Transcript: Eviction: The Short Take

Announcer: Welcome to Civil Discourse. This podcast will use government documents to illuminate the workings of the American Government and offer context around the effects of government agencies in your everyday life. And now your host, Nia Rogers, Public Affairs Librarian and Dr. John Aughenbaugh, Political Science Professor.

N Rodgers: Welcome to Civil Discourse. I'm sorry that Augie can't be with us today. Who knows where he's off to. He's probably off playing baseball or something. I have with me today, Dr. Katheryn Howell, Dr. Benjamin Teresa and Donna Coghill who is the community engagement librarian for the library. And we're going to talk to you about the book Evicted and broadly about eviction. So we're going to ask a few questions and I think Donna's going to start for us.

D Coghill: Yes. Hi, I'm glad to have you all here today and I'm excited to be involved. So the common book this year is Evicted and it follows the stories of several people as they are evicted or very close to eviction. And for our listeners who may not be familiar with the term, what does eviction mean?

B Teresa: There's a couple of different meanings. So the first kind of definition, technical definition of eviction is kind of... is the legal process that leads to someone being physically removed from their house or apartment where they rent. And so, that legal process differs state by state, but it has broad similarities where there's a notice a given from the landlord to the tenant when they're late on rent, and then a court proceeding to eventually determine that the tenant can be legally removed or evicted from the residence.

N Rodgers: Okay. And are there other definitions that y'all use in the lab? And I know we're going to get to the lab and we're going to explain the lab in a minute, but...

B Teresa: Right.

K Howell: Sure. I mean, so we think about it slightly broader in this kind of understanding of forced moves, because we know that ultimately why we care is that people are getting kicked out of their homes. Right? There's sort of an instability that's happening in terms of families and children. Right? So that's kind of why we think about it. And so we think about it more broadly in terms of forced move. So that could be an informal eviction. So a landlord tells you, "You're out," and doesn't give you a legal notice, but you're like, "Well, I got to go because my landlord told me to go." Or a landlord is sort of intentionally raising the rent and making it so that you can't stay.

K Howell: And so we think about these kind of broader forced moves that are a form of eviction, but don't go through the legal process. And we know that in the city of Richmond, the Point-in-Time count for homelessness found that a quarter of those who had been homeless in the past year had been evicted from their homes. And of those 35% did not go through a legal process.
And so it's really important to think more broadly about eviction than just the legal process or otherwise, you're really hitting a very narrow subset of people who are being forcibly removed from their homes.

N Rodgers: So this is as much a social problem as it is a financial problem in the sense that they're being evicted in some ways through pressure, not through money. Right? The landlord wants something... they want the property for some reason or they want to do something with it that's not allowing those people to stay.

B Teresa: Right. I think that when you look at the eviction cases that go through that legal process, the vast majority of them are for nonpayment of rent. So it does appear again that the eviction cases that are part of the legal process are mostly about people not paying rent. But even within those situations, there's lots of different factors that would lead to someone not being able to make a rent payment that are budgetary, financial at the level of personal or household finances. But we know that those household finances sit in a much broader context of housing affordability, of jobs and the quality of jobs, neighborhood housing conditions. And so what appears to be primarily kind of this budgetary financial problem really opens up a much broader set of issues in housing and related areas.

D Coghill: Why did you start the eviction lab? So now we can cover that part and so why do you want to study this and what's the web address because I'm sure people will want to look it up?

K Howell: Sure. The web address is the harder question, believe it or not.

D Coghill: Oh, my. So just use the Google.

K Howell: Yeah, I mean, I think the Google's okay.

B Teresa: Yeah.

D Coghill: So Google Eviction Lab? [crosstalk 00:05:06]-

K Howell: Yeah, RVA Eviction Lab. So we really started the RVA Eviction Lab in response to a news pick that came out about a year ago, year and a half now, I guess April of last year, that told us that Richmond was the second highest evicting city in the country and that five of the top 10 highest evicting cities in the country were in Virginia. And what I keep telling people is that's not a top 10 list you really want to be on, right? It's just not like, "Oh hey, we're the top 10 coolest cities to live in," or, "greatest phrases from millennials."

N Rodgers: The tattoos, the food [crosstalk 00:05:40]-
K Howell: Right, yeah. They've got so many great things. This is not the one we wanted to be on. And so one of the things that started to happen was that advocates were looking around. And then let me just tell you, advocates, people who are working with tenants, this was not a surprise to them. Attorneys were like, "Yeah, we know this. I'm so happy that finally we have some attention to this." This was not a surprise. And so they organized a group called The Campaign to Reduce Evictions and we were helping them along with folks from other organizations in the city to kind of develop research and data around this issue. And we did, what we'd like to call sort of a data barn raising, sort of all of us said, "Okay, I've got a map, I've got a chart, I'll analyze this data." And we all sort of came together and would create a PowerPoint that somebody would present.

K Howell: And Ben and I very quickly realized, and actually Ben made the suggestion that this wasn't sustainable. There was no way we were ultimately going to be able to keep kind of ad hoc putting things together to really help to create data-driven policy. And so we said, "Okay, let's figure out how to actually get data out there." And so we really started studying it from that perspective. And with this understanding, as Ben was talking about, that eviction is complex. You can say, "Well, they didn't pay rent." Well, why didn't they pay rent? Okay, so you can kind of go into these issues that people are paying too much of their income for rent. So if you're paying half of your income for rent, that leaves, even in the best budgeting situation, if you are a killer budgeter, it means that if your car breaks down, your budget is trash. Right? You have to buy new tires, you're done. You get a medical bill, you're done. It takes one bad day to put you in an eviction space. Right?

K Howell: And so we sort of realized that we've got to start to think about this differently and understand the causes. Right? So understanding this background piece, which we've really done a lot of work on. But also think about the impacts that it's not just one family and their housing and stability, which is enormous. Right? We know that if you're moving around schools all the time, and we know that if you're living in your car or in homelessness, if you're switching homes or living in poor quality of homes, because if you get evicted by the way, it stays on your record for years. So then you can't rent the next place or the next place that you rent is poor quality because you go to the landlord who won't refuse you. Right? And so that landlord is less choosy and chances are has poor quality housing or poor quality neighborhoods.

K Howell: And so we needed to then understand the impact. So that's like the individual household. But then you look at neighborhoods that have eviction rates in the 30% range, and you think about what does that mean for neighborhood turnover? We talk a lot about neighborhood stability and people engaging in their communities. How do you engage in your community? How do you care about your community if you're just trying to stay in your house or if you're turning over every year, right? And so we talk about that kind of community level stability issue. And then of course that has ripple effects for the entire city. And so we thought, "Look, we've got to figure out how to kind of get at these various issues with the Eviction Lab." And so we've been working on that from a couple of different directions, which we can talk about more later on. But that was a big piece.
D Coghill: I'm curious to know how this impacts VCU students specifically. Because we hear of these stories all the time of VCU students being housing unstable. So do you have data on that with the lab?

B Teresa: I think it's an important question about kind of... A broader question about students and stability, not just in housing, right? I mean we understand the impacts of student debt-

K Howell: Student security.

B Teresa: Exactly, exactly. So I think putting the eviction question in that realm in terms of students and their just instability across multiple areas. The data that we have looked at in terms of students and eviction, there are higher eviction rates immediately around kind of in the university and at least in the Monroe Park area, campus area. And we haven't dug into that. But it does suggest that students do experience at least high rent burdens, which means that they actually pay a lot of their income for rent, which means that again, that there's less leftover for food and books and that sort of thing. There's actually not as much instability, not as much eviction as you might think based on how much they're paying for rent. And we kind of hypothesize that some students may be able to rely on family, but for those who cannot, that's a serious problem as well.

K Howell: And we also know that our students are coming from a lot of different places and we've talked to students over the past couple of years as we've been thinking about this issue. And they're like, "Yeah, no, my family was evicted. We experienced homelessness." And so I think that the range of VCU student experiences is really broad. And this issue, when we talked to students about it in our classes, when we were first starting this actually, I had students, multiple come up to me and they said, "I want to be part of this because I experienced these issues. I'm still housing unstable now at VCU. I spent a semester living in my car," or, "as a child, I moved schools six times in high school." And so this is not something that is unknown to VCU students.

K Howell: And so I think that that's what's so exciting about having this as the common book, to be honest, is that it's not just that this is our community. Right? And VCU is part of the Richmond community and part of the Virginia community, but this is also part of our student community. And so I think that's what's... I hope that there's an opportunity to really bring to light the diverse experiences of VCU students, and the fact that we know that students are relying on the food, the Ram Pantry. We know that students are relying on short term assistance, and I think that this is just another piece of the experience that we can really bring to light about VCU students and hope that they bring it into the classroom, to be totally honest. I think there's nothing better for me as a professor then when a student is able to say, "No, I've experienced this, I know this." And that's a brave thing to do. I don't expect everyone to do it. But to be able to bring that into their writing and into their work, I think is so powerful.
N Rodgers: Thank you so much. Unfortunately, Donna has to go because as the engagement librarian, she's often engaging people. Not to get married [crosstalk 00:00:12:19]. This has been very engaging.

B Teresa: Thank you.

K Howell: So thank you for letting me be part of this process.

N Rodgers: Thank you so much. Will y'all stay and answer a few more questions for me.

K Howell: Sure.

B Teresa: Yes, absolutely.

K Howell: We don't have to engage with anybody right now.

N Rodgers: Thank you so much. Thanks Donna.

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