

“I Can’t Afford to Move”: Negotiating Neglect and Apartment Disrepair in Los Angeles

City & Community

00(0) 1–22

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DOI: 10.1177/15356841241238462

journals.sagepub.com/home/cty

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Abstract

Sociologists have shown how displacement reproduces inequality among U.S. renters. Less is known about the experiences of renters prior to displacement, or how the trade-offs that renters adopt to avoid moves also stratify families. This article addresses this gap by examining how renters with few housing alternatives manage landlord neglect in routine maintenance. Using interviews with 131 non-Hispanic white and Latina/o, low- and middle-income renters living in Los Angeles, I find that unaffordable rental markets embed disadvantaged families, particularly low-income Latina/o immigrants, into substandard indoor living environments. Unable or reluctant to move, renters endure a process that I call negotiating neglect, which encompasses decision making around repair requests, following up with repair delays, investing personal funds into maintenance, and managing the health consequences of disrepair. Negotiating neglect demands substantial time, cognitive labor, and, at times, financial resources, and for some families, it is a chronic stressor. Taken together, these findings advance prior research on how unaffordable rental markets widen inequalities among families.

Keywords

urban sociology, immobility, displacement, maintenance, immigration

In the United States, nearly one in three households rents their home (Joint Center for Housing Studies 2022). A broad literature has examined how displacement widens inequalities among U.S. renters. “Reactive moves” prompted by eviction, rising rents, and habitability problems (DeLuca and Jang-Trettien 2020) erode movers’ physical health (Desmond and Kimbro 2015), limit neighborhood attainment (DeLuca and Jang-Trettien 2020), and engender future residential instability (Desmond, Gershenson, and Kiviat 2015). Because displacement has negative consequences and is experienced unequally, involuntary moves are an important mechanism of social stratification in cities (DeLuca and Rosen 2022; Hepburn, Louis, and Desmond 2020).

Despite a scholarly focus on displacement, renters as a group are increasingly immobile (Myers, Park, and Cho 2021). Local mobility rates have declined by nearly one third since 2010, driven in part by increased rent burdens (Myers et al. 2021). For renters with negative credentials, limited incomes, or who face discrimination during housing searches, moves are time consuming, expensive, and uncertain

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(Reosti 2021; Schmidt 2023). As a result, it is likely that disadvantaged renters adopt strategies to avoid moving in an unaffordable rental market. However, less is known about renters' experiences before they are displaced, the trade-offs required to manage displacement pressures, or how these trade-offs also shape family wellbeing. Due to a theoretical focus on mobility, as opposed to the processes leading up to moves or the strategies that renters mobilize to manage displacement pressures, it is likely that sociologists underestimate the total impact of unaffordable rental markets on U.S. families.

In this article, I address this gap by examining an important and understudied trade-off endured by renters to avoid moves: managing chronic disrepair. The indoor living environment is a critical social determinant of health (Swope and Hernández 2019), and though landlords are legally responsible for keeping homes in habitable conditions, substandard rental housing conditions persist across the United States. In 2021, an estimated 8.4 percent of U.S. renter households lived in a moderately or severely substandard home (American Housing Survey 2021).¹ How do renters living in unaffordable housing markets manage chronic landlord disinvestment in maintenance?

Drawing on interviews with 131 low- and middle-income, Latina/o and non-Hispanic white renters in Los Angeles (LA), I find that low-income renters, particularly Latina/o respondents, frequently endure a process that I call negotiating neglect.² Negotiating neglect encompasses a spectrum of responses to landlord disrepair, including: forecasting landlord reactions to problems at home, deciding whether and how to notify landlords, managers, or city authorities, seeking out information about their rights as tenants, following up with landlords about repairs that are delayed or completed partway, coordinating fixes on their own, and enduring the consequences of unresolved maintenance problems. Negotiating neglect operates as a chronic stressor in the lives of some low-income families, and it requires substantial time and cognitive labor,

or the work required to anticipate needs, identify options, decide among options, and monitor results related to everyday household tasks (Daminger 2019). Some tenants invest financial resources into managing disrepair. Low-income renters had fewer feasible housing alternatives and often described negotiating neglect as their only option. Low-income Latina/o renters in particular endured maintenance delays, overlapping maintenance problems in the present, and self-repairs more than any other group. In contrast, middle-income renters were less likely to encounter disrepair in their homes and generally received timely repairs. When problems went unresolved, these families made plans to exit. By showing how low-income renters become embedded in and manage disinvested homes, this article advances our understanding of how exclusionary rental markets reproduce inequality.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Mobility Bias in Urban Sociology

Over the past 20 years, researchers have examined how renter displacement operates as an engine of inequality in U.S. cities (Carlson 2020; DeLuca and Jang-Trettien 2020; DeLuca, Wood, and Rosenblatt 2019; Desmond 2012; Freeman and Braconi 2004; Hwang and Ding 2020). Displacement has negative consequences for family wellbeing. For instance, moving on short notice—due to eviction, neighborhood violence, or a structural housing failure—constrains renters' future neighborhood choices (DeLuca and Jang-Trettien 2020) and can channel movers to homes with physical defects (Desmond et al. 2015). Experiencing an eviction, in particular, harms renters' mental and physical health (Desmond and Kimbro 2015). Because involuntary moves are unequally distributed across the population, displacement contributes to social stratification (Lundberg and Donnelly 2019).

One subset of this literature focuses on the relationship between rising housing costs and renter displacement. Although the negative

consequences of eviction and other involuntary moves are clear, social scientists debate the extent to which increasing rents prompt involuntary moves (Brown-Saracino 2017; Carlson 2020; DeLuca and Rosen 2022; Freeman and Braconi 2004). Some evidence suggests that poor renters in nongentrifying census tracts are about as likely to move as poor renters in gentrifying census tracts (for a review, see Brown-Saracino 2017). Low-income families in gentrifying neighborhoods may be less mobile when compared to nonpoor families (Freeman and Braconi 2004), and recent work suggests that the impact of rising housing costs on displacement varies across U.S. cities (Lee and Perkins 2023). Beyond displacement, increasing housing unaffordability writ large constrains the neighborhood destinations of financially disadvantaged movers, or “where disadvantaged residents move, when they move” (Hwang and Ding 2020:357).

Despite these mixed findings, this body of research shares a tacit assumption: that the harms of exclusionary rental markets are primarily experienced through displacement or through constrained neighborhood choices after moves. However, an overt focus on movers means that the experiences of disadvantaged families prior to displacement are understudied. Comparatively less is known about the trade-offs that families make to avoid moves amid rising housing costs or the consequences of these decisions. These trade-offs may be particularly salient in high-cost cities, where affordable units are scarce and low-income renters have a limited consideration set of neighborhood alternatives (Hwang and Ding 2020).

Borrowing from Schewel’s (2019) intervention in international migration research, I argue that this is tantamount to a “mobility bias” in urban sociological scholarship that prioritizes the accounts and motivations of movers over those who remain in place. This focus on renter mobility dates back to the Chicago School of urban sociology, which generally assumed that renter families were transient and churned through

homes and neighborhoods (Zorbaugh 1929). In contemporary research, this mobility bias often assumes that stable homes are also safe ones (Swope and Hernández 2019). Instead, Schewel (2019) calls for greater attention to the experiences of nonmovers. Applied to the residential mobility literature, attending to nonmovers advances our understanding of how renters achieve housing stability in the face of displacement pressures and the consequences of these strategies for their wellbeing.

Rising Housing Costs and Renter Immobility

Despite a scholarly focus on displacement, renter immobility is increasingly prevalent across the United States (Foster 2017). Local mobility rates have decreased by one third since 2010, driven by rising housing costs and fewer moves among renter households (Myers et al. 2021). Recent research shows that Black and Latinx families are less likely than white families to move, overall (Evans and Chapman 2023), and that Black, Latinx, and immigrant families are less likely than white, U.S.-born households to exit expensive metropolitan areas (Buchholz 2022). As high housing costs limit renters’ housing alternatives, families who face disadvantages on the rental market may endure substantial trade-offs to avoid an uncertain move.

Research on the household-level consequences of rent burden offers some insight into how rising housing costs negatively impact families beyond prompting involuntary moves. Exclusionary rental markets—marked by high entry costs (e.g., security deposits and the first month’s rent paid in advance), few affordable vacancies, and strict tenant screening practices—create long and costly housing searches for disadvantaged renters (Reosti 2021). Instead, renters manage rising housing costs by reducing expenditures in other areas (J. Rosen et al. 2022), applying for state support, or accepting crowded housing (Newman and Wly 2006). Although these management strategies help families avoid displacement,

they can also have negative consequences for families. Some evidence shows that living in a crowded home has a negative effect on children's educational outcomes (Solari and Mare 2012). Other work finds that families managing high housing costs make semipermanent reductions in other important areas, such as household spending on food and education (J. Rosen et al. 2022).

Displacement Management and the Indoor Living Environment

There are reasons to anticipate that renters' displacement management strategies extend beyond reduced household consumption or crowding. Renters may also make trade-offs around maintenance and repair. Renters who hope to avoid moves must negotiate maintenance requests with their landlords, who also adjudicate decisions around lease renewals and rent increases. Renters' indoor living environments are a critical social determinant of health (Swope and Hernández 2019), and renters uniquely rely on their landlords to keep their homes in habitable conditions, a legal requirement known as the implied warranty of habitability. Poor indoor air quality, pests, and mold can contribute to respiratory illnesses like asthma (Grineski and Hernández 2010). Structural problems within homes can harm residents and are associated with negative mental health outcomes (Clark and Kearns 2012; Foster, Hooper, and Easthope 2022). Moreover, marginalized renters who face disadvantages on the rental market may be unable or reluctant to exit poor housing conditions. For instance, recent quantitative evidence suggests that disparities in residential immobility rates contribute more to ethnoracial housing quality inequalities than disparities in displacement rates (Evans and Chapman 2023).

The fact that low-income renters endure maintenance problems at home is well documented in past residential mobility research (DeLuca et al. 2019; Rosenblatt and DeLuca 2012). However, this work primarily examines inadequate housing conditions insofar as

they drive involuntary moves among the poor (DeLuca and Jang-Trettien 2020; Desmond et al. 2015; Rosenblatt and DeLuca 2012). Poor maintenance is "especially likely to precipitate rushed and desperate moves for families receiving subsidies from the Housing Choice Voucher Program" (DeLuca et al. 2019:566), as the HCV program requires regular housing inspections, and failed inspections can require voucher holders to leave their homes. It is also possible that unit quality issues do not mechanically result in reactive moves among renters who are not HCV participants, particularly for those who live in high-cost contexts where moves are challenging. Because residential mobility research focuses on unit quality problems as a driver of displacement, less is known about how renters attempt to manage these pressures before they are forced to move. Other research on rental housing conditions examines landlords' repair decisions (Greif 2022; Travis 2019) and how building inspectors decide whether to cite building owners for code violations (Bartram 2022). Low-income renters face challenges enforcing the implied warranty of habitability in court (Sabbeth 2019), which suggests that families may resort to other measures to manage landlord disinvestment. Understanding how renters navigate maintenance problems can also contextualize quantitative research that uses data on housing complaints and 311 service calls (Bartram 2019; Travis 2019). It is likely that some tenants select into contacting city authorities, while others are reluctant to do so. For instance, one study finds that Latino/a/x immigrant tenants, fearing eviction or deportation, do not make maintenance requests (Grineski and Hernández 2010). Another study finds that disadvantaged renters with few housing alternatives feel "stuck" in exploitative housing conditions, eroding their ability to complain to landlords or city authorities (J. Rosen et al. 2022). However, past work stops short of identifying how renters manage disrepair, beyond avoiding maintenance requests altogether.

It is also likely that the burdens of negotiating landlord neglect are borne unequally

across the population. Although most work on Latinx immigrant incorporation focuses on neighborhood attainment and transitions into homeownership (Brown 2007; Díaz McConnell and Marcelli 2007; Pais, South, and Crowder 2012), Latinx families also struggle to access safe and sanitary housing. Nationally, about 9.7 percent of Latinx renter households live in moderately or severely inadequate homes, compared to 6.9 percent of non-Hispanic white renters (American Housing Survey 2021). Moreover, Latinx renters endure more housing quality issues at home relative to white renters, net of household income (Friedman and Rosenbaum 2004). Legal status also structures exposure to poor housing conditions. Undocumented Latinx immigrants are more likely than documented Latinx immigrants to experience housing quality problems, after accounting for household income (Hall and Greenman 2013). Latinx immigrants who belong to undocumented or mixed-status families face credit-related exclusions during tenant screening and can be pressured to accept available housing opportunities to end a stressful housing search (Schmidt 2023). Latinx renters also endure persistent racial and family discrimination while navigating the rental market (Faber and Mercier 2022; Oh and Yinger 2015). Due to the barriers that Latinx households face on the rental market, these families may feel particularly pressured to endure trade-offs at home to avoid another move.

DATA AND METHODS

I analyze interviews with 131 low and middle-income, non-Hispanic white and Latina/o renters living in three LA neighborhoods: Mar Vista, North Hollywood, and Canoga Park. All renters lived with at least one child. The sample is also stratified by household income: approximately one half of respondents reported incomes near or above the 2019 Housing and Urban Development (HUD)-established LA median income (\$65,800 for a family of three), while the other half reported incomes below the 2019

HUD very low-income limit for LA (\$47,000 for a family of three). This sampling strategy yielded four categories of study participants across three neighborhoods: very low-income white renters, very low-income Latina/o renters, middle-income white renters, and middle-income Latina/o renters. I also restricted the sample to families who rent on the private market without receiving state-sponsored housing assistance, as these households face distinct barriers during housing searches.

To avoid conflating observed differences in maintenance processes across race/ethnicity or income with potential neighborhood differences, I interviewed an approximately equal number of renters from each category (e.g., middle-income Latina/o renters, low-income white renters) in each neighborhood. This sampling decision informed neighborhood selection. I used the American Community Survey to identify LA neighborhoods that were income diverse and had a high population of renters, non-Hispanic white and Latinx households, and families with children. From this pool, I selected three neighborhoods in different geographic areas of LA: Canoga Park, North Hollywood, and Mar Vista. All three neighborhoods share the same public school system and the same regulations regarding evictions, rent increases, and building inspections. I did not observe distinct trends in renters' maintenance experiences across neighborhoods, and so I do not discuss neighborhood differences in the Results section.

Recruitment and data collection took place from 2019 to 2021, and I interviewed respondents both in person and over the phone after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In late 2019 and early 2020, I recruited 51 respondents by canvassing public spaces in each neighborhood and issuing a screening questionnaire. After the onset of the pandemic, I recruited the remaining 80 respondents using two virtual methods. First, I placed a geo-targeted, bilingual advertisement on Facebook/Instagram (recruiting 51 respondents). The advertisement prompted interested viewers to complete a short survey that I used

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Participants.

Descriptives	Low-income renters		Middle-income renters	
	Non-Hispanic white	Latina/o	Non-Hispanic white	Latina/o
% foreign-born	12.5	75.5	12.5	56.6
Mean household income	\$34,273	\$29,599	\$82,052	\$65,291
Mean coresident children	1.6	2.4	1.4	2.0
Mean tenure length (years)	4.5	5.2	4	5.1
Mean age	40.3	37.3	44	39.5
Total respondents	24	45	32	30

to screen and contact eligible respondents. Social media advertisements have been used before in sociological data collection efforts, and some estimates place social media coverage on par with a telephone sampling frame (Storer, Schneider, and Harknett 2020). Second, to reach participants who were potentially not active on social media, I identified USPS postal routes that ran through neighborhood census tracts with high rentership rates and mailed a bilingual postcard along these routes using the United States Postal Service's (USPS)'s Every Door Direct Mail service (recruiting 29 respondents). All recruitment materials asked respondents to share their experiences renting in LA, with no specific reference to housing conditions. Virtually recruited interviews took place over the phone. Table 1 presents selected descriptive statistics for the sample. On average, low-income renters had lived in their homes for five years at the time of their interview, relative to a national average housing tenure of about two years among renters (American Housing Survey 2019).

During interviews, I asked a series of open-ended questions about respondents' experiences living in their current home, their housing conditions, their opinion of their neighborhood, their health, and their future housing plans. Most interviews lasted between one and two hours. Interviews occurred in English or in Spanish, according to the preferences of the participant. I use endnotes to indicate where I have translated participants' quotes from Spanish to English.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted an abrupt change in interview modality. However, renters who I interviewed before and after the onset of the pandemic expressed similar feelings of being "stuck" in disinvested homes. Furthermore, most renters reported that their experiences with poor maintenance predated the onset of the pandemic. Phone interviews were less disruptive to respondents' daily lives (Randles 2021), but they were also shorter and yielded fewer conversational detours. With Institutional Review Board approval, I audio-recorded interviews with participants' informed oral consent. I compensated participants with \$30 for their time and contribution. At the end of each interview, I gave participants a packet with information about tenants' rights organizations active in each neighborhood and after the beginning of the pandemic, with renter resources related to COVID-19. All data are anonymized and presented using pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

I conducted two rounds of coding using verbatim interview transcripts and the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti. In the first round of deductive coding, I coded for themes derived from the interview guide: these included discussions of apartment maintenance, renters' interactions with building managers and landlords, their neighborhood evaluations, their health and wellbeing, and

their future housing plans. Using these first-round codes, I wrote a series of analytic memos that cataloged how renters responded to maintenance problems and barriers to moving, with attention to differences across race/ethnicity, legal status, property management arrangements, and household income. I used these memos to create inductive codes (i.e., disrepair management strategies), and then I recoded all the interviews using the revised codebook. This iterative approach to coding enabled me to test for the presence of theoretically relevant themes, while also allowing me to identify new insights from the interview data (Timmermans and Tavory 2012).

The Fieldsite: Renting and Apartment Disrepair in LA

LA is one of the least affordable cities in the United States after accounting for housing costs relative to household incomes (Freddie Mac Multifamily 2019). In LA County, average rental housing costs rose approximately 31 percent between 2010 and 2019 (USC Neighborhood Data for Social Change 2021). During the same period, average rents rose by approximately 19 percent in North Hollywood, 19 percent in Mar Vista, and 15 percent in Canoga Park (USC Neighborhood Data for Social Change 2021). These neighborhoods are neither highly advantaged nor highly disadvantaged relative to LA as a whole; all three report poverty rates near or below the city-wide mean.³ The LA Housing Department inspects most multifamily rentals in these neighborhoods once every four years. Inspectors post a notice at each property at least 30 days in advance and inspect building exteriors, but tenants must grant access to inspect unit interiors, and inspections often take place during work hours. Tenants can also report housing problems anonymously to the LA Housing Department.

In California, the implied warranty of habitability requires that all rental units have safe and intact floors, walls, stairs, and roofs, clean common areas, functional plumbing, heating, ventilation, and electricity, pest extermination,

and management of known hazards including lead paint and mold (Implied Warranty of Habitability 1972). However, the implied warranty of habitability is challenging to enforce due to a lack of public or private legal support for low-income tenants (Sabbeth 2019). As a result, housing disrepair remains common in LA. Estimates derived from the 2015 American Housing Survey find that about 249,500 units in the LA-Long Beach metro area have interior habitability issues (Huarita and Basolo 2019).

RESULTS

Low-income Renters Plan to Remain in Disinvested Apartments

Low-income renters in this sample commonly endured apartment disrepair, both in the past and at the time of their interview. Table 2 presents renters' experiences with current maintenance problems, maintenance problems across their housing tenure, and renters' responses to disrepair. I use California's state standard of habitability to categorize renters' maintenance problems. Current maintenance problems were concentrated among low-income Latina/o renters, but experiencing a repair delay in the past and multiple major maintenance problems were common across both low-income Latina/o and low-income white renters.

Despite experiencing chronic disrepair, relatively few low-income renters had short-to medium-term plans to leave their disinvested unit. As I spoke with renters at one point in time, it is possible that a reactive move would eventually force these families out of their homes. Nonetheless, several factors kept renters in place in the present. First, renters reported that high rental costs meant that a move would greatly strain limited family finances. Renters also predicted that tenant screening practices like credit and background checks would make finding a new home challenging. Second, renters anticipated that moving to an affordable unit would pull them far away from jobs,

Table 2. Renters' Maintenance Experiences by Race/Ethnicity and Income.

	Low-income renters				Middle income renters			
	White renters		Latina/o renters		White renters		Latina/o renters	
	N	% Total	N	% Total	N	% Total	N	% Total
Habitability issues^a								
Broken appliance ^b	1	4%	9	20%	0	0%	1	3%
Structural problem ^c	2	8%	16	36%	1	3%	1	3%
Pest infestation	2	8%	13	29%	0	0%	0	0%
Plumbing problem ^d	0	0%	16	36%	0	0%	1	3%
Electrical problem	0	0%	5	11%	0	0%	0	0%
At least one major problem ^e	22	92%	33	73%	24	75%	20	67%
Two or more major problems	12	50%	28	62%	11	34%	10	33%
Response to major problems^f								
Notified landlord or manager	21	95%	31	94%	23	96%	20	100%
Delayed or inadequate repair ^g	9	41%	28	85%	5	21%	4	20%
Self-repair ^h	4	17%	16	36%	4	17%	6	30%
Threatened to notify city	1	4%	5	11%	0	0%	0	0%
Notified city	2	8%	2	4%	0	0%	2	10%
Total respondents	24	100%	45	100%	32	100%	30	100%

Note. I present both overall frequencies and percentages, given the small and nonprobability nature of the sample.

^aRepresents present issues occurring at the time of the interview. Percentages do not sum to 100, as some renters report multiple problems.

^bBoiler, stove, heater, AC, kitchen fan.

^cCeiling, walls, floors, or windows.

^dLeaks, mold, non-functional plumbing, broken sinks/toilet.

^eMajor problems are those issues that violate the implied warranty of habitability in renters' current apartment at any point during their housing tenure.

^fThese percentages are calculated using the number of renters who experienced major problems as the denominator. For instance, of the 22 low-income white renters who experienced a major maintenance problem, 21, or 95 percent, reported this issue to their landlord.

^gI consider a delayed repair to be a repair that took one month or more to complete, as LA regulations require non-urgent repairs to be occur within 30 days. An inadequate repair is a partial or incomplete fix. Renters may experience timely repairs for some major fixes and delayed or inadequate repairs for others; this figure includes whether a renter endured at least one delayed or inadequate repair.

^hSelf-repairs include hiring fumigators or regularly taking on fumigation, repairing structural problems (with plumbing, flooring, walls, ceilings, windows, and wiring), and replacing or repairing broken appliances.

schools, and neighborhoods that they valued. Although poor white and Latina/o renters alike had few plans to leave disinvested units, undocumented Latina/o immigrants reported that moves were even more out of reach due to tenant screening requirements that disadvantage undocumented and mixed-status households.

Financial and credit-related limitations to moves. Even among renters working full time, many families did not have the spare

funds required to move to a new apartment. Security deposits in LA are tied to monthly rents, and landlords typically require one to two months' rent as a deposit to sign a lease, in addition to the first month's rent. The 2019 HUD fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in LA was approximately \$1,800, which translates to entry costs ranging from \$1,800 (the first month's rent, no deposit) to \$5,400 (first month's rent, with a two-month deposit). Renters with damaged or no credit can expect higher deposits, and rents

have also increased since renters' last move. Rather than embark on an uncertain housing search that could result in a more expensive apartment, most renters hoped to stay in their current home, despite experiencing chronic disinvestment. For instance, Evelyn, a low-income Mexican renter who had experienced delayed repairs in her apartment throughout her five-year housing tenure, felt resigned to remaining in place: "I'm the only income in my home and with what I make, I can't afford to move out. I can't afford to leave." And as Michael (a low-income white renter) retorted when I asked if he had plans to leave his badly maintained home: "I'd need to win the lottery." My wife always says, "Why don't we move?" And I say, "If you can come up with five grand, then I'll move." For undocumented tenants, all of whom were Latina/o, screening requirements that ask for extensive credit histories and Social Security Numbers (SSNs) make moves even more uncertain. Claudia, a low-income Peruvian renter managing broken stairs, pests, and poor plumbing at home, explained succinctly: "I don't have a social, I don't have an ID number, and I don't have credit, so no one wants to rent to me."⁴ Rising housing costs, as well as the costs and uncertainties associated with the housing search process itself, discouraged moves away from disinvested homes.

Feasible alternatives are far away. Low-income renters also perceived that affordable, better maintained housing alternatives were located far away from their current homes, often in distant LA County exurbs like Palmdale or Lancaster. Renters weighed moving out of their disinvested home against leaving LA entirely, as better maintained properties in their price range were difficult to find nearby. Respondents valued other facets of their neighborhood context—including their neighbors, children's schools, and proximity to job opportunities—that meant they were willing to endure landlords' poor maintenance. For instance, Adela, an undocumented low-income Mexican renter who last moved four years ago, started to look for a new home

after her landlord blamed her when her living room ceiling partially collapsed. She took her family to visit an affordably priced and better maintained garage conversion in San Bernardino County, about 90 miles away. She liked the homes she viewed, explaining: "the apartments out there are better kept, and everything looks new."⁵ However, the unit was not within walking distance of schools, and Adela's job remained in LA. Her children also weighed into her decision making: "My kids didn't like it. They told me they liked where we live because they already know people here."⁶ As a result, Adela halted her housing search. Marta (low-income, Salvadoran), a Canoga Park renter who was managing pest infestations, leaks, and broken appliances in her apartment where she had lived for four years, valued her strong relationships with her neighbors:

[My neighbors] are always trying to figure out if my kids need anything, they're always there. We had a neighbor who had an open heart surgery, and people were bringing lunch, dinner, making sure he was taken to a hospital. Everybody just helps out, you know?

Although Adela and Marta hoped to remain in neighborhoods that they valued, other renters prioritized other features of their apartment, such as size or price, despite experiencing maintenance problems.⁷ Carmen (low-income, Mexican) told me that her landlord regularly delays repairs, including a leaking roof, pest infestations, and a heating unit that has never worked during her entire five-year housing tenure. However, she felt that "if we moved now, we wouldn't be able to find an apartment this size for this price. That's why we haven't moved and why we put up with the fact that the owner doesn't fix anything."⁸ Although it is possible that Carmen could be forced out of her home in the future, she aspired to remain in place for the time being, particularly as she and her husband saved for a home. Low-income white renters largely concurred, valuing nearby

family ties and access to work opportunities. In addition to the financial cost of moves, many renters managing maintenance problems lived in neighborhoods that they valued, or they valued other features of their apartment (e.g., size or price) that made them reluctant to leave.

Low-income Renters Negotiating Neglect

Low-income renters who were unable or reluctant to leave their disinvested unit were left negotiating landlord neglect. Negotiating neglect encompasses renters' decision making and management strategies vis-à-vis landlord disrepair and involves a substantial amount of cognitive labor as renters anticipate needs, identify options, decide among options, and monitor results (Daminger 2019). Negotiating neglect includes forecasting landlords' responses to disrepair, deciding whether to notify the manager, landlord, or city authorities, seeking out information about their rights as tenants, holding landlords accountable to local laws, following up with landlords who do not initiate repairs or complete fixes partway, and investing their own time and resources into apartment maintenance. In addition to cognitive labor, negotiating neglect requires time and, on occasion, financial resources, and it can be a considerable stressor. For renters who are unable to obtain adequate maintenance, negotiating neglect also involves enduring the health consequences of disrepair. Although most low-income tenants negotiated neglect at some point during their housing tenure, low-income Latina/o renters were particularly vulnerable to maintenance delays and overlapping maintenance issues in the present, and these families more frequently took on repairs themselves.

Decision making around disrepair. Renters' first step in negotiating neglect was to forecast landlords' reactions to maintenance problems and to decide how to engage their manager, landlord, or city authorities. As

noted in Table 2, almost all renters notified their manager or landlord of major maintenance problems at least once. However, many hesitated to notify the housing department when repairs went unaddressed. Although 37 low-income renters reported maintenance delays, only four contacted city authorities. Renters feared landlords could retaliate by increasing rent, evicting them, or withholding future repairs. For instance, Alma (low-income, Mexican) lived with her husband and two daughters in a two-bedroom apartment, where she managed a persistent cockroach infestation. She regularly fumigated her apartment herself, and she also endured power outages in her home due to faulty wiring. Although her landlord repeatedly ignored her maintenance requests, she has decided not to report her building to the housing department. She predicted: "It would become a fight with the owner, she'll be looking for any little thing to kick me out. That's something I want to avoid, for my family."⁹ Although most renters notified their landlord of maintenance problems at least once, others felt that actively advocating for fixes over time was risky. Caroline (low-income, non-Hispanic white) and her daughter had no hot water in her apartment for several months. Although she has requested a repair, she anticipated that repeatedly asking for a new hot water heater could antagonize the property owner. Because Caroline struggled to pay the rent on time in the past, she decided to approach the situation gently: "I'll mention it to [the manager] when he's here, but I don't call him and tell him." Although Caroline currently owes no money to her landlord, she explained, "I feel like I don't have a leg to stand on when I have a problem." Alma, Caroline, and others could not afford to move and feared that advocating for a repair repeatedly could lead to an eviction.

Other renters did not fear eviction, but forecasted that landlords would retaliate by raising rents or refusing future repairs. Sonia (six years, low-income, Mexican), who rented a single-family home with severe plumbing problems, predicted that asking

her landlord to hire a plumber to fix their toilet would prompt a rent increase. She explained: “We’re afraid to bring that up to the management company, ‘cause I feel like every time we’ve done that, they’ve raised the rent.” She elaborated: “We try not to complain because we know our rent is considered cheap. At any point in time, they can be like ‘We actually need you guys to move out.’ That’s always on the back of our mind.” Instead, Sonia and her husband use a large bucket of water to flush their toilet. Iris, a low-income Mexican-American renter who had lived in her home with her two elementary-aged sons for two years, reported that the flooring in her unit came up soon after she moved in. Iris was entitled to a rent discount and accommodations for the 10-day repair, but she predicted that enforcing her rights could lead to poor treatment in the future:

I feel like the quieter you are and the less you complain, the less chances of you being on their bad side. I didn’t want to ask for a rent compensation because I didn’t want them to doubt whether they want to fix something in the future.

Renters like Sonia, Iris, and others attempted to forecast whether holding landlords accountable to their obligations under the law would ultimately threaten their security and safety at home.

Assessing tenant rights and notifying authorities. Conditions of severe neglect or landlord harassment prompted a minority of renters to seek out information about their rights as tenants and to notify city authorities. For example, Adela (introduced above) strongly advocated for fixes in her apartment. Adela lived with her children and husband in a duplex behind a single-family house in North Hollywood. She experienced a range of problems, including a ceiling collapse, faulty wiring, and a broken hot water heater that the landlord was reluctant to repair. After Adela’s landlord blamed her family when her living

room ceiling caved in, she contacted the housing department, and now, she always follows up with the city authorities when she communicates with her landlord, explaining: “Every time she sends me a letter, I go to the housing office.”¹⁰ The owner also threatened to charge Adela \$3 for every nail hole in the walls of their unit. Frightened, she reached out to a tenants’ rights nonprofit, which advised her on how to submit written requests for repairs. Despite experiencing harassment and neglect, Adela felt that she had no alternative but to manage her landlord as best she can:

[People] ask me, how do you put up with that woman? I tell them, “Because I can’t live somewhere else.” It has been very, very difficult and frustrating. But rents are high. You have to put up with where you’re living because you tell yourself, “Where would I go? No one will rent to me.”¹¹

Renters who reported their landlords to the city authorities often endured additional harassment. For instance, Lucy (low-income, white) explained that a severe plumbing problem left her with standing water in her home. After her property management company was unresponsive for four days, she reported them to the housing department. Afterward:

[The managers] started to find little things. They told me my son couldn’t ride his bike in the parking lot, but it was never a problem before. They started to put notices on my door about the rent, but I always pay on time. They pestered me.

Severe neglect and landlord harassment prompted Adela, Lucy, and others to seek out information about their rights as tenants and to contact city authorities—actions that in some instances led to additional harassment.

Delayed or inadequate repairs. Although some low-income tenants avoided repair requests or sought outside support, most made repeated repair requests from their landlords but experienced substantial maintenance

delays and partial, stop-gap repairs.¹² As shown in Table 2, these maintenance delays were borne predominantly by low-income Latina/o renters, many of whom continued to manage overlapping housing quality problems at the time of our interview. These families became embedded in time-consuming, frustrating, and repeated runarounds with property managers and landlords. Evelyn's (low-income, Mexican) experience illustrates the back and forth that low-income renters frequently endured. In 2019, a leak appeared in her bedroom ceiling. She notified her manager, but "they left it for a month or two." Evelyn contacted them repeatedly, and her manager decided to paint over the discoloration without investigating further: "[They] put a Band-Aid on it. It's not really taken care of properly." Several months later, the leak reappeared:

[The ceiling] was super wet and never dried out. The ceiling got a bump and the crack opened more. The smell, it was awful. I threw up. I had to sleep in the living room with my kids and the smell was awful, awful, awful.

Evelyn's bedroom was uninhabitable for two weeks while she waited for her manager to respond. When he came to inspect her home, she noticed that the wooden ceiling joists were damaged: "the wood, it was rotten, black. I asked them if they were going to change that, and they told me no." Dissatisfied, Evelyn took photos and sent them to the housing department, who told her that city inspectors could not require her landlord to make any further fixes. Evelyn waited again for the maintenance team to return to patch up the open hole. As Evelyn's experience indicates, landlord disinvestment and partial or delayed repairs demand renters' continued attention over time. Similarly, Alma (introduced above) explained that she has been managing a pest infestation and faulty electrical wiring in her building for years. As she explained:

If [the landlord] sees something is broken, she pretends like it isn't there. You have to repeat everything. I've been telling her about the wiring since I moved in here. The issue with the cockroaches is a problem that we have every day. I'm tired of telling her, and it has to be annoying for her to keep hearing it. But rents are expensive and my work isn't well paid. You have to put up with it.¹³

Although these interviews cannot identify why these lengthy repair delays emerge, renters like Evelyn and Alma frequently found themselves dealing with the fallout of landlord disinvestment. Evelyn, Alma, and others were embedded in time-consuming delays with their landlord as they followed up repeatedly over repairs.

Apartment self-repairs. Frustrated with landlord nonresponse, some low-income renters coordinated their own repairs. Many renters reported that they invested their own time and financial resources into improving their homes and maintaining them to the state standard of habitability. Investing in their own repairs allowed families to assert their agency in the face of landlord neglect and to secure safe and healthy homes for themselves and their children. These self-repairs included managing pest infestations by hiring fumigators or fumigating themselves, replacing broken flooring, fixing plumbing, replacing broken appliances, repairing drywall, and patching leaks. Others with asthmatic children replaced old carpet with tile or laminate flooring. Although several low-income renters exchanged repairs for discounted rent, most invested their money into improvements that would never be repaid.

Many Latina/o respondents, their romantic partners, or people in their social networks worked as skilled tradespeople in construction, plumbing, electrical work, and carpentry. Some families drew on this expertise to fix chronic problems in their apartments after facing persistent unresponsiveness from their

landlord or manager. For instance, Inés (low-income, Mexican), an undocumented renter living in North Hollywood, called her brother, a plumber, to fix their backed-up sink and kitchen plumbing after waiting a month for their landlord to coordinate the repair. Inés and her husband also fixed her apartment's windows, which would not shut, and which she estimates cost her family about \$500.

Others invested money into rentals because they wanted to live in dignified spaces that met their family's needs. Sonia and her husband (introduced above) landscaped the front and backyard of the single-family home that she rented with her three young sons, which the landlord had left as plain dirt: "We seeded grass, we put mulch in and grew all these succulents, and we've made a really nice playground for the kids. We made it comfortable in the backyard because of our children." Finally, some renters repaired their own homes because their landlord explicitly told them that they would not cover any repair costs. For instance, Lisa (low-income, Mexican), an undocumented renter living in North Hollywood, explained that her manager agreed to rent to her on one condition:

[She told me], "Because this apartment is really old, you're not going to be able to make any repairs. If you do, the office will charge you." So if something breaks, I look for someone to fix it myself.¹⁴

At the time of our interview, Lisa's hot water heater was broken, and she was working to locate someone who could fix it for a reasonable price.

Overall, 20 low-income respondents, predominantly Latina/o renters, repaired or upgraded their unit themselves. These investments constitute an additional transfer of resources from tenants to landlords. However, self-repairs offered unit-level solutions to building-level problems. For instance, one renter who hired a fumigator noted that cockroaches eliminated from her apartment seemed to enter her home from elsewhere in

her building. Another family who brought in a plumber was told that the underlying issue was "too deep" and required an extensive overhaul. Despite renters' best efforts, self-repairs often were piecemeal solutions to broader issues that remained unaddressed.

The health consequences of disrepair. Finally, I find that negotiating neglect involves managing the negative health consequences of living in an apartment that is poorly maintained, and that renters reported that the process of negotiating neglect is itself a stressor. Renters described feelings of stress over managing hostile building managers, feelings of hopelessness over their current situation, and feelings of anticipatory stress around landlord retaliation or future negligence (Grace 2020). For instance, Evelyn's (introduced above) experience managing poor maintenance in her home left her frustrated and anxious:

I hate this place. I never say the word hate, but I can't sleep, I feel anxious. I am constantly like, I don't want anything to get broken because they don't want to fix it. And if they fix it, they fix it however they want. It's really stressful for me.

Leticia (low-income, Mexican), an undocumented renter living in North Hollywood, shared a similar response. I asked her to describe her emotions after her landlord told her that she would have to cover the cost of any repairs he made in her apartment: "I feel angry, I feel scared, and I feel powerless," she reflected.¹⁵ Different renters described managing maintenance issues as "frustrating," "tedious," and "stressful," and renters often expressed additional uncertainty around whether a major problem would be fixed or generate new conflicts with their managers or landlords.

Unresolved maintenance issues also posed risks to renters' physical wellbeing, leaving them managing the health consequences of landlord disinvestment. Common issues like uneven flooring, windows that do not shut, and broken stairs are physical hazards,

particularly for young children. For several families, unattended problems led to injuries. Another renter told me that a heavy cigarette smell lingered from the previous tenants because the manager did not deep clean the unit, leaving her enduring frequent nausea and migraines. Others experiencing mold from leaks and damp also noticed health consequences. As one renter confided: “I think we’re getting sick from [the mold], we get a lot of headaches and sometimes it affects our breathing, too.”¹⁶ Pests, mold from leaks, old carpeting, and damp inside can all induce or exacerbate respiratory illnesses in children, and many renters in this sample were managing their children’s asthma in conjunction with poor living conditions. Renters in this sample who negotiated neglect often endured negative health consequences that were feasibly, though not conclusively, exacerbated by landlord disrepair.

Middle-income Renters Negotiating Neglect

Relative to low-income families, middle-income renters across race/ethnicity were less likely to endure landlord disrepair, limiting the amount of time spent negotiating neglect. I note three primary differences between how middle- and low-income families experienced major maintenance problems at home. First, middle-income families reported fewer major maintenance problems, overall. While low-income families reported chronic, compounding maintenance problems, middle-income renters generally experienced acute maintenance issues that arose at different points during their housing tenure. Second, when major maintenance problems did arise, middle-income renters notified their landlords, and fewer feared retaliation or endured maintenance delays. Their positive experiences asking for repairs in the past informed their confidence around repair requests in the present. Third, in contrast to low-income families, when major maintenance problems went unaddressed, middle-income families made concrete plans to exit disinvested units.

Fewer major maintenance problems. Generally, middle-income renters experienced fewer major maintenance issues than low-income families. In contrast to low-income renters’ chronic struggle for repairs, middle-income renters experienced acute problems that punctuated otherwise safe and stable housing tenures. For example, Jason (middle-income, white) reported that a rat problem in the single-family home that he rented took several months to address, but otherwise he experienced no major issues. Similarly, Sofi (middle-income, Mexican) told me that her manager left a large hole in her bathroom wall for several months after completing a repair, but in general, “if I ever have a problem, I communicate it and they’ll come take care of it.” Middle-income renters endured fewer major maintenance problems overall, limiting the amount of time spent negotiating neglect.

Fewer repair delays and inadequate repairs. When major maintenance issues did arise, middle-income renters notified their landlords and rarely reported stress or anticipatory stress around landlord responses to repair requests. Their past positive experiences with maintenance encouraged them to reach out again when problems arose. For instance, when I asked Walter (middle-income, white) about his maintenance experiences, he explained: “If we ever have any problems, the landlord sends one of her people out to fix it. We always call her when something is wrong.” In contrast to the experiences of low-income tenants in this sample, many middle-income families explained that their landlords went above and beyond their expectations for maintenance. Elena (middle-income, Chilean) described her building owner as “the best landlord in the world.” After her air conditioner broke down one summer, Elena explained that her landlord installed an energy efficient system that saves her money on her utility bill each month. Middle-income families also endured fewer maintenance delays. As Beverly (middle-income, white) explained about her landlord:

"If I call her, she is Johnny on the spot. She will literally have someone out here in seconds, she's on top of it, and she doesn't complain." Middle-income Latina/o and white renters' experiences with maintenance largely converged, with families experiencing both relatively few maintenance problems in the present and few maintenance delays.

A minority of middle-income families also endured major maintenance delays. These renters explained that persistence was key to eventually achieving repairs, and their efforts eventually yielded safe and habitable homes. For example, after a plumbing issue left her bathroom unusable, Fer (middle-income, Mexican) eventually received a repair after repeatedly calling her management company: "I had to put some pressure," she recalled. "Like, 'Hey, do you think they're coming today?' You kind of got to be the squeaky wheel." Many low-income renters were also "squeaky wheels" and followed up repeatedly with landlords and managers. However, middle-income renters' efforts around oversight and repeated contact often paid off. The few middle-income families who faced delayed maintenance in their apartments generally received fixes, and as reflected in Table 2, few middle-income families were managing maintenance problems at the time of the interview.

Making plans to move. In contrast to low-income renters, housing quality problems that went unresolved prompted several middle-income tenants to actively search for another home. Levi's (middle-income, white) experience with landlord neglect illustrates this trend. Levi's landlords were two brothers who were reluctant to replace the plumbing in the complex where he lived. One day, Levi came home to find that the sewer line had ruptured and leaked into his living room: "I asked for someone to come and clean, and it came to a fight because they couldn't get someone at the time." After paying for a sanitizing cleaning service himself, Levi asked his landlord to replace the flooring, which prompted another confrontation. Several months later,

the family came home from a vacation to find that the plumbing had ruptured again. This time, his landlords refused to change the floors, which concerned Levi due to his son's asthma. The brothers also refused to compensate Levi for the cost of deep cleaning the apartment or to replace the family's furniture that was thrown out because of the new leak. Instead, Levi and his wife decided to move. He explained they were searching for a new home "every day and every night" and had already identified several feasible options in the same neighborhood. Levi felt confident that with their strong credit records and financials, he and his wife would be able to find a new home. Landlord neglect was less common among middle-income families, and more affluent renters like Levi were able to initiate a housing search to a higher-quality home in the face of severe disinvestment.

DISCUSSION

Displacement, or involuntary residential mobility, widens inequalities among renter families in cities (DeLuca and Jang-Trettien 2020; Desmond 2012). However, less is known about how disadvantaged renters attempt to avoid moves and how these trade-offs also shape family wellbeing. Because past research predominantly focuses on how residential mobility processes sort families into shelter, scholars know less about how renters' experiences during their housing tenures also stratify families. An overt focus on movers constitutes a mobility bias in urban sociology that undertheorizes the experiences of nonmovers. By overlooking the trade-offs that renters endure to remain in their homes prior to displacement, it is likely that urban sociologists underestimate the extent to which rental markets widen inequalities between families.

In this article, I address this gap by examining how 131 middle- and low-income, Latina/o and non-Hispanic white renter families experience and navigate landlord disinvestment in apartment maintenance. I find that low-income renters, particularly Latina/o

immigrant households, negotiated landlord neglect to avoid moving in an unaffordable rental market. Low-income renters anticipated that moves away from disinvested units would be challenging, lead them to higher cost units, and could force them away from neighborhoods, jobs, and schools that they valued. Instead, many endured landlord disinvestment at home. The findings advance three key contributions to prior research. First, they advance what scholars know about how renters respond to disrepair. Second, the process of negotiating neglect presents a more complete accounting of how unaffordable (and otherwise exclusionary) rental markets harm low-income households. Finally, the findings extend past research on the housing experiences of Latinx immigrant families. I address each point in turn.

First, I advance past research on how renters respond to severe maintenance problems. Prior work finds that disadvantaged tenants hesitate to ask for repairs to avoid eviction (Grineski and Hernández 2010; J. Rosen et al. 2022) and that unit quality problems displace families (DeLuca et al. 2019). Although some renters in this sample did not request repairs or submit complaints to the housing department because they feared retaliation, most did notify their landlords and managers and faced delays that lasted for weeks, months, or indefinitely. These renters invested substantial time and cognitive labor as they followed up with housing intermediaries, researched their rights as tenants, anticipated their landlords' reactions to repair requests, and attempted to hold their landlords accountable to local laws (Daminger 2019). Others invested their own financial resources into apartment maintenance, transfers that constitute an understudied, additional form of extraction from tenants to landlords. By identifying the range of tenant responses to landlord disrepair, negotiating neglect highlights the labor required to achieve housing security for low-income tenants who have few feasible housing alternatives. It also complicates a broader "ideology of homeownership" in the United States that assumes that renters

are highly mobile and disinvested from their communities (Dreier 1982; E. Rosen and Garboden 2022; Zorbaugh 1929). In contrast, this study highlights the amount of work that tenants mobilize to remain in place and to ensure that their homes are habitable. For quantitative researchers, identifying how renters respond to landlord disrepair helps contextualize administrative data on housing code violations. Past research generally uses data on housing violations that are triggered by tenant or neighbor complaints (see, e.g., Bartram 2019 or Travis 2019). However, in this sample, relatively few tenants experiencing disrepair notified city authorities. Research that uses housing violation data should also consider how selection processes drive tenant complaints.

Beyond the case of apartment disrepair, examining how renters negotiate landlord neglect at home also advances research on administrative burdens, or "the learning, psychological, and compliance costs that citizens experience" as they interact with institutions (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015:43). The concept of negotiating neglect identifies related, but distinct, costs that emerge as clients who engage with institutions oversee the status of their requests. Renters not only comply with landlord requirements around repair notifications and seek out information about their rights (e.g., compliance and learning costs), they also expend significant time and effort overseeing landlord repairs, following up with requests, and managing the consequences of partial fixes. It is possible that similar oversight costs emerge as disadvantaged families interact with state institutions, more broadly.

Second, these findings advance past work on residential mobility and urban inequality. I show how unaffordable rental markets reproduce inequalities among U.S. families beyond prompting displacement or limiting the neighborhood destinations of moving households (Carlson 2020; DeLuca et al. 2019; Hwang and Ding 2020). The high-cost, low-vacancy rental market in LA provides disadvantaged renters with few feasible

housing alternatives. To avoid moves in this context, families endured major maintenance delays, partial fixes, administrative burdens, landlords' negative reactions to maintenance requests, and unresolved repairs. Some renters felt pressured to accept landlords' illegal declarations that they would be financially responsible for all routine maintenance. Others attempted to forecast whether landlords would react to repair requests in destabilizing ways. Attending to the experiences of renters before they are displaced foregrounds the work required to avoid unwanted moves. For survey researchers studying the social consequences of rising housing costs, the results suggest that the absence of displacement is not equivalent to the absence of harm for low-income families. Unaffordable rental markets not only displace families, they also embed disadvantaged renters in poorly maintained homes that require substantial effort to manage, and holding limited alternatives informs how some families advocate for maintenance in the face of disrepair. This finding contributes to a small but growing body of research that centers housing tenures themselves as sites of inequality (Bartram 2023; Leung, Hepburn, and Desmond 2021), in addition to inequalities in rental housing access or displacement. Because low-income families—and low-income Latina/o renters, in particular—primarily endure and negotiate landlord neglect, it is possible that this process further stratifies renter households. Future research could investigate whether and how negotiating neglect leads to compounded disadvantages for families (e.g., by linking housing conditions, parental stress, and children's outcomes).

Examining how renters in unaffordable rental markets manage displacement pressures also advances research on reactive mobility and the residential priorities of low-income families (DeLuca et al. 2019; Rosenblatt and DeLuca 2012). Aligning with past work (DeLuca et al. 2019), I find that housing quality problems are common among low-income renters. Unit quality problems are one shock among many that are theorized to

prompt reactive moves (DeLuca and Jang-Trettien 2020). Some shocks—like evictions or failed HCV inspections—cannot be managed and prompt immediate moves. However, the present study suggests that in extremely constrained housing markets, disadvantaged renters without voucher assistance may attempt to manage less immediate displacement pressures like unit quality failures rather than endure another move. The few renters who were exiting their homes due to disrepair had comparatively strong financial profiles that made moving away from landlord neglect more feasible. Although it is possible that even more extreme quality issues will force these families to move in the future, the costs of moving constrained low-income renters' ability to exit conditions of severe disrepair in the present. More work is needed to untangle which displacement pressures, beyond eviction, yield reactive moves and for whom.

Past research on residential decision making also finds that low-income households prioritize larger homes over neighborhood conditions (Rosenblatt and DeLuca 2012). However, the present findings suggest that in some cases, low-income renters also endure poor housing conditions to remain in neighborhoods that they value. Two factors could drive these disparate findings. First, it is possible that renters who value unit quality over neighborhood features have been displaced from these three fieldsites, and thus, do not appear in this sample. Second, LA's rental market conditions mean that higher-quality, larger homes are out of reach for many respondents. Moves to more affordable exurban communities like Palmdale would require concurrent changes in jobs, children's schools, and everyday social support networks, other costs that also discourage moves. As exclusionary rental market conditions proliferate across the United States, disadvantaged renters may increasingly negotiate landlord neglect as larger or higher-quality homes become further out of reach. Given the links between neighborhood context, housing conditions, and the intergenerational

transmission of disadvantage, these neighborhood and housing trade-offs likely impact families in countervailing ways. For instance, renters in this study managed poor living conditions, but these sacrifices allowed them to stay near job opportunities, their children's schools, and supportive social networks. The present study sampled renters who lived in three neighborhoods that were relatively similar contexts. Additional research could examine renters' experiences across different neighborhoods to parse out the trade-offs that renters adopt to remain in certain areas, while quantitative research could untangle the countervailing consequences of these trade-offs for renters' long-term socioeconomic mobility.

Third, I find that the process of negotiating neglect is borne unequally across the sample. In particular, low-income Latina/o immigrant renters reported more maintenance delays, endured more overlapping maintenance problems at the time of our interview, and more frequently addressed major problems themselves than any other group. Undocumented and mixed-status Latinx families also reported greater barriers to leaving substandard housing conditions, as credit and background checks can exclude rental applicants who do not hold an SSN. This finding largely aligns with past work on Latinx immigrants' housing conditions (Díaz McConnell 2015; Grineski and Hernández 2010; Hall and Greenman 2013). It also advances what scholars know about the incorporation experiences of Latinx immigrant families. Past research on Latinx immigrants' housing careers generally focuses on transitions into homeownership (Díaz McConnell and Marcelli 2007) or advantaged neighborhood contexts (Brown 2007; Pais, South, and Crowder 2012). This body of work positions neighborhood attainment as an important dimension of immigrant incorporation. By showing how Latinx households manage severe maintenance problems at home to remain in neighborhoods that they value, this study adds nuance to the use of neighborhood attainment as an indicator of immigrant upward mobility. Given the

links between housing conditions and health (Swope and Hernández 2019), it is possible that immigrant renters who gain access to (or remain in) relatively desirable neighborhood contexts simultaneously endure housing quality problems that threaten their wellbeing.

LIMITATIONS

Because this study leverages interviews with tenants, several important questions remain about landlord behavior. Without data on landlords, I cannot adjudicate why building owners appear reluctant to invest in routine repairs or why code enforcement fails to compel building owners to provide better housing conditions for low-income families. The findings raise three specific questions about landlord behavior in high-cost, low-vacancy rental markets. First, additional research could examine whether and how disinvestment operates as a business strategy in high-cost contexts. Landlords might disinvest to "milk" tenants (Travis 2019), to displace long-term renters, or to address cash-flow problems in the present (Greif 2022). Second, future work could examine how landlords interact with building inspection regimes. This could help explain why current inspection programs, even those that are proactive, appear to poorly protect low-income renters. Finally, additional research could explore whether and how landlords' business strategies shape the predatory inclusion of disadvantaged tenants into disinvested homes. It is possible that landlords in unaffordable rental markets like LA proactively lease to families who face exclusions on the rental market precisely because these negative credentials erode renters' ability to fully assert their rights, or that, for similar reasons, landlords and managers feel empowered to ignore repair requests from these households.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings suggest several potential policy interventions. First, policies regulating

building inspections could take into account that high-cost rental markets where families have limited housing alternatives deeply erode renters' willingness to report poor housing conditions to city authorities. Second, for proactive building inspection regimes, policy interventions could encourage fuller unit coverage during building inspections, while also targeting landlords' retaliatory practices after maintenance is complete (through rent increases, harassment, or future neglect). Policies could also support expansion of the legal infrastructure required to enforce the implied warranty of habitability (Sabbeth 2019). Overall, policy interventions should aim to better support the health and housing security of tenants, who aspire to remain in their homes and neighborhoods but struggle to receive adequate maintenance.

Overall, understanding the trade-offs that families adopt to avoid moves centers renters' experiences prior to displacement as an understudied dimension of urban poverty in the United States. By examining the accounts, motives, and experiences of renters who manage displacement pressures, I begin to address the mobility bias in urban sociology (Schewel 2019). Urban sociologists often focus on tenant entry and tenant exit, with less attention to how renters' experiences during their housing tenure also stratify families. Families who face exclusions on the rental market—in this case, immigrant families and renters with low incomes or damaged credit—may be particularly vulnerable to landlord disinvestment in repairs. Beyond trade-offs related to maintenance, it is likely that renters also adopt other compromises to avoid moves. For instance, families in this sample took on boarders, made budgeting cutbacks, sought additional work opportunities, and deferred other personal goals to manage rising rents. The findings underscore how immobility is an achieved outcome that disadvantaged families work to sustain. Examining renters' experiences prior to displacement offers a more complete accounting of how unaffordable rental housing markets widen inequalities even before families are forced to move.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks the project participants for their time and for generously sharing their experiences. He also thank Nina Bandelj, Victoria Basolo, Vanessa Delgado, Peter Hepburn, Noemi Linares-Ramirez, Estefani Marin, Ann Owens, Rocío Rosales, David Schaefer, Kristin Turney, and three anonymous reviewers for their feedback on previous versions of this manuscript. All errors are his own.

FUNDING

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Funding for this study was provided by the NSF SPRF (grant no. 220801), NSF GRFP (grant no. DGE-1321846), the John and Dora Haynes Foundation, and the UC Irvine Center for Organizational Research.

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NOTES

1. It is likely that this statistic is an undercount of renter households with housing quality problems. The American Housing Survey housing quality measure can be found here: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/ahs/research/publications/HousingAdequacy.html>. Critics note that “adequacy is a narrower standard than quality, and a unit can suffer from various deficiencies and still be considered adequate shelter” (Eggers and Moumen 2013:1).
2. When referring to the race/ethnicity of respondents in my sample, I use Latina/o, as all participants identified as a man or a woman. When referring to households or families, I use the gender-expansive term Latinx. In the Results section, I refer to participants as they themselves identified, primarily using their country of origin (e.g., Mexican, Salvadoran, or Mexican American) rather than Latino or Latina. I follow the guidance of critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and do not capitalize the term “white” in this article.
3. In 2019, Mar Vista's federal poverty rate was 10 percent, Canoga Park's poverty rate was 16 percent, and North Hollywood's poverty rate was 19 percent, compared to 18 percent in Los Angeles, overall. Past research operationalizes a high-poverty neighborhood as a neighborhood where 40 percent or more of residents live below the federal poverty line, while a low-poverty neighborhood has 10 percent or less of residents living below the federal poverty line (Rosenblatt and DeLuca 2012).
4. Translated from Spanish.
5. Translated from Spanish.

6. Translated from Spanish.
7. Some research suggests that flexibility around rental payments keeps renters in units with maintenance problems (Desmond 2012). However, only one renter in this sample reported exchanging poor maintenance for permissiveness around late rent.
8. Translated from Spanish.
9. Translated from Spanish. Confidential complaints are confidential, but many tenants worried that their landlord would be able to feasibly identify them as the person who filed the report.
10. Translated from Spanish.
11. Translated from Spanish.
12. Almost all Spanish-speaking Latina/o respondents reported that their landlord and manager also spoke Spanish, suggesting that language barriers did not play a major role in how families in this sample experienced maintenance delays and disrepair.
13. Translated from Spanish.
14. Translated from Spanish.
15. Translated from Spanish.
16. Translated from Spanish.

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