



Rikers Island Longitudinal Study: Housing

March 2023

The Rikers Island Longitudinal Study (RILS), conducted by the Columbia University Justice Lab, collected data from 286 men and women who appeared in New York City criminal courts between 2019 and 2020. After initially interviewing people at court or in jail, the study re-interviewed them 3 months, 6 months, and 12 months later. Our sampling strategy focused on those with multiple prior charges and prior violent felonies. The interviews were conducted over a 22-month period that concluded in May 2021. We conducted a total of 1,078 interviews, maintaining a response rate of over 75%. As part of New York City’s effort to close Rikers Island Jail, we aimed to understand how poverty, housing insecurity, and health problems affect the pre-trial process. This is one of a series of research briefs that summarize several of the key findings. More information about the study can be found at: <https://justicelab.columbia.edu>

Housing Stability for Court-Involved People

For people involved in the criminal justice system, unstable housing is known to be associated with re-arrest, relapse to substance use, and an elevated risk of violent victimization. Understanding the housing situation of people going through the criminal courts is thus important for understanding how to support a successful pretrial process. Here we document the state of self-reported housing and housing stability in the RILS sample.

The first interview with RILS respondents asked about housing at the time of arrest. As Figure 1 shows, about 40 percent of the sample were living with family and another 20 percent were living in their own place. Another 10 percent were also living in private households, with friends or intimate partners.

Around 30 percent of the sample were either unhoused or in some kind of temporary housing at the time they were arrested. Temporary housing included motels and rooming houses, but also included residential drug treatment facilities and supportive housing programs. Some respondents told

us that they “moved around a lot” or split their time across several addresses. All these forms of housing were coded as temporary. Around 10 percent of the RILS sample was living in a shelter at the time of their first interview. Another 10 percent told us that they were homeless and living on the street.

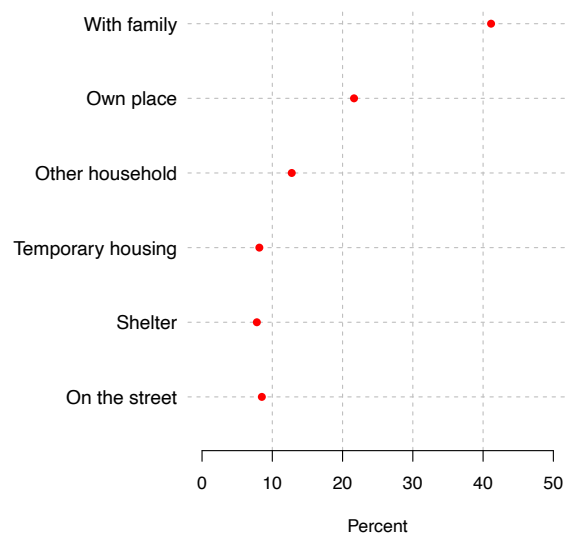


Figure 1. Percentage of respondents living with family, in their own place, living with someone else, in temporary housing (e.g., motel, treatment program, or boarding house), in a shelter, or unhoused on the street at the baseline interview.

Substance Use, Mental Illness, and Housing

Housing problems are especially serious for people with histories of substance use problems and mental illness. The dual diagnosis of substance use problems and mental illness is well-known to be prevalent among people at serious risk of incarceration. The RILS data point to the close tie between substance use problems and mental illness, on the one hand, and housing insecurity on the other.

Figure 2 shows housing insecurity for three groups in the RILS sample: (1) those who reported that they had no history of substance use problems or mental illness (33% of the sample), (2) those reporting they had either substance use problems or mental illness (36%), or (3) those reporting both a history of substance use problems and mental illness (31%).

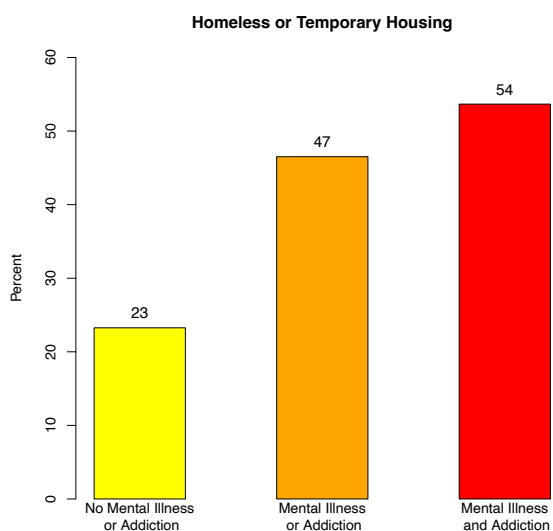


Figure 2. Percentage of respondents who were homeless or in temporary housing in the 12 months after arraignment, by mental health and addiction status.

About a quarter of group one experienced homelessness or was in temporary housing compared to half of group two. More than half of group three was homeless or in temporary housing. In short, mental illness or substance use problems were associated with double the risk of housing instability, while a dual diagnosis further exacerbated said risk.

Figure 3 reports on study respondents who lived continuously in a private household during the study period. Half of those without a history of substance use or mental illness had highly stable housing, compared to under a third of those with histories of mental illness and substance use problems.

Maggie, a 26-year-old woman, described the cycle of housing insecurity. Talking about her eviction, just days before the interview: “They didn’t give us any warning... [I packed my] jeans, sweaters, like just the main things. I left a lot of stuff.” An eviction record, like a criminal record, can be hard to escape: “This eviction here, it makes [our] record bad. So, it’s probably gonna be a little harder for us to find somewhere else to go.”

Another respondent, 44-year-old Matt, described the positive effects of safe and stable housing: “[In this] space, the neighbors are quiet. It’s a building that has three other families in it. Everybody in the building works. The neighborhood is quiet for the most part and it’s convenient, because it’s not too far from my mom and my probation officer is [nearby], so on a nice day I can walk [to the office].”

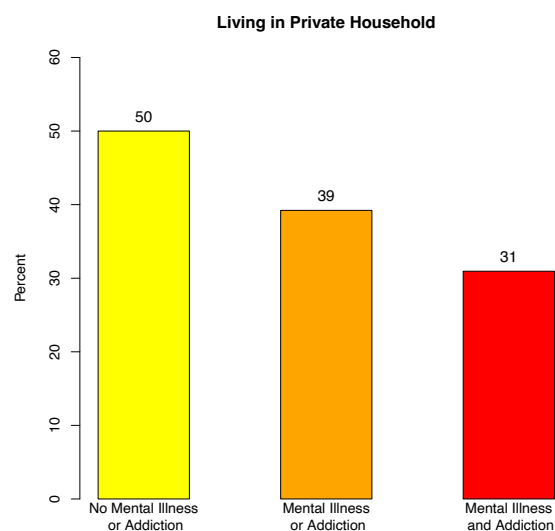


Figure 3. Percentage of respondents who lived continuously in a private household, either their own place or with family or friends, in the 12 months after arraignment, by mental health and addiction status.

The average level of housing among court-involved New Yorkers is poor. Shelter use, temporary housing, and street homelessness are common and these problems are most serious for those with substance use problems and mental illness. Greater stability and predictability in daily life could be encouraged by supporting stable housing in private households.

Acknowledgements and Contacts

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