

Why GAO Did This Study

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

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

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

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EVICCTIONS

National Data Are Limited and Challenging to Collect

What GAO Found

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

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

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

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

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