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Harassment or neglect? The influence of market dynamics on landlord behavior in Los Angeles

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Abstract

This paper examines whether and how housing market dynamics shape landlords' profit-seeking behaviors, focused on harassment and property neglect. Leveraging household survey data, we assess whether unit-level rent gaps, rent control, and neighborhood gentrification status influence landlord behavior. Within the past two years, one-fourth of respondents reported failure to provide adequate maintenance. Another one-fourth reported at least one form of harassment. However, the incidence of these issues varied across contexts. Higher household rent gaps–the difference between potential market rents and paid contract rents related to more maintenance issues, but no greater likelihood of refusal to provide maintenance and a lower likelihood of harassment. In contrast, tenants in rent-controlled buildings and gentrifying census tracts were 10.9 and 8.6 percentage points more likely to experience harassment. Moreover, rent control tenants were more likely to experience illegal eviction practices while those in gentrifying tracts were more likely to experience threats and assault. These results suggest that the existence of a rent gap alone is not enough to incentivize harassment and other illegal behaviors aimed at displacement. However, the use of those strategies increases when landlords have strong market conditions and direct mechanisms to capture higher market rents, such as growing demand and amenities or units with below-market prices that can reset when tenants turn over.

Introduction

This paper examines landlord behavior and tenant experiences in Los Angeles to understand whether and how landlords respond to housing market dynamics. Landlords can sometimes pursue higher profits without removing existing tenants, such as by increasing rents or reducing costs through avoided maintenance and upkeep. However, landlords frequently need existing renters to move to charge higher rents or redevelop the properties. Such moves not only reflect formalized processes such as court-ordered evictions, but also informal landlord strategies aimed at pushing out tenants including refusal to accept rent checks, targeted harassment, and even physical harm (Garboden & Rosen, 2019; Desmond & Shollenberger, 2015).

Various market and unit-level conditions may influence the type of profit strategy landlords pursue. One measure of housing market dynamics is the rent gap (Smith, 1979; Smith 1984), which describes the difference between the current value of land and rent collected on a particular property versus the potential market value. There are several reasons why tenants might pay below market rent: 1) public policies like rent control, 2) lower quality units, 3) neighborhoods with fewer amenities, 4) turnover costs of finding new tenants, and 5) price friction in rapidly changing market contexts. Christophers (2022) suggests that it can be difficult for landlords to simply close the rent gap by systematically increasing rent, even with enabling local political and economic conditions. This challenge implies that different market and institutional dynamics might drive different landlord behaviors in closing that gap, with varying efficacy. In some cases, public policies like rent control may incentivize harassment and behaviors aimed at displacing current tenants since landlords can capture higher profits if a tenant moves out and units reset to market rents. Gentrifying neighborhoods similarly create incentives for tenant turnover, due to the high demand associated with these areas. In disinvested areas with lower demand, landlords often rely on cost-saving strategies to enhance profits.

Despite broad recognition that market dynamics and policy environments can structure local development outcomes, much remains unknown about the specific ways that landlords respond to housing market contexts. In response, this paper examines the patterns associated with landlord behaviors of deferred maintenance and harassment, which represent two profit-seeking pathways that generate precarity for tenants. We assess the relationship between those landlord behaviors and land profitability, first, at the unit level through indicators for rent gaps and rent control protections, and second, at the neighborhood level, through gentrification measures. Although gentrification research has highlighted the potential harms for existing tenants associated with neighborhood change, we contribute to the literature by explicitly linking redevelopment patterns with both rent gaps and tenant experiences. The analysis adds novel insight by allowing us to observe both the frequency of deferred maintenance and harassment, as well as the factors that influence these landlord behaviors, to identify patterns.

We leverage three datasets to trace the relationship between landlord behaviors, property-level characteristics, and broader economic conditions. First, we draw data from a door-to-door survey we conducted in South and Central Los Angeles, which collected information on tenant experiences including rent payments, rent control, and exposure to deferred maintenance and harassment. Next, we gathered data on market rents from Rent-o-Meter (2019) for each participant address collected in the survey. Finally, we include data from the Urban Displacement Project (UDP) (2020) to test hypotheses related to gentrification. By combining

these data, we can examine the relationship between landlord behaviors and the rent gap, rent control, gentrification pressures.

We find widespread experiences of neglect and harassment: within the previous two years, one in four respondents reported landlord refusal to provide maintenance up to code or hazardous living conditions, and another one in four reported landlord harassment. However, experiences varied across contexts: tenants with the largest rent gaps at the unit level experienced a greater number of maintenance issues while those in gentrifying areas or rent-controlled units were more likely to experience harassment. These findings suggest fundamental differences in the profit-seeking strategies used by landlords dependent on both neighborhood and unit-level characteristics.

Next, we review literature on landlord behavior and market dynamics. We then introduce the data, methodological approach, and findings, exploring this relationship empirically. We conclude by discussing the implications of these results.

Deferred Maintenance and Neglect

Our analysis focuses on landlord behaviors of deferred maintenance and harassment. Theories of uneven development, the rent gap, and gentrification are interconnected and suggest different ways in which the neighborhood context shapes the potential profit that a parcel can yield, and, in turn, the profit-maximizing strategies available to landlords–including deferred maintenance and harassment. As articulated by Neil Smith (1979), rent gaps emerge between the actual paid rents that properties generate and the future potential rent that landlords could otherwise receive through conversion to a parcel's highest economic use, which often requires concentrated investment and redevelopment. Importantly, the influence of the rent gap on landlord behaviors also depends on a mechanism to close it. When rent gaps exist, landlords must act to capture higher rents in order to realize new profits–through rent increases for existing tenants or removing tenants to enable redevelopment and/or tenant replacement. Past research has found that investors need both favorable local political-economic conditions and deep resources to close the rent gap, to bring a property to the highest possible economic use (Christophers, 2022).

In high-demand cities, sizable rent gaps exist across locations for multiple reasons, including rent control, property neglect, and price frictions. Landlords' ability to close rent gaps depends on the economic, social, and political context. In some cases, landlords forgo higher rents and instead implement strategies of neglect to minimize costs and preserve profit rates (Smith, 1979). Landlords most commonly defer maintenance in neighborhoods and units where market conditions suggest barriers to raising rents such as lack of demand, racial segregation, or political obstacles (Travis, 2019; Mallach, 2014; Immergluck & Law, 2014). Given housing stock durability, landlords can often extract profit for years despite neglect. Similarly, rent control literature (e.g. Autor, et al., 2014; Sims, 2007) suggests that landlords respond to rent gaps, in part, by reducing maintenance of existing units. Strategies of neglect may also be used in rapidly ascending rental markets to make the units of existing tenants uninhabitable and justify redevelopment (author citation).

Past research suggest that a sizeable portion of the renter population experiences maintenance and repair issues that are not fully addressed by landlords. Following evidence from the Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking (Federal Reserve Board, 2019), 15 percent of renters had moderate or substantial difficulty getting their landlord to undertake home repairs. In addition, a Los Angeles survey indicated that over half of households needed a yearly repair. Families faced particular risk: 14.7% of households with children risked toxic paint exposure, 1.5% had pest issues, and 6.9% experienced mold problems (County of Los Angeles Public Health, 2015). Literature suggests that neglect disproportionately affects lower-income tenants, who must often accept any available and affordable unit, often the poorest quality housing in neighborhoods with fewer resources and amenities (Sharkey, 2013). Past research also finds that Black and Latino/a residents, undocumented residents, and low-income households are more likely than other residents to live in degraded housing (Hall & Greenman, 2013; Krieger and Higgins, 2002). Furthermore, landlord discrimination and the historical legacy of segregation make it difficult for Black and Latino/a residents to move to locations with higher-quality housing and amenities (Korver-Glenn, 2018). While municipalities across the United States have implemented regular, mandatory inspections for rental properties, significantly improving housing stock quality, an estimated 8% of renters occupy homes with serious structural damage (Divringi, et. al., 2019).

Gentrification and Harassment

Gentrification also shapes the neighborhood context and, in turn, the profit-seeking strategies available to landlords. The Urban Displacement Project (UDP) defines gentrification as "a process of neighborhood change that includes economic change in a historically disinvested neighborhood—through real estate investment and new higher-income residents moving in—as well as demographic change." With heightened demand and concentrated investment, landlords in gentrifying areas may more easily increase rents and pass through the costs of maintenance and upgrades. However, landlords and investors must manage existing residents to realize the monetary gains—either by sharply increasing rents or displacing tenants from the unit so that redevelopment is feasible. For this reason, a substantial literature has attempted to trace the relationship between gentrification and displacement (Zuk et al., 2018).

Previous research has noted that gentrification produces complex and mixed impacts for residents (Hyra, et al., 2019; Freeman, 2006). New investment can generate new local resources through higher tax bases, amenities, and higher quality local infrastructure and housing, as well as increased property values, benefitting homeowners. Relatedly, new local development can create health and economic benefits for residents (Brummet & Reed, 2019). Simultaneously, groups may experience disparate outcomes: evidence suggests that white residents capture greater health benefits from new development than Black residents (Izenberg, Mujahid, & Yen, 2018; Gibbons & Barton, 2016).

Gentrification can also create concentrated harm for tenants from fear, stress, harassment, displacement, and disrupted social infrastructure throughout the process (Slater, 2021; Huynh & Maroko, 2014; Betancur, 2011). Harassment describes efforts by landlords to either intimidate tenants and keep them from reporting issues to public enforcement agencies, or to displace residents so that units can be relisted or redeveloped at higher market rents. Past research has demonstrated that most forced moves result from indirect eviction, which do not go through the

court system (Gromis & Desmond, 2021; Garboden & Rosen, 2019). But, relatively few studies investigate the landlord behaviors used to push people out. Some evidence suggests that remodeling and demolition permits are positively associated with eviction rates (Ramiller, 2021). Harassment also emerges in literature on corporate landowners that benefit from large real estate portfolios and outsized market power. Those entities have higher occurrences of arbitrary fees and fines, aggressive eviction tactics, surveillance technologies, and deferred maintenance (Travis, 2019; Raymond, et al., 2018).

Past rent control studies also suggest that landlords may remove existing tenants to gain additional profits. Chen et al. (2023) find that rent control benefits are largest in gentrifying neighborhoods, suggesting that landlords have the largest incentives to remove tenants in these neighborhoods. Further, Diamond et al. (2019) find that 15 percent of rent controlled units were redeveloped out of rent controlled status in San Francisco, again suggesting that landlords may pursue strategies to remove existing tenants.

Our survey data offer an important opportunity to build on past work by observing landlord behavior through a tenant perspective. Such inquiry is particularly important given literature gaps on the frequency and predictors of neglect and harassment. Most previous research examining landlord-tenant relations is qualitative in nature and provides evidence from which we extrapolate our hypotheses to examine those relationships at the population-level. We contribute to the literature by examining how landlord behavior varies in response to policy or market dynamics through indicators for rent gaps, gentrification, rent control, and household characteristics.

Methods and Context

The analysis leverages data from a neighborhood survey we conducted across two study areas in Central and South Los Angeles. We surveyed tenants door-to-door in Spanish and English from January to October 2019. For each study area, we used 2-stage stratified random sampling to select census block groups. We purchased a full set of addresses for each census block group (CBG) from Marketing Systems Group and randomly selected households for surveying. We visited each block group three times with at least one weekday evening and one weekend attempt. In total, we collected 794 complete surveys and obtained an overall response rate of 20%. Out of 11,262 addresses, an estimated 76% of doors were reached and 32% of those addresses yielded conversations with an eligible adult renter. The survey covered multiple housing-related topics. In this study, we leveraged questions covering participants' housing history over the previous 2 years, experiences with maintenance issues, landlord neglect, and harassment, housing unit characteristics, observations on neighborhood conditions, and demographics. Additional details about the survey and its sampling parameters are detailed in Angst et al, 2023.

Because we spoke directly with tenants about neglect and harassment instead of relying on formal reporting structures, our dataset counteracts response and reporting bias. Although tenant protections such as rent control and just-cause eviction ordinances help protect renters, information asymmetries and power imbalances persist that can prevent tenants from exercising their rights and lead these issues to remain hidden. This is particularly true for low-income renters and tenants of color who experience higher rates of discrimination and larger resource

deficits (Chisholm, et al., 2020). Therefore, by speaking directly with tenants, and outside of administrative data and formal reporting procedures, these data present a unique opportunity to study the interaction between the activities of landlords, as private actors, and both public policies like rent control and broader housing market dynamics.

In addition, we scraped data on estimated market rents from the Rent-o-Meter (2019) website for each participants' address. Rent-o-Meter takes into account the unit location and number of bedrooms, then collects market rent data on comparable surrounding properties to generate an estimate. We also gathered data from the Urban Displacement Project's Gentrification Index for Los Angeles (2020) to assign each participant address from the past two years to a particular gentrification and displacement typology. These data were available at the census tract level for Los Angeles County and based on American Community Survey 5-year Estimates 2014-18. Last, we matched our survey data with secondary sources to perform a series of sensitivity analyses. Data from the American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates 2015-2019 was pulled at census block group level on poverty, median income, median gross rent, rent burden, housing types, race, and citizenship. We also matched zip code-level data on Small-Area Fair Market Rents (FMR) (2019) from the U.S. Department Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and market rents from the Zillow Rent Index (ZRI) (2019). Information on housing code violation cases from the Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety was compiled for each census block group as well.

This paper provides both descriptive and multivariate evidence. The survey data is cross-sectional so our results provide associations between variables rather than causal estimates. To assess the sensitivity of the regression results, we use multiple outcome variables aimed at evaluating the same types of landlord behavior. We also tested multiple indicators of rent gap, gentrification, and rent control–our independent variables of interest.

The Los Angeles Context

The City of Los Angeles has two primary policies for addressing housing costs and quality: the Rent Stabilization Ordinance (RSO) and the Systematic Code Enforcement Program (SCEP). The RSO limits rent increases to between three and eight percent per year (based on the twelve-month Consumer Price Index average) plus one percent for each utility covered by the landlord on buildings with two or more units built before 1978. The RSO also includes a just cause ordinance that entitles residents to relocation assistance, right-to-return, and protections against displacement when the tenant is not at fault for an eviction. However, there is no vacancy control in the City of Los Angeles, and landlords can reset rents back to market rate after an existing tenant moves out. To monitor housing quality, the Los Angeles Housing Department employs a Systematic Code Enforcement Program (SCEP) for RSO properties aiming to inspect units every four years and address complaints promptly (LAHD, 2023).

Within Los Angeles, this study focuses on two areas of Los Angeles that roughly approximate the Federally Designated Promise Zones, in Central and South Los Angeles (see Figure 1). Both areas are similarly characterized by high poverty, large immigrant populations, and a high proportion of rent-burdened residents (NDSC, 2019). Moreover, there is high demand for housing and a significant shortage of supply throughout the City of Los Angeles. However,

there is also significant variation throughout these study areas with regards to gentrification, rent control, and rent gaps explored in greater detail below.

Dependent Variables

First, we examined maintenance issues and landlords' failure to address those issues. This included a continuous variable for the total number of maintenance issues experienced in participants' homes over the past 6 months, which was then split into four categories for regression analysis: zero, one, two, and three or more issues. We also tested a dummy variable comparing tenants that experienced any amount of maintenance issue to those that had none. In our survey, we further asked survey participants whether their landlord had responded to maintenance requests and fixed all reported issues in the past 6 months, which was transformed into another binary outcome variable. Last, we used a survey question asking respondents whether their landlord had refused to maintain their unit up to code or allowed hazardous living conditions to develop in the past 2 years to generate another dummy variable.

Second, we evaluated tenants' experience with harassment. The survey asked participants whether they had encountered issues with their landlord including threats, harassment, assault, refusal to collect rent checks, illegal rent raises[1], illegal eviction[2], or discrimination. We asked about each of those categories separately and determined the total number of landlord issues a renter encountered. Similar to the maintenance variables detailed above, we created a categorical variable (zero, one, two, and three or more forms of harassment) and a dummy variable (any harassment versus no harassment). We also grouped the different types of harassment into three broader categories: 1) illegal rent raises; 2) threats, harassment, and assault; 3) illegal eviction strategies including refusal to collect rent checks. We combined harassment types for both theoretical reasons and increased sample sizes to analyze the data by theme. While illegal rent hikes represent an indirect way to force a tenant out or capture market rents, threats, harassment, and assault are direct efforts to remove tenants through intimidation and harm. We combine illegal eviction and rent refusal because there are few reasons for a landlord to make claims of non-payment after a tenant attempts to submit a check besides preparation for an illegal eviction. Thus, we create a series of dummy variables for whether a participant had experienced any of the landlord behaviors in each of the three categories listed above.

Independent Variables

We constructed a series of variables to examine differences across rent gaps, gentrification, and RSO status. In addition, we included a set of control variables for income, age, race, household composition, housing history, building type, and rents. We have included a brief description of the variables used in this analysis in Table 1.

[1] For homes covered by the RSO in Los Angeles, rents may not be increased by more than 3-8% per year tied to inflation–beyond this threshold is considered illegal.

[2] To initiate eviction proceedings, landlords must provide written notice, have just-cause if the notice pertains to an RSO unit, and then give the tenant an opportunity to defend themselves in court. Any deviation from this process is illegal, such as failure to provide notice or using alternative means to push residents out.

Table 1: Sample Statistics & Variable Construction

Variable	Definition	Sample Description
Deferred Maintenance		
Any Issues - Yes	1 = respondent experienced at least 1 maintenance issues in past 6 months; 0 = experienced no issues; dichotomous	78.2%
Total Issues		
0	Sum of total maintenance issues experienced in past 6 months	21.83%
1		22.35%
2		20.65%
3+		35.16%
Landlord Fixed All Issues	1 = landlord fixed all maintenance issues reported by respondent in past 6 months; 0 = landlord did not address all issues; dichotomous	70.7%
Hazardous Conditions or Housing Not to Code	1 = landlord refused to maintain the unit up to code or allowed hazardous living conditions to develop; 0 = unit up to code with habitable conditions; dichotomous	24.3%
Harassment		
Any Forms - Yes	1 = any form of landlord harassment in past 2 years; 0 = no harassment; dichotomous	24.2%
Total Forms		
0	Sum of total forms of landlord harassment experienced by respondent in past 2 years	75.8%
1		11.5%
2		7.1%
3+		5.7%
Illegal Rent Increases	1 = landlord raised rent above the legal threshold; 0 = no illegal rent raises; dichotomous	8.9%
Threats or Assault	1 = landlord threatened or assaulted respondent; 0 = no threats or assault; dichotomous	13.0%
Illegal Eviction	1 = illegal eviction attempt or refused to accept rent; 0 = no illegal eviction attempts; dichotomous	6.8%
Demographics		
Age	Total Years; Continuous	41.72
Race		
Black	1 = Black respondent; 0 = non-Black; self-identified; dichotomous	22.7%
Latino/a	1 = Latino/a respondent; 0 = non-Latino/a; self-identified; dichotomous	55.7%

Household Characteristics		
Family with children	1 = at least 1 child below the age of 18; 0 = no children in household; dichotomous	40.7%
Overcrowded	1 = more than 1 person per room (HUD definition); 0 =less than 1 person per room; dichotomous	42.6%
Household Income		
Less than $36,500/year		59.5%
$36,500-$73,000/year		25.6%
More than $73,000/year		14.9%
Government Support	1 = household received some form of government support (including food stamps, CalWorks, or TANF); 0 =no government support; dichotomous	39.8%
Time in Residence > 2 Years	1 = lived in current residence longer than 2 years; 0 = less than 2 years, ; dichotomous	68.9%
Forced Move in Previous 2 Years	1 = forced move in past 2 years; 0 = no forced move; dichotomous	7.8%
Housing Unit Characteristics		
Rent Gap		
Above Market Rate		10.9%
$0 - $299		18.5%
$300 - $599		25.4%
$600 - $899		23.4%
Greater than $900		21.8%
Rent Control	1 = unit covered by rent control ordinance; 0 = not covered or did not know; dichotomous	47.6%
Apartment with 20 or more units	1 = building had 20 or more units; 0 = less than 20 units; dichotomous	32.4%
Neighborhood Characteristics		
Gentrification		
Low-income		30.6%
Displacement		8.8%
At-Risk		12.6%
Early or Advanced		48.1%
Poverty Rate above 25%	1 = poverty rate in block group above 25% of total population; 0 = poverty rate below 25%; dichotomous	61.7%
Number of LADBS violations per rental unit above City median	1 = LADBS housing code violations per rental unit between 2015 and 2019 in block group exceeded City median; 0 = below City median; dichotomous	54.7%

Rent Gap

To determine each survey participants' rent gap–the difference between paid rent and estimated market rent–we first needed to determine the potential market rent for their unit. We computed market rents in two ways: 1) at the unit level using Rent-O-Meter (ROM) estimates; 2) at the census block group level by housing unit type (studio, 1 bedroom, 2 bedroom, 3 bedroom, and 4 bedroom) using the mean of ROM market rent estimates among survey respondent addresses for each census block group (CBG). ROM market rent prices ranged from $1,027 to

$4,500 across CBGs. In comparison, the contract rents reported by survey participants ranged between $125 and $4,200.[3]

Rent gaps were computed at the participant level by subtracting reported contract rents from estimated ROM market rents. Household rent gaps ranged from -$1,280 to $3,900. Moreover, 89% of tenants paid a contract rent lower than the estimated market rent for their unit. This variable was further operationalized for analysis by sorting households into five groups: 1) 11.0% paid the market price or more; 2) 18.5% had a rent gap between $1 and $299; 3) 25.4% at $300 to $599; 4) 23.4% between $600 and $899; 5) 21.8% had a rent gap that was greater than $900. Therefore, the rent gaps observed were both large in magnitude and widespread.

We test the following hypothesis related to the rent gap:

H1) All else equal, we hypothesize a positive association between the rent gap and deferred maintenance related to situations of disinvestment, and a positive relationship between the rent gap and harassment corresponding with contexts where there is a mechanism to close the gap.

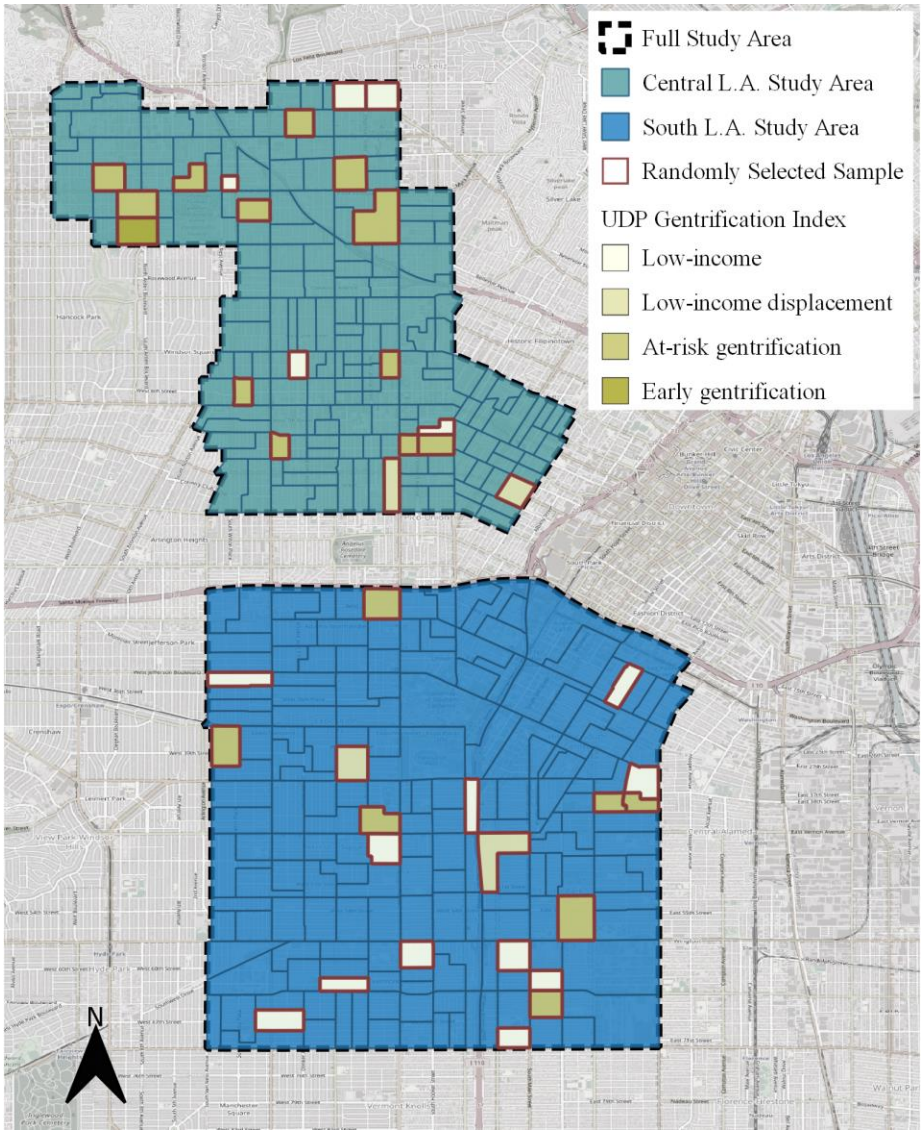
Gentrification

We constructed variables for gentrification from the Urban Displacement Project, which sorted our study neighborhoods into five categories: low-income tracts (no gentrification or displacement), low-income displacement tracts, at risk of gentrification, early gentrification, and advanced gentrification. This metric builds off the most commonly operationalized definition from Freeman (2006) using information from the ACS 5-Year Estimates 2014-2018. According to the UDP indicator, 30.6% of survey participants lived in low-income tracts, 8.8% in displacement tracts that had seen a reduction in the number of low-income households from 2010 to 2018, 12.6% were at risk of gentrification, 46.2% with early gentrification, and 2.0% in advanced stages of gentrification. Due to the small number of survey participants who lived in an advanced gentrification census tract, we combine the early- and advanced-gentrification categories together for analysis.

We apply those gentrification variables to examine the hypothesis:

H2) We predict gentrification is associated with higher rates of harassment because of the incentives that exist for removing existing residents to attract new tenants with higher incomes and education levels. We do not expect to find a significant relationship between deferred maintenance and gentrification because upkeep is often required to justify higher rents.

[3] For every CBG, mean ROM market rents fell between the Zillow Rent Index (ZRI) and HUD's Small-Area Fair Market Rents (FMR). Survey-reported contract rents also landed between the median rent values from the ACS 5-Year Estimates 2015-2019 and FMR for most CBGs. We also evaluated ZRI and FMR rent gap indicators in our models, ZRI did not show predictive power. However, the FMR rent gap was positively correlated with total maintenance issues for those with the highest rent gap, similar in magnitude to ROM variables. ZRI and FMR were both at the same geographical zip code level, but ZRI lacked housing type separation, possibly biasing it downwards. Neither metric significantly influenced harassment. Indicators for RSO, gentrification, and other controls all exhibited similar significance and magnitude across models. More information available upon request.



Rent Control

In the survey, we asked each resident whether their current and previous housing units were covered by the RSO or rent control. While 47.6% of renters knew they lived in a RSO unit and 19.7% knew they did not, almost one in three participants (32.7%) did not know the rent control status of their units. We coded participants who did not know their unit status as lacking rent control; this was a significant portion of our sample and renters are unlikely to enforce rights they do not know they have.

We investigate the relationship between rent control and landlord behavior through the following hypotheses:

H3) We expect fewer maintenance issues reported by tenants in RSO units due to the fact that RSO are inspected regularly by the city and failure to maintain can lead to monetary penalties. At the same time, we predict higher rates of harassment among rent-controlled units to remove existing tenants in order to replace them with new tenants paying market rent.

Descriptive Results

1) *Among survey respondents, 24.3% experienced housing issues related to hazardous living conditions or landlord's failure to provide maintenance up to the housing code.*

Most renters (78.2%) had experienced at least one maintenance issue in the past 6 months with 35.2% experiencing 3 or more issues. Additionally, almost one in four had a landlord refuse to maintain their unit to basic living standards (see Table 1). For a significant majority, maintenance issues were fully addressed by their landlords, with 70.7% of respondents reporting that all issues were fixed. However, 8.8% had none of the issues they reported fixed. Furthermore, those with nothing fixed had a significantly higher number of reported issues on average: roughly 7 total maintenance issues in the previous 6 months (data not displayed in chart; results available upon request).

2) *Among survey respondents, 24.2% experienced illegal rent increases, threats or harassment, discrimination, or illegal eviction.*

Overall, nearly 1 in 4 of survey respondents (24.2%) experienced some form of harassment in the previous 2 years (see Table 1). We also examined different forms of harassment independently. First, 8.9% of respondents had encountered illegal rent increases. Second, 13.0% endured verbal and physical threats, harassment, and assault. Next, residents were asked about the discrimination they faced living in their unit: 11.0% reported experiencing some form of bias in their landlord interactions. Finally, 3.7% experienced an attempt at illegal eviction, and 4.4% had a landlord that refused to accept rent checks (6.8% collectively). Additionally, we examined the degree to which different forms of harassment clustered together. We observed 12.7% of respondents experiencing two or more forms of harassment and 5.6% with three or more.

Multivariate Results

Maintenance

We found evidence that tenants who had moved in the previous 2 years–and more specifically those who had experienced a forced move–experienced significantly higher exposure to neglect. Those with a forced move were 19.5 percentage points ($p<.01$) more likely to experience 3 or more issues, 19.1 percentage points ($p<.05$) less likely to have landlord that fixed all issues reported, and 19.6 percentage points ($p<.01$) more likely to have a landlord refuse to provide proper maintenance. In contrast, we noted that Latinos/as and residents of apartment

buildings with 20 or more units reported significantly fewer maintenance issues with each roughly 10 percentage points ($p<.05$) less likely to experience 3 or more issues.

[Findings on maintenance are largely unrelated to our 3 variables]. A positive association existed between the size of the rent gap and the total number of maintenance issues experienced: tenants with the largest rent gap were 13.7 percentage points ($p<.05$) more likely to experience 3 or more issues in the past 6 months as compared to those paying market rates (see Table X). However, we did not find a significant relationship between the rent gap and issues with landlords refusing to provide maintenance or hazardous conditions. We also did not detect significant correlations between the total number of maintenance issues or maintenance refusal and rent control or the UDP gentrification metric.

	Marginal Effects at the Means			
	Total Maintenance Issues - 3+	Yes/No - Maintenance Issues	Yes/No - Landlord Fixed All Issues	Yes/No - Hazardous Conditions or Housing Not to Code
Rent Gap: Above Market Rate	.	.	.	.
Rent Gap: $0 - $299	0.058	0.019	0.058	-0.051
Rent Gap: $300 - $599	0.053	0.009	0.061	-0.023
Rent Gap: $600 - $899	0.059	0.035	0.058	-0.062
Rent Gap: > $900	0.137**	0.062	0.093	-0.082
Rent Control	-0.005	-0.019	-0.045	0.046
Gentrification: Low-income	.	.	.	.
Gentrification: Displacement	-0.005	0.033	-0.034	-0.034
Gentrification: At-Risk	0.005	0.078*	0.008	-0.058
Gentrification: Early or Advanced	-0.032	-0.019	0.043	-0.007
Move in Previous 2 Years	0.105**	0.125***	-0.032	0.062
Forced Move in Previous 2 Years	0.195***	0.083	-0.191**	0.196***
Income: Less than $36,500/year	.	.	.	.
Income: $36,500-$73,000/year	0.028	0.035	0.033	0.031
Income: More than $73,000/year	0.052	0.000	-0.028	-0.021
Age - Continuous	-0.003**	-0.003**	0.001	-0.001
Black, Respondent	0.006	-0.019	0.051	0.058
Latinx, Respondent	-0.100**	-0.104**	0.018	0.038
Apartment with 20 or more units	-0.099**	-0.067	0.052	-0.031
Household with children under 18	0.039	-0.040	-0.065	-0.017
Government support	-0.018	0.007	-0.051	0.030
Overcrowded home	0.059	0.063	0.014	0.024
Poverty Rate in block group above 25%	-0.046	-0.038	-0.040	0.011
Number of LADBS violations in block group per rental unit above median	-0.022	-0.042	0.014	0.037
N	613	613	498	564
R2				
Pseudo R2	0.024	0.043	0.027	0.032
* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.010				

Harassment

A significant relationship was detected between race and a range of indicators for harassment. Latino/a tenants were 4.4 percentage points more likely to experience 3 or more forms of harassment ($p<.05$), 13.1 percentage points ($p<.05$) more likely to endure any form of harassment, and 8.3 percentage points ($p<.01$) more likely to experience illegal rent increases as compared to White and Asian tenants. Black renters were 3.4 percentage points ($p<.10$) more likely to experience 3 or more forms of harassment and 11.5 percentage points ($p<.10$) more likely for any form of harassment. Both Black and Latino/a tenants had significantly higher likelihood ($p<.01$) of experiencing discrimination as well.

In addition, tenants with the largest rent gaps had significantly fewer instances of harassment than those with lower rent gaps. Those with a rent gap over $900 were 5.6 percentage points ($p<.1$) less likely to experience 3 or more forms of harassment and were 17.3 percentage points ($p<.05$) less likely to experience any harassment in general over the previous 2 years.

However, we did observe a significant positive relationship between several of the harassment variables and those who lived in a rent control unit–which typically have a rent gap by definition and a mechanism to close it. Residents living in a rent-controlled unit were 3.6 percentage points more likely to experience 3 or more forms of harassment ($p<.01$), 10.9 percentage points more likely to endure at least one form of harassment or attempts at illegal eviction ($p<.01$), and 4.4 percentage points greater likelihood of enduring illegal eviction practices such as refusal to accept rent checks and other means of pushing people out ($p<.01$).

Moreover, tenants living in gentrifying neighborhoods had a positive, significant relationship with harassment–another mechanism for increasing rent prices and closing the rent gap. Tenants in gentrifying neighborhoods were 2.7 percentage points more likely to have 3 or more issues ($p<.05$), 8.6 percentage points more likely to experience at least one issue ($p<.05$), and 7.6 percentage points more likely to be exposed to threats and assault ($p<.05$). Tenants living in displacement tracts also had a higher likelihood ($p<.1$) of experiencing threats or assault.[4]

Lastly, tenants' housing history and household composition were also correlated with harassment. Overcrowded households were 10.5 percentage points ($p<.01$) more likely to experience an illegal rent increase. Families with children were significantly less likely to experience any form of harassment ($p<.1$), illegal rent increases ($p<.01$), or illegal eviction ($p<.05$) while those receiving government support were more likely to experience harassment issues across most indicators ($p<.1$). Expectedly, tenants that had experienced a forced move were also more likely to have experienced an illegal eviction ($p<.1$). Residents of large apartment buildings were also less likely to experience illegal eviction ($p<.1$), but this association was small in magnitude.

[4] We also found significant, positive associations between displacement tracts and harassment when using the exposure metrics discussed in the sensitivity analysis section below.

	Marginal Effects at the Means				
	Total Harassment Issues - 3+	At Leat One Issue	Yes/No -Illegal Rent Increases	Yes/No - Threat or Assault	Yes/No - Illegal Eviction
Rent Gap: Above Market Rate	.	.	.	.	.
Rent Gap: $0 - $299	-0.013	-.034	0.027	0.049	0.017
Rent Gap: $300 - $599	-0.032	-.097	-0.008	0.004	0.001
Rent Gap: $600 - $899	-0.035	-.093	-0.016	0.018	-0.031
Rent Gap: > $900	-0.056*	-.173**	-0.056	-0.026	-0.037
Rent Control	0.036***	.109***	0.029	0.039	0.044***
Gentrification: Low-income					
Gentrification: Displacement	0.032	0.107	0.052	0.106*	0.000
Gentrification: At-Risk	0.015	0.028	-0.013	0.047	0.018
Gentrification: Early or Advanced	0.027**	0.086**	0.003	0.076***	0.015
Move in Previous 2 Years	0.011	0.023	0.036	0.022	0.054**
Forced Move in Previous 2 Years	0.038*	0.077	0.029	0.084	0.077**
Income: Less than $36,500/year					
Income: $36,500-$73,000/year	0.016	0.057	-0.002	0.056	-0.009
Income: More than $73,000/year	-0.012	-0.039	0.008	0.034	-0.035**
Age - Continuous	0.000	0.001	0.001	-0.001	0.000
Black, Respondent	0.034*	0.115*	0.046	0.008	0.005
Latinx, Respondent	0.044**	0.131**	0.083***	0.063	0.032
Apartment with 20 or more units	0.007	0.004	0.029	0.016	-0.002*
Household with children under 18	-0.024	-0.085*	-0.113***	0.018	-0.05**
Government support	0.024*	0.073*	-0.018	0.053*	0.029*
Overcrowded home	0.015	0.044	0.105***	-0.044	0.005
Poverty Rate in block group above 25%	-0.010	-0.028	-0.010	-0.007	-0.016
Number of LADBS violations in block group per rental unit above median	0.011	0.045	0.000	0.036	0.022
N	564	564	564	564	564
R2					
Pseudo R2	0.042	0.062	0.167	0.062	0.145
* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.010					

Sensitivity Analyses

We performed several sensitivity analyses to assess the robustness of these findings.

First, leveraging data from the Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety on housing code violations (LADBS, 2023), we compared our previous results on deferred maintenance incidence from the tenant perspective with the public sectors' tracking of formal enforcement mechanisms. An outcome variable was constructed at the census block group level dividing the total number of violations between 2015 and 2019 by the total renter population in

that CBG. The controls for this regression analysis used data at the CBG level from the ACS 5-Year Estimates 2015-2019, which attempted to mirror the household level variables used in the analyses above from survey data–median income, median rent, Black, Latino, and Asian population, foreign-born population, large apartment buildings, and rent controlled units, rent gap using ZRI and FMR, and the UDP Gentrification Index.

The secondary models using housing code violations showed a larger proportion of rent control units was associated with a greater number of complaints. This makes sense given the local policy environment, as those units are governed by more stringent regulations around housing quality and inspected more consistently. Additionally, neighborhoods experiencing gentrification were associated with fewer violations, which aligns with our survey findings presented above. These models also found higher rent gaps using the Zillow and FMR zip code values had significantly fewer violations reported, which further substantiates the conclusion that units with large rent gaps are not necessarily the more likely to be deliberately neglected. We further noted tracts with higher median incomes had more violations while those with higher rents had fewer. This may result from higher-wealth clientele having greater access to government enforcement when issues do arise, given the time and energy required to work the system, or greater government oversight and policing. Further, tracts with a larger proportion of Asian residents had fewer complaints while those with larger Latino/a populations had more complaints. These associations are consistent with past research: higher rent housing is often higher quality while Latino/a renters live in lower quality housing on average as compared to other racial groups.

Second, we tested the sensitivity of the harassment models. Because our questions covered a two-year period, we used data collected on participants' housing history to create exposure indices for the rent control, gentrification, and large apartment building variables. We computed the proportion of time spent at each address from the previous two years then multiplied the result by a dummy variable for each indicator. We converted the result into categorical variables indicating if a tenant had lived the entire two-year period, some time, or no time in a RSO unit, gentrifying tract, and large building. We also tested each model using a restricted sample of only residents who had lived in their unit for the entire two-year period. Additionally, we examined changes to our models when more or less control variables were added related to housing and social conditions. A few examples include a continuous variable for length of time in residence (insignificant for neglect and harassment), ZRI and FMR rent gap indicators (see footnote), and single family homes (significantly fewer number of maintenance issues and forms of harassment). We presented the results for apartment buildings with 20 or more units to proxy for corporate landlords who are more likely to operate large complexes (Ferrer, 2021), but found limited significance. Across all of these specifications, regression estimates were consistent with those presented above.

Conclusion

Overall, we found that tenants commonly endure landlord strategies of neglect and harassment. Nearly 1 in 4 survey respondents reported that their landlord had failed to maintain their unit up to code and prevent hazardous conditions. Moreover, roughly 1 in 4 tenants had also experienced some form of harassment, with 13 percent enduring verbal and physical threats or assault. The incidence of these conditions varied across contexts, suggesting that landlord

behaviors are interrelated, profit-seeking strategies influenced by broader market dynamics of gentrification and public protections like rent control, which create different profit potential and pathways for landlords. While past research has developed theoretical arguments or leveraged qualitative data to study neglect and harassment at the neighborhood level, we use our unique dataset to test hypotheses at the population level using multivariate analysis related to both market conditions and unit-level characteristics. We highlight three sets of findings to support these assertions.

First, we find mixed evidence regarding rent gaps. Larger rent gaps are associated with more maintenance issues. At the same time, those with the highest rent gaps were less likely to experience harassment. We interpret these results in two ways. First, because we observe high rent gaps across neighborhood types, we do not have variation to identify the effect of rent gaps when rent control is not present. Second, it might be the case that landlords' response to rent gaps is to plan to raise the rent as soon as possible. In many cases, landlords have the ability to increase rents or expel tenants when their lease expires if they are unwilling to pay. As such, it might not be profit maximizing to also harass such tenants because the best outcome for the landlord would be to maximize future rent increases, while minimizing turnover.

Second, we find a significant relationship between harassment and rent controlled apartments. This aligns with our hypothesis, as existing RSO tenants must be displaced before rents can be reset to market prices and the rent gap closed. We contrast those experiences against non-rent controlled units with the same rent gap. We find that RSO tenants are more likely to experience harassment and to experience illegal eviction practices. The results demonstrate that landlords target RSO tenants with displacement strategies, which represents an important unintended consequence of RSO and a possible public policy intervention. We did not find significant impacts associated with deferred maintenance, suggesting that regulations help sustain RSO units and encourage residents to report issues as they arise. The rent stabilization ordinance in Los Angeles seems to offer disparate incentives for neglect and harassment due to systematic code enforcement and lack of vacancy controls.

Third, tenants living in gentrifying neighborhoods were more likely to experience harassment as compared to non-gentrifying areas and more likely to endure threats and assault. In gentrifying neighborhoods, the large potential profits at stake appears to motivate landlords to undertake behaviors aimed at displacing tenants. Similar to rent control, landlords must often displace existing tenants in these situations because remodeling or redevelopment are required to capture excessive profits. We did not find any association between gentrification and deferred maintenance as landlords in these areas are likely focused on attracting higher-wealth clientele. Rather, the findings suggest that gentrifying neighborhoods provide a mechanism to close rent gaps by providing new amenities and heightened demand that justify higher rents and make the acquisition of new tenants feasible. Furthermore, past research suggests that harassment and other abusive behaviors in gentrifying neighborhoods are not motivated by economics alone, and interact with discrimination as landlords attempt to attract a specific type of clientele believed to improve the social status of a particular place and boost economic activity in turn (Rucks-Ahidiana, 2022).

Finally, we did not find significant correlation between our variables of interest and neglect. At the same time, our descriptive statistics clearly demonstrate that deferred maintenance and hazardous living conditions exist widely. We interpret these findings as reflective of the high demand context of the Los Angeles housing market, where if tenants complain about conditions, landlords can simply find someone else so that these situations are more difficult to observe systematically. Our neglect models are consistent with a hypothesis that the relational aspect of the landlord-tenant relationship as measured by time in residence and whether the respondent had experienced a forced move, are more salient. Those that had been in their units longer–and likely had established greater trust and understanding with their landlord–were less likely to experience issues. Our findings also suggest that tenants forced to move from their previous residence end up in lower quality units with higher rates of maintenance refusal. Importantly, neglect represents a complex set of strategies that range from targeted disinvestment and disrepair to more passive unresponsiveness, which stem from varying landlord incentives and motivate varying tenant responses. For example, we found that Latino/as experienced fewer maintenance issues, which seems to contradict past work. However, our related qualitative work suggests a multitude of explanations for this as tenants self-fix, learn to live with structural issues, engage in homemaking practices, and seek community support to address issues outside the tenant-landlord relationship (author citation). Each of those may result in fewer issues reported on the survey overall and downward bias in our results as tenants are actively altering their housing situations to make them liveable.

Altogether, these results illuminate the widespread nature of, and contributing factors to, property neglect and harassment, which are serious issues that affect renters' quality of life, and can also force residents to move in ways that formal eviction counts can obscure. Our findings illustrate how property-level conditions interact with broader market dynamics to influence landlord behavior and generate precarity for renters within a high housing demand environment. In response, policymakers must address the multifaceted ways in which landlords and market conditions can produce harm for renters, including behaviors aimed at generating tenant turnover like harassment. In a high demand environment like Los Angeles, landlords are likely to raise the rent to address gaps between contract and market rent when possible, and pursue strategies that generate tenant turnover in a gentrifying environment or when tenants are protect by rent control.

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