched you? Have you ever called the police?
- LL: no, but she gets close to us and I've threatened to call the police before
- T: Deneesha smokes weed late at night and I was told to contact maintenance. I've never been notified to vacate, never spit, never got close enough to do so. I'm very surprised by the accusations.
 - Direct quote: "I raise my kids and I stick to myself and I pay my bills. The way I protect myself doesn't define who I am as a woman. It's not a crime to carry myself confidently. They may be intimidated by the way I dress and speak but that is not my fault"
 - Nov 11 pm visited about weed complaint
 - Nov 30
 - "I feel like I'm being discriminated against because I'm not like my neighbors... I have medical problems so I *can't* smoke and

they think I'm high maintenance. I carry myself differently which bothers them. My child is in critical condition so I take this very seriously."

- L: You don't have any proof of the weed smoking? Do you have issues with anger management? Don't you have pending criminal charges? Haven't you assaulted a police officer?
- T: No
- LA: objection
- J: too late
- L: tries to object to tenant mother testifying
- Judge allows mother to testify
- Tenant mother: I've never touched anyone. I've called the police on Deneesha because she shook her ass in my face. I can't get upset like that because I have a pancreatic issue. My daughter was worried about me. The police saw that she came at me. I have nerve issues and mental health issues. I have the report right here. She made threats against me and she knows nothing about my personal situation. My grandchild is sick and this weed smoke is a *real* problem. This could kill me.
- L: Why did the property manager call the police?
- Mother: I have no idea - I had said nothing to him.
- L: Ok I've heard enough. Our argument is that she's a danger to everyone
- LA: Legally, there are no grounds to displace her, their argument is simply that she has been rude
- J: I don't think that the first 2 witnesses are enough but the spitting on the manager is a concern to the court so we will move for possession
- Tenant attempts to intervene - judge tells her to talk to her lawyer
- Evicted
- Return to case 11 → Witness: White woman, Lawyer: White man
 - T: shaking head, muttering to himself
 - Bailiff shows tenant video, squatting down next to him, holding phone, no mask, tenant has mask
 - T: I don't see nothin
 - Video shown to judge
 - T: tries to show him paper
 - Schizophrenia bipolar, no medication in 2 months
 - T: I'm just here to tell the truth

- Brought a lot of documentation, tried to get witnesses form property but they declined
- T has Marvel bag, radio pulled out of bag
- The slamming of doors bothers the tenant, neighbors continue to slam door
- T: I was told I would have legal aid, I need a lawyer
- J: In these tight apartments, people are going to have to act like adults

VITA

Sam Myers-Miller was born and raised in DeKalb, Illinois. She graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Geography and Geographical Information Science with a minor in Art and Design from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2020. She began her Master's degree in Fall 2020. During her time in the Geography department, Sam was the co-president of the Geography Graduate Student Association where she helped create community for the diverse group of graduate students. This leadership carried into the classroom, where she was a graduate teaching assistant, responsive to undergraduate students' questions and ideas, cultivating an inclusive learning environment. She assisted physical, GIS, and human geography courses. Sam is going to continue her academic career, entering the Community Research and Action PhD program at Vanderbilt in Fall 2022 where she will continue doing community geography in practice. She also loves cycling, hiking, live music, making art, traveling, and sharing food and drink with her loved ones.