Research Statement

Robert Collinson, Department of Economics

I am an applied microeconomist studying how public policy and institutions shape economic opportunity and material hardship. Much of my research examines how housing consumption decisions and choice of neighborhood spill over into other aspects of the lives of low-income adults and children, including their labor market outcomes, human capital accumulation, access to credit, health, and material hardship. Housing is the single largest expense for nearly all households in the U.S., and for low-income households, it is not unusual to spend more than half of their income on housing. This means that housing decisions play an outsized role in individual and family budgets. Moreover, housing choices have important implications for significant societal challenges such as homelessness, segregation, and intergenerational poverty. Within the space of housing and neighborhoods, my work has focused on two categories of inquiry: 1) the impact of housing instability, in particular court-ordered evictions, on the outcomes of adults and children; 2) the role of changing housing and neighborhood environment, via housing policies, on economic opportunity. Within each area of inquiry, I also have work studying how supply-side (landlord) responses can undermine the efficacy of housing policies intended to benefit low-income households.

My work spans the fields of public, labor, and urban economics. A common methodological theme in my research is developing new linkages of large individual-level administrative datasets coupled with rigorous experimental and quasi-experimental research designs to estimate policy-relevant causal effects. I use economic theory, as well as insights from other social sciences, to guide analysis, probe mechanisms, and interpret empirical results. At the time of writing, my research has been cited over 1,100 times, including on multiple occasions in the Economic Report of the President. My work has also been covered numerous times in major media outlets, including: The New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, The Economist, and National Public Radio.

Evictions and Housing Instability

Evictions affect nearly three million U.S. households annually. Despite the large number of tenants who interact with eviction courts and growing interest among policymakers in reducing evictions, the consequences of eviction for households are neither well documented nor well understood. My job market paper, subsequently combined with a related paper by Humphries, Madar, Tannenbaum, and van Dijk, explores the impact of eviction on tenants. Previous research on eviction has been hampered by two obstacles: a lack of linked data and an absence of an identification strategy to separate the impact of eviction from the impact of correlated sources of distress, such as job loss or declining health. In "Eviction and Poverty in American Cities," (published in the ***Quarterly Journal of Economics***, 2024), we overcome both of these barriers to provide new evidence on the effect of eviction on a range of policy-relevant outcomes, including earnings, employment, homelessness, residential mobility, hospital use, and credit records. Our linked data allow us to document and characterize tenants' outcome trajectories several years before and after their eviction case. To identify the causal impact of the eviction order, we use an instrumental variables (IV) research design that relies on the random assignment of cases to judges who systematically vary in their tendency to evict. We find signs of increasing economic distress in the lead-up to eviction filing across a broad range of measures: falling earnings, decreased attachment to the labor market, rising unpaid bills, and increases in hospital visits. This suggests many eviction cases are precipitated by adverse events. As we show, these patterns are likely to bias both comparisons of evicted tenants to renters outside of court and comparisons of evicted to not-evicted tenants within court, underscoring the value of our IV design. Using our IV design, we find that eviction causes spikes in homelessness and hospital use, reduces earnings, and worsens credit. Measuring the consequences of an eviction for tenants is crucial for evaluating policies to reduce evictions and, more broadly, for understanding the role of housing instability as a driver of poverty and inequality.

Eviction may also be an important channel for the intergenerational transmission of poverty through impacts on children. Recent estimates suggest that up to one-in-seven children in the U.S. will experience an eviction at some point during childhood (Lundberg and Donnelly, 2019). In a companion paper to our study on adults, "The Effects of Eviction on Children" (Revised & Resubmitted at the ***Journal of Political Economy***), we study the impact of eviction on the outcomes of children using eviction court records from New York City and Cook County, IL linked to education records from each city. Using the same quasi-experimental research design as in "Eviction and Poverty in American Cities," we instrument for eviction with the tendency of randomly-assigned eviction court judges; we estimate the causal effects of eviction on student absences, test scores, credits earned, grade promotion, and high school completion. First, we show that eviction increases children's residential mobility, homelessness, and likelihood of doubling up with grandparents or other adults. Turning to schooling outcomes, we find that eviction triggers increases in absences, chronic absenteeism and school switching, and reductions in credits earned, outcomes that are frequently interpreted as being influenced by non-cognitive traits. In contrast, we find little evidence of direct effects on cognitive measures such as math or reading scores. These non-test-score measures are, in fact, better predictors of high school completion than conventional cognitive measures such as standardized test scores. In line with those findings, when we turn to impacts on high school graduation, we find that eviction leads to meaningful reductions in the likelihood of graduating high school, with much of the effect on graduation explained by its attendant effects on absences, school switching, and course credits. Our results highlight how adverse short-term shocks may have lasting effects on the economic mobility of low-income children.

Understanding equilibrium responses, including how the supply side of the housing market responds to policies intended to reduce evictions and aid low-income renters, is paramount for understanding markets and designing effective policy. In recent years, a leading tenant protection policy is "right to counsel" (RTC), which provides free legal assistance to tenants in eviction court. At least seventeen US cities and five states have recently introduced RTC programs. Legal assistance can delay or prevent eviction, but at-scale it may generate costs for tenants through landlords' rent-setting and housing supply. In "Equilibrium Effects of Eviction Protection: The Case of Legal Aid" with Humphries, Kestelman, Nelson, van Dijk and Waldinger (Conditionally Accepted, ***American Economic Review***), we study how free legal aid to tenants in housing court impacts equilibrium responses in the rental market. Assembling data from a variety of sources, and leveraging the staggered roll-out of "right to counsel" in NYC, we estimate the effects of RTC on listed rents, tenant-screening, housing supply, and habitability. We find that listed rent prices rose within two years of policy implementation, with larger increases in areas with higher baseline eviction rates. We do not find evidence that landlords adjusted on other margins, such as tenant screening or improvements to habitability. Guided by these results, we develop a framework to evaluate the policy's welfare implications for tenants, incorporating the trade-off between protection from eviction and higher rent prices. We quantify the parameters of our framework using linked data on eviction court cases, rental housing listings, and tenant earnings trajectories. Despite the direct benefits and insurance value of stronger eviction protections, the estimated equilibrium effects are large enough to generate a small net reduction in ex-ante tenant welfare.

A major policy response to reduce evictions and housing instability during the COVID-19 pandemic involved significant expansions in federal support for emergency rental assistance (ERA). In "The Effects of Emergency Rental Assistance During the Pandemic: Evidence from Four Cities", (Conditionally Accepted at the ***American Economic Journal: Economic Policy***) with DeFusco, Humphries, Keys, Phillips, Reina, Turner, and van Dijk, we evaluate ERA programs using application data to five assistance programs across four cities that disbursed more than $200 million via lottery. Drawing on linked administrative data and original survey data, we estimate the effects of assistance on rent payment, housing stability, financial distress, and health. Assistance led to increases in rent payment and reduced tenants' concerns about eviction. We also find suggestive evidence of improvements in self-reported mental and physical health. However, we find little effect on housing stability or financial distress. These conclusions stand in contrast to findings from prior work on pre-pandemic ERA programs that provided similarly-sized assistance to renters facing idiosyncratic shocks. We provide descriptive evidence that expanded fiscal stimulus during the pandemic, along with a slackening of the rental market may have insulated control group households from the usual instability facing low-income renters.

Neighborhoods, Housing Policies, and Economic Mobility

Economics, and the social sciences more broadly, has long been interested in the role that neighborhood plays in shaping children's and adults' economic and life outcomes (Wilson, 1987; Massey, 1990; Kling et al., 2007; Chetty and Hendren, 2018). Neighborhoods could affect individual outcomes through a variety of channels such as: peer influences, social interactions, the quality of local public services, or access to local labor markets, yet separating these forces empirically from features of family background has been challenging.

These "neighborhood effects" have the potential to exacerbate racial inequality, as residential segregation by race remains a persistent feature of the U.S. housing market. Theory and descriptive evidence suggest that racial and economic segregation play an important role in explaining Black poverty in the U.S. (Wilson, 1987; Massey, 1990). However, less is known about the effectiveness of policies aimed at reducing residential segregation. In "The Long-Run Effects of America's Largest Residential Racial Desegregation Program: *Gautreaux*" (published in the ***Quarterly Journal of Economics***, 2025) with Eric Chyn and Danielle

Sandler, we study the consequences of the largest residential racial desegregation program in U.S. history: the Gautreaux Assisted Housing program. From 1976 to 1998, the Gautreaux program helped thousands of Black families living in urban neighborhoods in Chicago use housing vouchers to move to private rental housing in predominantly white, suburban neighborhoods. Unlike previous housing mobility studies, which moved families to low-poverty but segregated areas (Chetty et al., 2016; Chyn, 2018), Gautreaux's racial desegregation focus provides unique insights into how neighborhood racial composition shapes children's outcomes. Additionally, since Gautreaux program staff located and placed most families into apartments based on availability of units at the time of processing, and not based on families' preferences, the program generated quasi-random variation in neighborhood placements among families who were otherwise observably similar. We link historical program records to administrative and Census data, and leverage plausibly exogenous variation in neighborhood placements to study how desegregating moves impacted Gautreaux families. We find that being placed in the predominantly white neighborhoods targeted by the program significantly increases children's future lifetime earnings and wealth. We also find that placements through Gautreaux impact neighborhood choices in adulthood, with those placed in predominantly white neighborhoods during childhood living in substantially more racially diverse areas with higher rates of upward mobility nearly 40 years later. When we then probe whether these effects are the result of reducing racial or economic segregation, we find that the effects of Gautreaux placements on interracial marriage or choice of neighborhood racial composition in adulthood seem to be driven specifically by racial desegregation and not the accompanying reductions in exposure to poverty. Whereas for economic outcomes, the bulk of the evidence suggests that the effects of racial desegregation are largely mediated by reductions in economic segregation.

The rise of mobility programs such as *Gautreaux* or Moving to Opportunity (MTO) reflects a broader shift in low-income housing policy during the past three decades, away from government-managed public housing and toward government-subsidized housing vouchers as the primary tool to improve outcomes of low-income households. This shift was driven, in part, by concerns about whether public housing was "bad for kids" (Jacob, 2004; Currie and Yelowitz, 2000). Despite its importance for policy, there is relatively little direct evidence on the effects of moving into public housing on children, or comparable evidence on the effects of voucher receipt from the same setting. In "In-Kind Transfers and Early Childhood Development: Evidence from Housing Assistance Lotteries" (Revise & Resubmit at the ***Quarterly Journal of Economics***) with Chloe Gibbs, we provide new experimental evidence on the effects of housing vouchers and public housing on housing stability, housing consumption, neighborhood quality and the developmental outcomes of children using a novel housing assistance lottery that generated random offers of vouchers or public housing to more than 70,000 households seeking assistance. Both programs reduce housing instability, but have divergent effects on housing and neighborhood quality: vouchers lead families to higher-quality housing in safer, less impoverished neighborhoods, while public housing placements increase exposure to poverty and crime. When we examine impacts on child development, we find that housing vouchers substantially improve children's early literacy skills, kindergarten readiness, subsequent test scores, and behavioral health, while public housing has no detectable effects on average. We show that the positive impact of vouchers largely accrued to households who would experience the greatest improvement in housing and neighborhood conditions, rather than those most likely to experience large increases in disposable income. Investigating heterogeneity in effects by the type of public housing development, we find that children moving to higher-quality developments appear to experience improved outcomes while those in lower-quality developments see sharply worse outcomes. Our results demonstrate that in-kind transfers *can* yield improvements in child development, but these effects depend crucially on how the transfers affect consumption of the targeted goods.

Despite the large improvements in socioeconomic outcomes for children stemming from a move to a low-poverty neighborhood, historically, families who receive housing vouchers do not typically move to neighborhoods that are significantly less impoverished or segregated than their old neighborhoods (Jacob et al., 2015). This fact is both a challenge for policymakers, who have recently prioritized moving low-income families to better neighborhoods, and a puzzle for economists. In "How Do Changes in Housing Voucher Design Affect Rent and Neighborhood Quality?" (with Peter Ganong), published in the ***American Economic Journal: Economic Policy***, we study how the design of federal housing vouchers – the largest rental assistance program in the U.S. – shapes the mobility decisions of low-income families and the pricing behavior of landlords. This allows us to shed light on the incidence of vouchers. We find that increasing housing voucher generosity uniformly across a metro area benefits landlords through increased rents, and has little impact on the types of neighborhoods that low-income families choose. In contrast, indexing voucher generosity to zip code rents encourages voucher holders to move to less impoverished and safer neighborhoods. Our paper was influential in a policy change undertaken by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to expand the use of zip code indexing.[1]

On-Going and Future Work

In ongoing work (with Eric Chyn and Danielle Sandler) motivated by our prior findings studying *Gautreaux*, we are exploring whether place-based policies which seek to boost employment rates in impoverished areas can have intergenerational effects. A long social science literature, led by Wilson (1987, 1996), emphasizes the role of concentrated neighborhood joblessness in perpetuating intergenerational poverty. While growing evidence suggests relocating families out of disadvantaged neighborhoods can improve outcomes for children whose families successfully lease up in less impoverished settings, the question of whether public policies can disrupt the deleterious effects of concentrated joblessness through directly increasing work in areas where joblessness is pervasive remains unanswered. This is a challenging question to answer empirically because most place-based policies target neighborhoods nominated by local officials that may be selected on the basis of unobservable characteristics likely to bias conventional analysis. We overcome this challenge by studying one of the only randomly-assigned place-based employment policies in the U.S.: a saturated employment program serving public housing residents. We assemble novel data linking program data for treatment and control locations to roughly three decades of longitudinal earnings and employment data, as

[1] See federal registrar describing the change and citing our work: https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2015/06/02/2015-13430/establishing-a-more-effective-fair-market-rent-fmr-system-using-small-area-fair-market-rents-safmrs

well as data on criminal justice involvement, and neighborhood locations to study how the policy affects both the adults directly served, but also their children's future outcomes in adulthood. This work will help answer the question of whether policies can foster opportunity in disadvantaged places without relocating low-income households.

Building on the public housing and housing voucher lottery data that I assembled for the project comparing the impacts of both programs on children, I have two follow-up projects studying separate questions related to these programs using the same lottery setting. The first "Public Provision v. In-Kind Vouchers: Evidence from Housing Assistance Lotteries", with Dan Waldinger and Winnie van Dijk, studies the take-up decisions for each program and the resulting effects of program receipt on adult participants, including their labor supply, homelessness, financial strain, and mortality. The second project, with Emily Davis (a Notre Dame graduate student), examines the impacts of each program on fertility decisions of women on the waiting list using linked Medicaid data.

In another collaboration with a Notre Dame graduate student, Ethan Jenkins, we are studying an old question: what are the consumption smoothing benefits of Unemployment Insurance, with a specific application to the risks facing low-income households. In the U.S. many low-income workers don't earn enough to be eligible to receive UI benefits. In "The Effects of Unemployment Insurance on Low-Income Families" we exploit a discontinuity in eligibility for Unemployment Insurance (UI) for the lowest earners to study the effects of UI receipt on both non-employment duration, and a range of measures of material hardship and financial strain. The basis of our analysis is UI claims data linked to quarterly earnings data for a large sample of low-income households in New York City. We then link these claims to several data sources to capture consumption and hardship, including: homeless system use, evictions, and credit records, and use a Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD) to estimate the causal effect of UI receipt. This work will quantify the traditional efficiency cost from UI (extended unemployment durations) and provide new estimates of the consumption-smoothing benefits (reducing homelessness, evictions, bankruptcies etc) of UI for low-income workers.

Additionally, I am the Principal Investigator or Co-PI of five Randomized Controlled Trials studying different questions related to homelessness. In one study, with David Phillips and Mike Cassidy, we implemented a system-wide, multi-year RCT with the lead homelessness agency in San Antonio (TX) to test two alternative regimes of targeting homeless services. A key question in the homelessness policy space is how to most effectively ration scarce assistance to individuals and families seeking help. To inform this question, we test two different systems of prioritization: an algorithmic targeting tool, and human scoring systems conducted by case managers. This study features more than 13,000 participants tracked over several years. In addition to tracking returns to the homeless system, we are linking study participants to health records, criminal justice data, and earnings to capture a range of subsequent policy-relevant outcomes. The results of this work will inform not just local policy around prioritization, but will also provide insights into broader questions of how to target homeless programs, as well as the literature on human vs. algorithmic targeting.

Research Writing and Policy Engagement

I have also co-authored several articles and chapters reviewing research on, and examining the economics of, housing policies and programs. Most recently, I wrote an article "Reforming Housing Assistance" (published in The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 2019) with Ingrid Gould Ellen and Jens Ludwig discussing the economics of proposed reforms to low-income housing programs and reviewing relevant research. We also wrote an earlier chapter: "Low-Income Housing Policy" for the NBER's Volume: *Economics of Means-Tested Transfer Programs in the United States* (ed. Robert Moffitt). I also authored a chapter, "Allocation Problems in Low-Income Housing Policy" (published in *Fair by Design: Economic Design Approaches to Inequality*, a book edited by economists Alex Teytelboym and Scott Duke Kominers), discussing how market design approaches could be applied to issues in the low-income housing space.

References

Chetty, R. and N. Hendren (2018). The Effects of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility I: Childhood Exposure Effects. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics 133*(3), 1107–1162.

Chetty, R., N. Hendren, and L. Katz (2016). The Effects of Exposure to Better Neighborhoods on Children: New Evidence from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment. *American Economic Review 106*(4), 855–902.

Chyn, E. (2018). Moved to Opportunity: The Long-Run Effects of Public Housing Demolitions on Children. *American Economic Review 108*(10).

Currie, J. and A. Yelowitz (2000). Are Public Housing Projects Good For Kids? *Journal of Public Economics 75*(1), 99–124.

Jacob, B. (2004). Public Housing, Housing Vouchers, and Student Achievement: Evidence from Public Housing Demolitions in Chicago. *American Economic Review 94*(1), 233–258.

Jacob, B. A., M. Kapustin, and J. Ludwig (2015). The Impact of Housing Assistance on Child Outcomes: Evidence from a Randomized Housing Lottery. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics 130*(1), 465–506.

Kling, J. R., J. B. Liebman, and L. F. Katz (2007). Experimental Analysis of Neighborhood Effects. *Econometrica 75*(1), 83–119.

Lundberg, I. and L. Donnelly (2019). A research note on the prevalence of housing eviction among children born in American cities. *Demography 56*(1), 391–404.

Massey, D. S. (1990). American apartheid: Segregation and the making of the underclass. *American Journal of Sociology 96*(2), 329–357.

Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The Truly Disadvantaged: the Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Wilson, W. J. (1996). *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.