

LEGAL LANDSCAPE FOR LEHIGH COUNTY RENTERS



3/2/2022

Lehigh Valley Justice Institute



The scales of justice are unbalanced in landlord/tenant cases throughout Lehigh County's court system. We seek to understand the demographic factors related to these inequalities to assess the challenges and biases Lehigh tenants are facing. Using landlord/tenant case data and data from the U.S. Census Bureau at the district level, we found that tenants win just 0.9% of cases raised against them, but their chances increased by 1200% when they had an attorney. Lastly, we found that districts' racial/ethnic makeup had a stronger relationship with case outcomes than income. In response to these inequities, we recommend providing tenants with resource information prior to trial, establishing a mediation program to promote fair settlements, and implementing Implicit Bias Awareness programs. This study was conducted to help guide reform and support programs assisting Lehigh County renting families.

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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	2
BACKGROUND	3
METHODOLOGY	4
FINDINGS	5
Tenants won just 0.9% of cases.	5
Tenants with attorneys had a 1200% better chance of winning.	6
Racial makeup has a stronger relationship to tenant losses than income.	6
DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS	10
Recommendation #1: Provide tenants with resource information and some form of legal representation.	10
Recommendation #2: Institute a settlement mediation program.....	10
Recommendation #3: Implement Implicit Bias Awareness programs to assist in reducing racial disparities in this and other aspects of the justice system.	11
LIMITATIONS	11
NEXT STEPS & FUTURE PROJECTS	12
CONCLUSION	12
REFERENCES	13

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A Message from the Executive Director

The staff of the Lehigh Valley Justice Institute has produced this report analyzing 10 years of Landlord/Tenant cases as a service to the communities of the Lehigh County. It is part of our efforts to provide governmental decision makers, and the community at large, with empirically sound data upon which they may craft solutions to the issues facing our communities.

While Landlord/Tenant cases are civil in nature, housing is such a vital component in solving the most vexing issues within the criminal justice system; the two are inextricably linked. We were motivated to conduct this study by the serious interest which the Lehigh County Commissioners have demonstrated in resolving the current eviction crisis. We are dedicated to formulating locally based solutions and commend the Commissioners on their interest.

We trust that the information presented herein will serve to assist our governmental leaders and our communities with crafting innovative solutions to long standing issues in the justice system.

Joseph E. Welsh
Executive Director
March 2, 2022

About the Lehigh Valley Justice Institute:

Lehigh Valley Justice Institute (LVJI) is an independent nonpartisan research, policy, and advocacy organization working to develop and promote a reimagined criminal justice system that is equitable and fair for all communities. The Institute employs a data-driven approach focused on the criminal justice processes of the Lehigh Valley area of Pennsylvania.

The Institute employs a three-step approach to study and reform:

1. **Research** - Utilizing the abundant academic resources of the Lehigh Valley, the Institute provides a solid empirical, data driven approach to assessing the current deficiencies and inequities inherent in local criminal justice processes;
2. **Policy Development** - Building upon solid data analysis and modeling, research of innovative and best practices nationwide, the Institute develops policy and procedural recommendations for the management of the local governmental systems; and
3. **Advocacy** - The Institute promotes the adoption of its recommended policies and procedures through interaction with stakeholders, both community and governmental, public education and awareness, utilizing the news media, as well as LVJI's own media platforms.

Legal Landscape for Lehigh County Renters

BACKGROUND

In Lehigh County, under state law, there are legal protections for landlords and tenants alike. These laws were designed to protect both parties and ensure a fair renting landscape. However, a dive into Lehigh County's landlord/tenant case data reveals a troubling imbalance in the courtroom.

Violations of landlord/tenant rights or lease agreement breaches often result in civil action. Landlords will most often pursue action against tenants for unpaid or habitually late rent payments as well as lease violations and persistent nuisances.¹ This action is generally in the form of an eviction: a legal process which landlords initiate in magisterial district court to forcibly remove a tenant from a rental unit.² When a landlord does not fulfill their duties, most often for habitability issues, a tenant has the legal right to withhold rent until the concern is remedied.³ If in court, a tenant may file a civil cross-complaint in defense, citing the landlord's negligence, false allegations, retaliation, noncompliance with notice procedures, or unreasonable claim as justification.⁴

Despite regulations surrounding tenant's rights, the legal landscape is grim for Lehigh County renters. Tenants lose the vast majority of cases raised against them. Eviction and a host of subsequent arduous struggles generally follow. Cumbersome legal procedures to hold landlords liable are difficult to navigate for families facing eviction. An eviction record, even if the tenant wins the case, makes securing new housing incredibly difficult.⁵ When tenants do win or when their cases are settled, repair arrangements or other settlement provisions are often unenforced and tenants remain in poor living conditions.⁶ Not only do evictions negatively affect renters, but they also damage the economic well-being of a community and help perpetuate housing inequalities.⁷

Understanding the mechanisms behind this imbalance is necessary to alleviate it. We set out to quantify challenges and identify factors influencing disparities in the legal landscape for Lehigh County renters. Our goal is to provide this data analysis so informed policy decisions and reform can be instituted, improving the scene for renters, landlords, and the rest of the community.

¹ Landlord Guidance, "Pennsylvania Eviction," Last modified August 4, 2021. <https://www.landlordguidance.com/eviction-notice-forms/pennsylvania-eviction/>.

² Souza, Elizabeth, "Pennsylvania Eviction Process," iPropertyManagement, November 8, 2021. <https://ipropertymanagement.com/laws/pennsylvania-eviction-process>.

³ Stewart, Marcia, "Pennsylvania Tenant Rights to Withhold Rent or "Repair and Deduct,"" Nolo. Accessed February 28, 2022. <https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/pennsylvania-tenant-rights-withhold-rent-repair-deduct.html>.

⁴ Landlord Guidance, "Pennsylvania Eviction."

⁵ Weekly, Faith, "Why Eviction Matters: Consequences for Individuals and Families," *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis* (blog), March 24, 2021, <https://www.stlouisfed.org/open-vault/2021/march/why-eviction-matters-consequences-individuals-families>.

⁶ Summers, Nicole, "The Limits of Good Law: A Study of Housing Court Outcomes," *University of Chicago Law Review*, 87 (2019): 145, p. 50, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3387752>.

⁷ The Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania, "Revealing Opportunities and Challenges: An Analysis of Eviction Filings in Pennsylvania," 2022, p. 6, <https://housingalliancepa.org/eviction-data-report/>.

METHODOLOGY

We obtained the primary dataset through a Right to Know request from the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC). The dataset is comprised of cases filed by a landlord(s) against their tenant(s) in Lehigh County Magisterial District Courts from 1/18/2012 through 1/17/2022, as recorded in the Magisterial District Judge System (MDJS). The plaintiff(s) in each case is a landlord(s), as a tenant completes a different Civil Complaint form to file a complaint against a landlord.⁸ The dataset contained case information, docket entries, and hearing records. The original dataset held 54,412 individual cases. AOPC notes that some older cases may have been removed prior to obtainment as per retention policy, but we do not believe this to have a profound effect on the results.

There were 151 cases that had two values listed for Judgment Disposition. This meant that the case had multiple defendants who did not receive the same ruling. For analytical simplicity, we combined these cases into other categories in the following ways:

- 38 cases were listed as Judgment for Defendant and Judgment for Plaintiff; we marked these cases as Judgment for Defendant.
- 75 cases were listed as Dismissed Without Prejudice (Dismissed) and Judgment for Plaintiff; we marked these cases as Judgment for Plaintiff.
- 35 cases were listed as Judgment for Plaintiff and Withdrawn; we marked these as Judgment for Plaintiff.
- 1 case was listed as Judgment for Plaintiff and Settled; we marked this case as Settled.
- 1 case was listed as Dismissed and Withdrawn; we marked this case as Withdrawn.
- 1 case was listed as Settled and Withdrawn; we marked this case as Settled.

We marked three cases that had a disposition listed as Default Judgement for Defendant as Judgment for Defendant. We removed 59 cases with missing values in Judgment Disposition. The final dataset contained 54,353 cases.

We obtained Lehigh County Census tract information from the 2019 American Community Survey and mapped the tracts to Lehigh County's magisterial districts. In instances where several tracts existed within a district, total quantities were summed, and per capita income was averaged across tracts. Proportions were calculated from updated total numbers. This allowed us to match a district's demographics with landlord/tenant case information from that district.

All exploratory data analysis and preliminary calculations were completed in Microsoft Excel 365. We conducted simple and multiple linear regression analyses in RStudio.⁹

⁸ Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts, "For the Public," United Judicial System of Pennsylvania, Accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.pacourts.us/forms/for-the-public>.

⁹ R Version 4.1.2.

FINDINGS

Tenants won just 0.9% of cases.

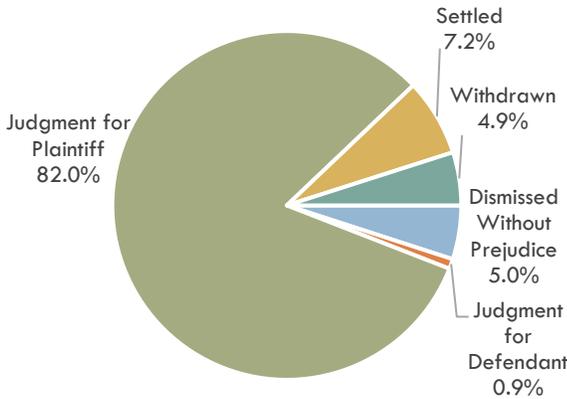


FIGURE 1: TOTAL DISPOSITION DISTRIBUTION

Figure 1 shows the distribution of case outcomes over the past 10 years. Tenant families won an appalling 0.9% (500) of the 54,353 cases raised by landlords in Lehigh County. In stark contrast, landlords won outright in 82.0% (44,566) of cases. The remaining 17.1% (9,287) of cases did not go to court. They were either Dismissed without Prejudice (Dismissed) (2,715), which implies temporary dismissal;¹⁰ Settled (3,892), where both parties reach an outside agreement;¹¹ or Withdrawn (2,680). In many of these instances, tenants do not receive justice. One University of Chicago study showed landlords frequently do not follow through on settlement agreement conditions, as often they are unenforced or made without legal representation.¹²

Landlords won 98.9% of cases that were brought to trial (45,066).

Table 1 breaks down outcome results by district. In each of the county’s 14 districts, landlords win in massive landslides while tenants and their families win handfuls of cases. There is little deviation from the overall distribution, which shows that this experience is consistent for tenants across Lehigh County.

District	Judgment for Defendant	Judgment for Plaintiff	Settled	Withdrawn	Dismissed
31101	0.4%	81.0%	5.0%	2.6%	11.0%
31102	0.7%	84.3%	4.5%	5.5%	5.1%
31103	0.5%	79.6%	12.3%	1.7%	5.9%
31104	0.2%	88.5%	5.6%	4.5%	1.1%
31105	0.7%	81.5%	4.0%	2.8%	11.0%
31106	2.6%	76.4%	12.3%	6.8%	1.9%
31107	3.3%	70.0%	19.9%	4.9%	1.9%
31108	0.9%	77.5%	8.9%	7.5%	5.2%
31201	0.3%	87.0%	4.7%	3.9%	4.0%
31202	2.3%	82.7%	3.0%	10.3%	1.7%
31203	2.9%	65.8%	14.4%	16.3%	0.7%
31301	3.9%	85.9%	6.1%	3.2%	0.9%
31302	0.9%	76.7%	6.0%	13.3%	3.0%
31303	1.8%	82.2%	9.0%	5.4%	1.6%

TABLE 1: DISTRICT DISPOSITION DISTRIBUTIONS

¹⁰ “What Does ‘Dismissed without Prejudice’ Mean?” Robert M. Helfend Attorney at Law. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://www.robertmhelfend.com/criminal-defense/dismissed-without-prejudice-mean/>.

¹¹ D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center, “Settlement and Mediation in Landlord and Tenant Court,” LawHelp.org/DC, January 31, 2018, <https://www.lawhelp.org/files/7C92C43F-9283-A7E0-5931-E57134E903FB/attachments/B2D6F359-0773-3A92-7247-8180D767AD47/408781Settlement.pdf>.

¹² Summers, “The Limits of Good Law,” p. 52.

Tenants with attorneys had a 1200% better chance of winning.

Landlords swept most cases, but outcomes were more varied when parties had lawyers. Figure 2A shows the outcome distribution by legal representation. The presence of tenant attorneys increased the percentage of cases won by the tenant. When tenants had lawyers and landlords did not, the percentage of cases won by tenants increased from 0.8% to 10.4%, a difference of 1200% – though still a small portion of cases. A larger percentage of cases were Dismissed as well, most likely because tenants’ lawyers were able to reach a resolution. When landlords had lawyers, about 4.6% of the time, the percentage of cases Withdrawn increased. This is presumably because both parties were legally advised and came to a solution outside court.

Figure 2B shows that over 94% (51,301) of cases had no lawyers at all. Tenants had lawyers in 1.5% (793) of cases, and in 1.0% (547) of cases they were the only party that had legal representation.

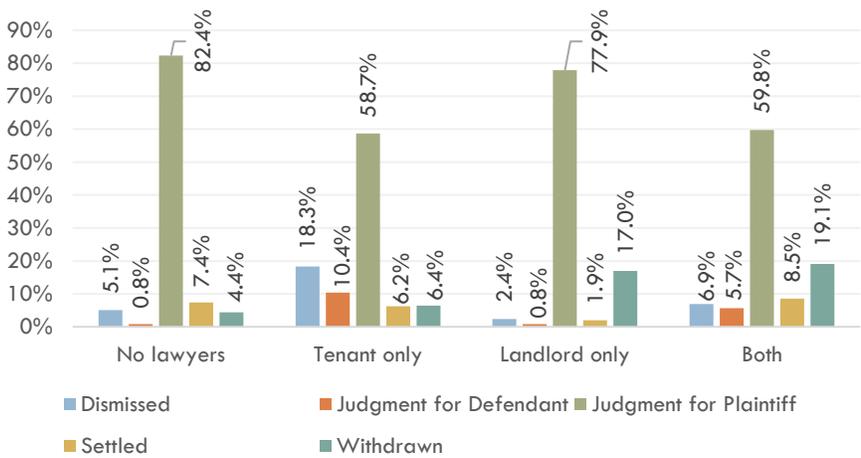


FIGURE 2A: OUTCOME DISTRIBUTION BY PARTIES' LEGAL REPRESENTATION

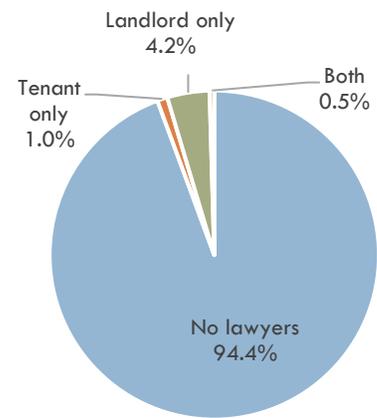


FIGURE 2B: LEGAL REPRESENTATION DISTRIBUTION

Racial makeup has a stronger relationship to tenant losses than income.

Table 2 reports each district’s population demographics taken from the U.S. Census Bureau and case demographics over the last 10 years. Columns are shaded relative to their maximum and minimum values; larger values are darker and smaller values are lighter. This makes trends and relationships between variables easily discernable.

Many of these shading patterns have straightforward explanations. Districts with lower per capita income (PCI) or higher poverty rates experience higher case rates¹³ presumably because poorer people have a harder time paying rent. Furthermore, racial minorities and Hispanic people tend to have lower incomes than non-Hispanic White people,¹⁴ so the interrelationship between Poverty Rate, Nonwhite Percentage, and Hispanic Percentage is not surprising.¹⁵ What is surprising is that districts with higher proportions of people of color still have higher rates of tenant losses when controlling for income, as our analysis will show.

¹³ Case Rate was calculated by dividing the total number of cases by the population of each district.

¹⁴ PK, “Income by Race: Average, Top One Percent, Median, and Inequalities,” DQYDJ, 2021, <https://dqydj.com/income-by-race/>.

¹⁵ United States Census Bureau, “Hispanic Origin,” Last modified October 8, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/topics/population/hispanic-origin.html>; The Census Bureau defines Hispanic as an ethnicity rather than a race. Therefore, citizens mark their race and Hispanic ethnicity separately, and Nonwhite does not imply non-Hispanic.

District	Total Population	Poor	Poverty Rate	Cases	Case Rate	Tenant Loss Percentage (LossPct)	PCI	Nonwhite Pct	Hispanic Pct
31101	20,985	7,303	34.80%	8,261	39.4%	99.5%	\$15,353	44.9%	69.1%
31102	19,519	4,377	22.42%	7,359	37.7%	99.2%	\$19,816	34.4%	45.1%
31103	10,065	1,690	16.79%	4,344	43.2%	99.4%	\$26,827	36.6%	37.8%
31104	26,151	5,113	19.55%	10,362	39.6%	99.8%	\$21,528	34.4%	52.1%
31105	26,992	3,073	11.38%	5,037	18.7%	99.1%	\$29,368	16.9%	23.9%
31106	13,793	2,033	14.74%	2,236	16.2%	96.7%	\$26,372	19.9%	33.1%
31107	30,768	1,932	6.28%	3,165	10.3%	95.5%	\$29,733	20.0%	19.0%
31108	20,231	2,559	12.65%	1,377	6.8%	98.8%	\$35,809	21.9%	25.6%
31201	11,781	3,863	32.79%	5,745	48.8%	99.6%	\$13,856	42.2%	64.1%
31202	36,056	1,503	4.17%	1,007	2.8%	97.3%	\$41,294	10.9%	8.4%
31203	18,056	1,216	6.73%	1,800	10.0%	95.8%	\$40,660	10.6%	8.2%
31301	26,326	2,031	7.71%	932	3.5%	95.7%	\$38,529	3.5%	3.5%
31302	26,500	1,001	3.78%	2,104	7.9%	98.8%	\$45,057	13.5%	7.7%
31303	31,296	1,127	3.60%	624	2.0%	97.9%	\$48,522	6.8%	4.7%

TABLE 2: DISTRICT POPULATION AND CASE DEMOGRAPHICS

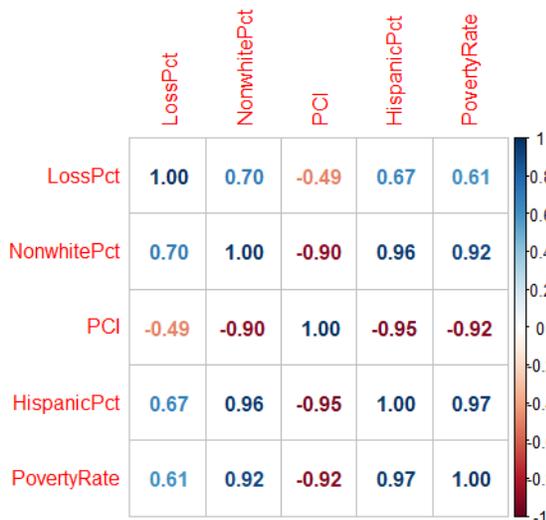


FIGURE 3: CORRELATION MATRIX

relationships with LossPct. We further quantify this difference by plotting and regressing these variables on LossPct, as shown in Figure . Since PCI and Poverty Rate are both measures of income, we choose PCI as the income variable because it has smaller correlations with Nonwhite Pct and Hispanic Pct.

To quantify these interrelationships, we use correlation coefficients. Correlation is a measure between -1 and 1 that assesses of the strength of the linear relationship between two variables.¹⁶ The correlation matrix in Figure 3 reports the correlations between the listed variables. In fact, the correlations between the income variables and the racial and ethnic variables are extremely high; all have magnitudes between 0.90 and 0.97. This means that these variables have very strong linear relationships with each other, as expected.

The correlation matrix also suggests which demographic factors are useful in predicting¹⁷ the percentage of cases brought to trial which tenants lose, called LossPct. Notably, both Nonwhite Pct and Hispanic Pct have higher correlations with LossPct than Poverty Rate and PCI do. This means that they have stronger linear

¹⁶ Correlations of 0 imply no relationship; correlations near 1 imply a strong positive relationship; correlations near -1 imply a strong negative relationship.

¹⁷ In this context, we define a “prediction” as an educated guess of what LossPct would be in certain Lehigh County district using only the variables provided as information; that is, a “guess” of a district’s LossPct given that Nonwhite Pct (or Hispanic Pct) is the only known statistic. It is not used to imply a forecast of a district’s LossPct or hypothesize a theoretical district’s LossPct.

Figure 4 contains three graphs. Each graph plots Lehigh County’s 14 districts by its PCI, Nonwhite Pct, or Hispanic Pct respectively on its LossPct. A line of best fit (also known as a simple linear regression) is modeled in each. At first glance, we see that districts seem to be less scattered – that is, datapoints are more linear in distribution – when plotted with Nonwhite Pct and Hispanic Pct than PCI.

The regressions’ R^2 values, also given in Figure 4, confirm these suspicions. A model’s R^2 statistic is a measure between 0 and 1 of how well the model explains changes in the dependent variable.¹⁸ Larger values correspond to less scattered (and therefore more linear) data and therefore better model fits. When we model LossPct against PCI, the R^2 is 0.2426. When we model LossPct against Nonwhite Pct, the R^2 is 0.4949, an increase of 104%. Therefore, the Nonwhite Pct model in Figure 4B does a better job of accounting for the changes in LossPct than the income model in Figure 4A. In other words, **a district’s racial makeup is a more accurate indicator of trial outcomes than income.**

Similarly, as anticipated, regressing LossPct against Hispanic Pct yields an R^2 of 0.4447, an increase of 83% from the PCI regression model. Thus, **a district’s ethnic makeup is also a more accurate indicator of trial outcomes than income.**

However, as Figure 3 exhibits, racial and ethnic variables are strongly correlated with income variables. How can we be sure that Nonwhite Pct and Hispanic Pct are significant predictors of LossPct and not simply echoing their intense correlation with the income variables? We combine the two covariates in two multiple linear regressions to predict LossPct with Nonwhite Pct and PCI, and then with Hispanic Pct and PCI. This allows us to control for PCI and look at the significance of Nonwhite Pct and Hispanic Pct on LossPct.¹⁹

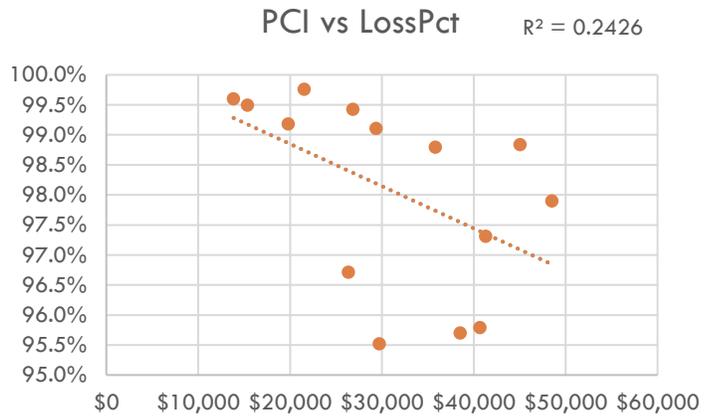


FIGURE 4A: LOSSPCT REGRESSED ON PCI

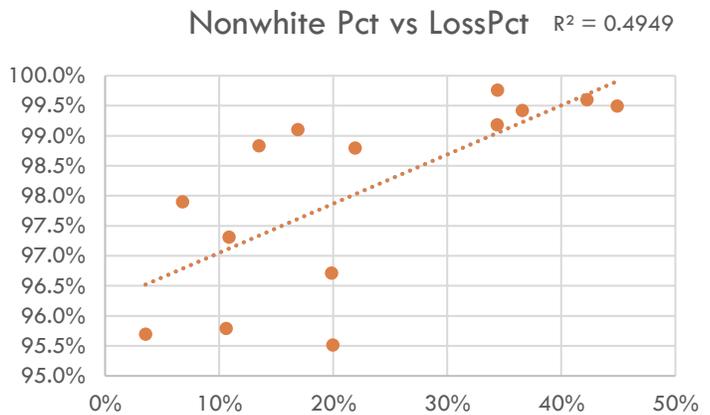


FIGURE 4B: LOSSPCT REGRESSED ON NONWHITE PCT

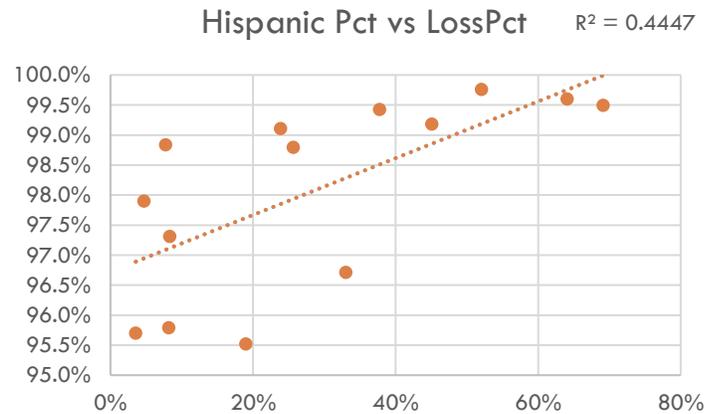


FIGURE 4C: LOSSPCT REGRESSED ON HISPANIC PCT

¹⁸ The coefficient of determination R^2 is the square of the correlation coefficients given in Figure 3’s correlation matrix.

¹⁹ See the Limitations section for the multicollinearity assessment.

MODEL 1			
LossPct = 0.913 + 0.162 * NonwhitePct + 1.095 × 10 ⁻⁶ * PCI			
Regression Significance	F(2,11) = 8.338	P-value	0.006
R ²	0.6040	Adj. R ²	0.5320
	Coefficient Estimate	Standard Error	P-value
Intercept	0.913	0.030	<0.001
Nonwhite Pct	0.162	0.051	0.009
PCI	1.095 × 10 ⁻⁶	6.291 × 10 ⁻⁷	0.110
MODEL 2			
LossPct = 0.885 + 0.134 * HispanicPct + 1.846 × 10 ⁻⁶ * PCI			
Regression Significance	F(2,11) = 9.076	P-value	0.004
R ²	0.6227	Adj. R ²	0.5541
	Coefficient Estimate	Standard Error	P-value
Intercept	0.885	0.036	<0.001
Hispanic Pct	0.134	0.040	0.007
PCI	1.846 × 10 ⁻⁶	8.104 × 10 ⁻⁷	0.044

TABLE 3: RESULTS FROM MULTIPLE REGRESSIONS

The regression output given in Table 3 lets us interpret how one covariate affects LossPct when the other is controlled or fixed. The coefficient estimates are approximations of the linear relationship between the respective variable and LossPct. Model 1 states that regardless of a district’s PCI – that is, when a district’s PCI is controlled – a 1 percentage point increase in the Nonwhite proportion is associated with an increase in LossPct by 0.162 percentage points. Similarly, when a district’s PCI is fixed, Model 2 states that an additional 1 percentage point of Hispanic proportion is associated with an increase of 0.134 percentage points in LossPct. **Even when PCI is controlled, the effects of Nonwhite Pct and Hispanic Pct are significant.**

In both models, p-values below the 1% significance level for Nonwhite Pct and Hispanic Pct coefficient estimates indicate that the variables are significant in their respective models. The p-values for PCI are less than the significance level. Therefore, we claim that PCI is not useful at predicting LossPct when NonwhitePct or HispanicPct are available. Alternatively, **when Nonwhite Pct or Hispanic Pct are controlled, the effects of PCI are not significant.**

**Racial/Ethnic makeup have stronger relationships to tenant loss percentage than income.
Racial/Ethnic makeup are more useful for predicting a district’s tenant loss percentage than income.**

DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This study shows there are great justice disparities for renters across different demographics in Lehigh County. Districts' tenant losses have strong relationships with factors unrelated to the case facts, including race, ethnicity, and legal representation. This can result in immense injustices for tenants and their families whose livelihoods are upended, damaged, or burdened by these court proceedings. Still, these issues are addressable, and other studies support our findings: the renting landscape can be improved for landlords, tenants, and the community.

Recommendation #1: Provide tenants with resource information and some form of legal representation.

When tenants had access to lawyers, they won cases at a 1200% rate increase, and more cases were Dismissed. This echoes a University of Chicago study, which found that tenants with representation had noticeably better chances of obtaining rent abatements in valid habitability complaints – an increase of nearly 25 percentage points.²⁰ This study also strongly suggested that legal representation was significant in affecting court outcomes in the tenant's favor but did not completely explain them.²¹

Evictions are preventable through rental assistance programs such as the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP).²² These services provide renters with money they can use to pay landlords and avoid court judgments. Knowledge of these services is essential for their use. A piloted eviction diversion program in Berks County showed that giving defendants information about resources prior to their hearings was associated with a strong increase in the number of Settled and Withdrawn cases.²³ Providing defendants with information regarding attorney representation and other rental assistance programs before their hearing would help them navigate the complicated legal process, defend their situation, and stay in their homes.

We recommend that defendants be provided with information regarding rental assistance programs, legal representation, and other resources upon the court's acceptance of the landlord's complaint.

Recommendation #2: Institute a settlement mediation program.

Even when tenants are provided with assistance information and have legal representation, cases that go to trial are largely decided for the landlord. In Berks County, there was not a considerable increase in judgments for the defendant since the eviction diversion program's operation.²⁴ Similarly, in our study we see that tenant attorneys alone did not improve the Settled and Withdrawn case rates; cases were more likely to be Withdrawn if the landlord had a lawyer. This suggests that legal advisement on both sides helps reach mutually beneficial and enforceable agreements. Mutually beneficial agreements help prevent evictions.

In September 2020, three courts in Chester County implemented the Eviction Prevention Court program, which provided tenants with an attorney on the day of their hearing to devise a settlement and prevent eviction. In their recent study, the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania showed these three courts saw dramatic increases in the proportions of Settled and Withdrawn cases from 2019 to 2021; in fact, the proportion of Settled or Withdrawn cases increased from 22% to 55%.²⁵

²⁰ Summers, "The Limits of Good Law," p. 60.

²¹ Summers, "The Limits of Good Law," p. 53.

²² Explore the ERAP website here: <https://www.dhs.pa.gov/ERAP/Pages/ERAP.aspx>.

²³ The Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania, "Revealing Opportunities and Challenges," p. 15.

²⁴ The Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania, p.15.

²⁵ The Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania, p. 13.

We recommend funding mediation programs focusing on fair, equitable settlements between tenants and landlords. These programs should have legal experts involved to ensure both parties adhere to settlement conditions.

Recommendation #3: Implement Implicit Bias Awareness programs to assist in reducing racial disparities in this and other aspects of the justice system.

Our data suggests a troubling correlation between race and negative outcomes for tenants. This is a pattern seen in other aspects of the justice system as well. We believe that such disparities could be addressed by Implicit Bias Awareness programs.

It is important to recognize that we all have biases. They are a part of human nature. The key is recognizing our biases, bringing them into our conscious mind, and, thereby working to ensure that such biases are not playing a role in our decision-making. This is the goal of bias awareness programs, and we strongly encourage their use.

LIMITATIONS

This study was observational, so causal conclusions cannot be drawn from these results. This does not invalidate the findings of the study.

As the primary dataset obtained from the AOPC did not contain defendants' racial or income information, we utilized American Community Survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau to examine relationships between these variables and case outcomes. The primary dataset listed case information at the district level, whereas the Census dataset had information at the smaller tract level. We therefore mapped the Census tracts to Lehigh County districts, averaging data when multiple tracts comprised a single district. Due to this process, there is possibility of slight difference in districts' true racial makeup and income/economic statistics, but we do not believe this difference to be considerable.

The regressions worked with a small sample size since Lehigh County has 14 districts. Furthermore, the datapoints comprise the entire population rather than a probabilistic sample. However, we employed regression techniques with the goal of modeling and estimating the significance of linear relationships between variables rather than for futuristic or hypothetical prediction purposes. The results should be considered with this in mind.

The strong correlations between independent variables raised concern about multicollinearity potentially inflating the coefficient estimates' variances and skewing significant results. However, a variance inflation factor analysis reported variance inflation factors below 10, a common minimum for concern.²⁶ Furthermore, the models' condition indexes are below 30, hence the multicollinearity analysis returned acceptable results.²⁷ Both multiple linear regression models fulfilled the remaining regression assumptions.²⁸

We do not believe these limitations seriously affected the analyses since regression model assumptions were fulfilled, and we were primarily interested in coefficient significance rather than prediction.

²⁶ The variance inflation factors for Model 1 are 5.386 and for Model 2 are 9.382.

²⁷ The condition indexes for Model 1 are 2.826 and 21.945. The condition indexes for Model 2 are 2.416 and 26.718.

²⁸ (1) Each independent variable is linearly related to the dependent variable; (2) the residuals are independent (Durbin-Watson tests >0.5); (3) the variance is homoscedastic; (4) residuals are distributed approximately Normal.

NEXT STEPS & FUTURE PROJECTS

We began this project in response to numerous Lehigh County Commissioners' interest; we offered to complete an analysis on challenges and disparities for tenants facing eviction or other renting legal action. Intrigued by the strong results from this initial study, we plan to run a nearly identical analysis on Northampton County landlord/tenant case data. This will allow us to paint a picture of the renting disparities across the entire Lehigh Valley. At the time of publishing, we have already submitted the Right to Know request to the AOPC for Northampton County's data.

While we are confident that these results are substantial, context would provide a clearer picture of the Lehigh Valley renting experience. A study examining the outcome disparities of tenant-raised complaints would reveal more detail about the challenges and biases tenants face. This would also shed light on the landlord's point of view. The best solutions are those that work for both landlords and tenants, so understanding landlords' points of view, challenges, and experiences are crucial for effective reform.

Additionally, a deeper dive into American Community Survey data could reveal further relationships between other demographic factors and case loss percentage. A recent study by the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania showed that Pennsylvania counties with larger proportions of female-headed households with children experienced greater eviction filing rates.²⁹ Information regarding child status, marriage status, and the number of rental units in a district could shed light on other factors influencing the rental disparity in Lehigh County.

CONCLUSION

The Lehigh Valley is a microcosm of the United States in the sense that it is representative of the racial and socio-economic diversity reflective of our nation. Because of this, we at LVJI firmly believe that studies conducted and solutions successfully implemented in the Lehigh Valley are translatable to most other locations in the country.

The inequity in landlord/tenant outcomes in Lehigh County are both stark and unsettling. Tenant families won a disproportionately low amount of only 0.9% of these cases. Racial and ethnic makeup had a stronger relationship to case outcomes than income. It is essential that these problems are addressed for the good of tenants, their families, and the community. Evictions lead to familial housing instability, which affects children's mental and physical development.³⁰ Evictions also exacerbate homelessness, which can lead to lower property values, higher taxes for social relief programs, and a depletion of county funds for other issues.³¹ Our findings reflect systemic and intrinsic inequities in our system. They pinpoint undeniable racial disparities that continue to persist in our policies and institutions. LVJI is committed in our mission to confront these injustices in dedication to a reimagined criminal justice system that is fair and equitable for all communities.

About the Authors

This report was authored by Ms. Victoria Wrigley, M.S., Data Scientist for the Lehigh Valley Justice Institute. Ms. Wrigley conducted all data analysis. This report was completed under the direction of Mr. Joseph E. Welsh, Executive Director of LVJI. We thank LVJI colleagues Ms. Nicole Levy and Ms. Halle Nelson for their thoughtful edits and contributions.

²⁹ The Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania, "Revealing Opportunities and Challenges," p. 21.

³⁰ Weekly, "Why Eviction Matters."

³¹ Weekly.

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