

**HOUSING
CRISIS
RESEARCH
COLLABORATIVE**

YEAR 1 RESEARCH
FINDINGS
SUMMARY

SEPTEMBER 2021

CORE RESEARCH PARTNERS

The Collaborative is led by the following research institutions:

- The **Urban Institute** produces timely data and analysis that help advance opportunity, dismantle structural racism, and achieve economic mobility for everyone. From C-suite executives to community activists, we are a trusted source for facts and evidence that have the power to improve the well-being of people and places and move our society toward greater equity.
- **NYU Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy** advances research and debate on housing, neighborhoods, and urban policy. Established in 1995, it is a joint center of the New York University School of Law and the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. Its mission is to conduct objective academic and empirical research, promote frank and productive discussions, present essential data and analysis, and train the next generation of urban policy leaders.
- The **Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies** advances understanding of housing issues and informs policy. Through its research, education, and public outreach programs, the center helps leaders in government, business, and the civic sectors make decisions that effectively address the needs of cities and communities. Through graduate and executive courses, as well as fellowships and internship opportunities, the center also trains and inspires the next generation of housing leaders.
- The **Turner Center for Housing Innovation at the University of California, Berkeley** formulates bold strategies to house families from all walks of life in vibrant, sustainable, and affordable homes and communities. Our work provides timely analysis and data-driven research to support policy and innovation for policymakers, practitioners, and advocates in addressing with urgency the multiple, layered crises of housing affordability, entrenched inequities, and climate change.



YEAR 1 RESEARCH PROJECTS

The Impact of the Pandemic on Landlords: Evidence from Two National Surveys	September 29, 2021	Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies Turner Center for Housing Innovation	Elizabeth Kneebone, Nathaniel Decker, Elijah de la Campa, and Chris Herbert
Rent Payments in Affordable Housing During the Pandemic: The Role of Rental Subsidies and the Safety Net	September 8, 2021	Furman Center Turner Center for Housing Innovation	Katherine O'Regan, Elizabeth Kneebone, Hayley Raetz, and Quinn Underriner
How Are Landlords Faring During the COVID-19 Pandemic? Evidence from a National Cross-Site Survey	August 25, 2021	Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies	Elijah de la Campa, Vincent J. Reina, and Chris Herbert
Paying the Rent in a Pandemic: Recent Trends in Rent Payments Among Affordable Housing Tenants in California	June 18, 2021	Turner Center for Housing Innovation	Elizabeth Kneebone, Quinn Underriner, and Carolina Reid
Eviction Prevention and Diversion Programs: Early Lessons from the Pandemic	April 27, 2021	Urban Institute	Mark Treskon, Solomon Greene, Olivia Fiol, and Anne Junod
Public Housing Programs Could Benefit from Greater Flexibility	May 15, 2021	Urban Institute	Monique King-Viehland, Elizabeth Champion, and Susan J. Popkin
Renters' Responses to Financial Stress During the Pandemic	April 8, 2021	Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies Urban Institute	Whitney Airgood-Obrycki, Ben Demers, Solomon Greene, Chris Herbert, Alexander Hermann, David Luberoff, and Sophia Wedeen
Housing Counseling to Support Renters in Crisis	April 8, 2021	Urban Institute	Martha M. Galvez, Camille H. Anoll, and Abby Boshart
Rent Payments in a Pandemic: Analysis of Affordable Housing in New York City	March 1, 2021	Furman Center	Hayley Raetz, Daniel Waldinger, and Katherine O'Regan
Learning from Emergency Rental Assistance Programs: Lessons from Fifteen Case Studies	March 1, 2021	Furman Center	Claudia Aiken, Vincent Reina, Julia Verbrugge, Andrew Aurand, Rebecca Yae, Ingrid Gould Ellen, and Tyler Hauptert

How are renters faring in this crisis? How many people are behind and by how much?

[Rent Payments in a Pandemic: Analysis of Affordable Housing in New York City](#)

[Paying the Rent in a Pandemic: Recent Trends in Rent Payments Among Affordable Housing Tenants in California](#)

What are key aspects of successful rental assistance programs?

[Learning from Emergency Rental Assistance Programs: Lessons from Fifteen Case Studies](#)

[Public Housing Programs Could Benefit from Greater Flexibility](#)

What are renters doing absent emergency rental assistance (ERA)?

[Renters' Responses to Financial Stress During the Pandemic](#)

What other policy solutions are there in addition to ERA and how well are those working?


[Housing Counseling to Support Renters in Crisis](#)

[Eviction Prevention and Diversion Programs: Early Lessons from the Pandemic](#)

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How are renters faring in this crisis? How many people are behind and by how much?



An analysis of monthly rent payment data for 2019 and 2020 from Eden Housing, one of the largest mission driven, nonprofit affordable housing developers in the state of California found the share of Eden's tenants missing rent payments in a given month more than doubled during the pandemic, **reaching 5 percent by December 2020**.

- Nearly **1,600 households (19%)** missed a payment between April and December in 2020, compared to just over a thousand the year before.
- More than **670 households (8%)** missed multiple rent payments between April and December of 2020, and more than **160 (2%)** of those missed 5 or more months of rent after the pandemic started.



In a sample of 18,500 primarily below-market rate units from New York City, analyzed from January 2019 to September 2020 found **slight increases in the number of households in arrears but large increases in the size of those arrears**.

- The share of households owing rent was **52 percent** in September of 2019 and rose to **55 percent** one year later.
- Households in the sample with rental arrears saw an average increase of **43 percent** in the rent they owed.

Studies indicate that between 10 to 20 percent of renters were behind on rent at the end of 2020 or the beginning of 2021 and that those hardest hit by the pandemic—renters of color, low-income renters, and middle-aged renters—were more likely to be behind on their rent

What are key aspects of successful rental assistance programs?

A survey of 220 rental assistance programs and interviews with program administrators with 15 select programs from a range of communities found six key takeaways necessary for creating efficient, responsive, and equitable emergency rental assistance programs:

Increasing Tenant Take-Up: Documentation Challenges

Targeting Vulnerable Populations and Monitoring Program Outcomes: Designing a Program around Underserved Groups

Engaging Landlords: Reported Challenges with Landlord Participation

Boosting Efficiency: Building Capacity and Infrastructure

Effectively Partnering with Nonprofits: Developing an Efficient Network

The Need for Clear and Flexible Funding Guidelines

What are key aspects of successful rental assistance programs?

A series of interviews with PHA leaders conducted in Spring 2020 found that the regulatory waivers most useful for overall PHA operational effectiveness and ability to serve residents and clients during the ongoing pandemic were:

Allowance of remote hearings, briefings, and housing counseling

Allowance of unit-owner certification in lieu of inspection, and alternative methods and/or timelines for unit inspection

Delaying of annual reexaminations of family income and composition, allowance of self-certifications of income, and forgoing of third-party income verification requirements

Discretionary extension of voucher search terms

Approval of assisted tenancy and execution of Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) contracts

What are renters doing absent emergency rental assistance (ERA)?

Surveys suggest that, early in the pandemic, as many as 40 percent of renters lost at least half of their income; a small recent survey found that, as of early 2021, this share had fallen to about 25 percent of all renters. **Renters responded to these losses in a variety of ways:**

- Many **tapped their savings**, although the estimates of who did so ranged from 25 to 40 percent of renters.
 - Some information also suggests that a quarter of renters have substantially depleted their savings since the beginning of the pandemic.
- **Borrowing from family and friends** was another means of coping with income loss, with about 25 percent of all renters turning to this option including about half of renters who were behind on rent.
- And while estimates vary, most surveys found that **5 to 15 percent of renters were able to secure reduced rent payments from their landlords**, at least temporarily.
- Several studies also found that about **30 percent of renters relied on government support** – such as unemployment insurance or stimulus payments – to pay rent at some point during the pandemic, although only 2 to 3 percent of renters were able to tap smaller emergency rent assistance programs that were part of early pandemic relief efforts in 2020.

What other policy solutions are there in addition to ERA and how well are those working?

Rental
Housing
Counseling

Eviction
Prevention
and
Diversion
Programs

Landlord
Assistance

Rental
Subsidies
and the
Safety Net

What other policy solutions are there in addition to ERA and how well are those working?

Renter Housing Counseling

Demand from renters for counseling and emergency support increased rapidly when the pandemic started and has remained high, reflecting the complex and changing circumstances surrounding renters. [Research](#) exploring the ways that the housing counseling field responded to the needs of renters in crisis found:

- As demand for rental counseling increased during the pandemic, counseling agencies pivoted away from services focused mainly on homeownership to expand or adapt services for renters while shifting from in-person to virtual services.
 - These changes required agencies to rapidly get up to speed on the federal, state, and local services and policies aimed at helping renters stabilize their housing. Counseling was provided almost exclusively online or by phone, increasing access in some places while underscoring a digital divide in others.
- Interviewees described wraparound services and financial supports as critical and a combination of housing counseling, financial counseling, and legal services as particularly helpful for renters at risk of eviction.
- Counseling providers noted that landlords, particularly “mom and pop” landlords with relatively few rental properties felt the financial strain of their tenants’ income losses but found that keeping tenants in place may be in the best interest of landlords as well as tenants.
- Counseling providers faced funding and capacity constraints and needed a knowledge base of local rental assistance programs and legal expertise.

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Eviction Prevention and Diversion Programs

The number of programs combining interventions to prevent and divert evictions is increasing. [A study](#) of court-based and court-adjacent eviction prevention and diversion programs created or adapted during the pandemic found:

- Promising eviction prevention and diversion program models address renters' needs holistically. Job or income losses often motivate renters to participate in these programs, but counselors and advocates working with them quickly learn about adjacent issues that also threaten housing stability, such as depleted savings, unpaid utility bills, high-cost debt, and health challenges.
- Program administrators and partners emphasized the need to recruit and collaborate with landlords to participate in the program. Several interviewees emphasized how these programs helped shift an oppositional landlord-tenant relationship toward a less adversarial, more mutually beneficial relationship.
- Rental and other forms of financial assistance are essential to making all other program elements work. If renters are behind on rent, they risk eviction regardless of how strong their legal representation is and even if a temporary moratorium is airtight. Moratoriums simply postpone the consequences of missed rent and do not relieve renters from their payment obligations.
- All parties involved in creating, managing, and supporting eviction prevention and diversion programs need to center equity in program design and outreach.

What other policy solutions are there in addition to ERA and how well are those working?

Landlord Assistance

Some localities designed their ERA programs so that payments were made directly to landlords for their tenants. [A national survey](#) on landlord behavior in the pandemic found:

- Yearly rent collection was down significantly in 2020 relative to 2019 – both within and across rental markets – and an increasing number of owners have a large share of their portfolio behind on rent.
- Owners of all sizes adjusted their practices during the pandemic, with dramatic increases in the share of landlords granting tenants rent extensions or forgiving back rent. The share of all landlords granting rental extensions and forgiving back rent increased in 2020 relative to 2019 (15 to 48 percent and 3 to 21 percent, respectively).
 - These findings cannot be fully explained by decreased 2020 rental collection, indicating the pandemic affected landlord behavior above and beyond its impact on tenants' ability to make rent.
- Many owners also deferred maintenance to their properties, and those facing challenges around non-payment were more likely to list their properties for sale.
- Renters of color have disproportionately borne the negative impact of landlord decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - Rental properties in communities of color were more likely to be moderately and severely behind on rent in 2020.
 - Conditional on these rental payment rates, landlords were more likely to take punitive actions against these tenants in the form of late rental fees, evictions, and lack of rental forgiveness.

What other policy solutions are there in addition to ERA and how well are those working?

Rental Subsidies and the Safety Net

The [combined analysis](#) of rent payment data for renters in affordable housing in New York City and California found:

- In both locations, the share of households missing a full rent payment in a given month increased sharply immediately after the economic shutdown in March 2020 and remained at heightened levels throughout the rest of 2020.
- Subsidized households had *higher* levels of nonpayment prior to the pandemic, perhaps due to much lower incomes and greater precarity.
- Both subsidized and unsubsidized households saw increases in nonpayment of the tenant portion of rent after the onset of the pandemic, with unsubsidized households hit particularly hard in the California sample.
- Where fixed income receipt is observable (in the California sample), households with fixed incomes had lower rates of nonpayments both prior to and after March 2020, and a smaller increase in nonpayment rate after the onset of the pandemic.
- While both subsidized and unsubsidized households experienced marked increases in nonpayment rates during the pandemic, subsidized households accrued lower levels of rental arrears, as their tenant-charged rent is substantially lower than that of unsubsidized tenants.
- Unsubsidized households without fixed incomes had the greatest increase in nonpayment rates and accrued higher levels of arrears during the pandemic.
- From a landlord's perspective, rent subsidies buffered the total rent debt (tenant and subsidy portion) that accrued during the pandemic.