TENANT SCREENING AND FAIR HOUSING IN THE INFORMATION AGE


Committee: Katherine A. Beckett (Chair), George I Lovell (GSR), Kyle Crowder, Alexes Harris, Stewart E Tolnay.

The information age has brought about an unprecedented level of scrutiny with which applicants for rental housing are evaluated. Contemporary landlords are increasingly likely to use commercial background check tools to investigate applicants’ criminal, credit and eviction histories. In addition to impeding housing access for renters with imperfect tenancy, credit or criminal records, these technologies may enhance opportunities for subtle forms of discrimination involving the inconsistent application of background check criteria.

This dissertation uses a mixed-methods approach to investigate how rental housing providers screen and select applicants on the basis of discrediting information revealed by background checks. It also assesses the capacity of existing and proposed fair housing regulations to combat discriminatory tenant screening practices and broaden housing access for renters with negative background credentials. The project’s online field experiment measures how landlords respond to emails from fictitious prospective applicants disclosing two types of negative rental credentials (criminal history and prior eviction), and whether those response patterns are related to the race of applicants. The project’s qualitative component entails forty-six in-depth interviews with representatives of Seattle’s rental housing industry as well as renters with criminal conviction records, past evictions and/or damaged credit histories who had recently searched for housing. The interviews construct a rich descriptive picture of the tenant-screening process from divergent vantage points, explore the impact of fair housing law on how landlords approach background screening, and document the far-reaching consequences of modern tenant screening and selection practices for negatively-credentialed renters.

This study advances our understanding of how ostensibly race-neutral background screening criteria and technologies can reshape, amplify or conceal existing patterns of discrimination in the private rental market, an increasingly important site of social stratification. My research also provides timely, policy-relevant insights into the distinct challenges involved in using new fair housing regulations to combat discriminatory tenant screening practices and meaningfully broaden housing access for renters with discrediting background credentials.