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Narratives of Housing Displacement and Health in San Francisco: Eviction as Public Health Crisis

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The PACE Applied Housing Research Initiative (AHRI) seeks to expand faculty research on housing to make PACE a central hub where students, policy makers, practitioners, and other housing leaders can come together to examine and understand housing policy issues in the Bay Area and beyond. AHRI provides a platform for introducing innovative solutions to affordable housing problems through activities such as supporting faculty and student research, offering a practitioner (co)-taught course on housing, and hosting an annual Distinguished Speaker Lecture. Seed funding from Merritt Community Capital Corporation for AHRI is greatly appreciated.

Abstract

Threats of eviction and experiences of involuntary displacement from one's home are significant, disruptive events that are only beginning to be understood as impacting health and furthering inequality. This paper contributes to this growing literature on the effects of eviction on health. Through an SF State Public Health graduate course partnership with the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, this paper is based on analysis of 16 oral history narratives of displacement, previously collected and open-sourced. We found that housing displacement is a public health crisis affecting people's emotional and physical health. Three overlapping social processes shape health: (1) *Root Shock and Neighborhood Change* illustrates experiences of eroded social-ties and a loss of connection to place. (2) *Eviction Events* include threats and loss that together produce physical and emotional manifestations of stress – fear and worry, frustration and anger, and loneliness and disconnection. (3) *Activism for Housing Justice*, shows how many built on or became experts in housing rights and participants in community activities. We argue that housing and health policies must lead with principles of equity, to make visible the ways BIPOC, immigrant and marginalized communities and residents are most affected by housing precarity, harms, and economic shocks, like COVID-19.

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INTRODUCTION: Housing Displacement and Public Health

Housing insecurity and involuntary displacement are increasingly recognized as public health issues of major concern. In the U.S. prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, housing crises were affecting many communities in almost every state, including the San Francisco Bay Area. Economic downturns such as the recession following the dot-com industry bubble fall out of 2000-2002 and sub-prime housing market collapse of the 2007-2009 period are major contributors to the housing crisis, as are economic periods of rapid growth that drive some incomes to rapidly rise while others remain flat (Pamuk 2004). Research documents that nearly half of all renters spend more than 30% of their income on housing with 25% paying more than 50% of their income on rent each month. For people living below the poverty line, one in four residents spend upwards of 70% of their income on housing costs (Pew Charitable Trust 2018). As an increased share of income goes to pay for housing, other necessities such as food, medications, transportation, and school supplies are no longer afforded, leaving residents both housing insecure and exposed to other health risks (McConnell 2012; Newman and Holupka 2014).

Threats of eviction and experiences of involuntary displacement from one's home are significant, disruptive events that are only beginning to be understood as impacting health and furthering inequality (Burgard, Seefeldt, and Zelner 2012; Currie and Tekin 2011). People exposed to threats of eviction report mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and distress as well as physical health impacts such as high blood pressure and increased interpersonal violence (Vásquez-Vera et al. 2017). Being evicted has been shown to be a "traumatic event," affecting the capacity to care for oneself and one's family and can lead to unhealthy behaviors that further harm health and wellbeing (Vásquez-Vera et al. 2017). Finally, housing precarity and displacement create stigma, embarrassment, financial and emotional stress, and a sense of isolation (Merrefield 2020; Garboden and Rosen 2019; Zewde et al. 2019).

In addition, an erosion of what social scientists refer to as community or neighborhood-based stabilities resulting from gentrification affects people's sense of belonging to place, to one another, and to residential resources such as schools (Desmond and Kimbro 2015; Sampson

[1] This paper is based on two unpublished reports of findings written by Professor Laura Mamo and SF State MPH Students enrolled in Public Health Perspectives in 2016 and 2018 (Mamo et al. 2016, 2018).

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2012; Oishi 2010). This erosion of community-based stabilities mirrors what renowned urban policy and health scholar, Mindy Fullilove, describes as the "mazeway," the shared collective history of a place and our sense of place within it. The erosion of the mazeway is marked by the rupture of that collective place (Fullilove 2001, 2016). Residents who remain in a neighborhood as it undergoes gentrification– experience a shared sense of exclusion that permeates as different cultural, institutional, and political resources shape neighborhood contours (Hyra 2008; Tach and Emory 2017). Fullilove refers to this feeling of exclusion as *root shock,* the experience that takes hold as people are uprooted psychologically, socially, and physically from their ecosystems. Root shock manifests in individuals as increased anxiety, destabilized relationships, altered or destroyed social and emotional resources, and increased risk for a multitude of stress-related illnesses like depression or heart disease (Fullilove 2016). As neighborhoods shifts from lower-income to higher income, these "legacy" residents may also experience disrupted social networks and increase anxiety, policing, and cost of living in ways that impact residents to move or spend less on nutritious food and medicine (Ellen and Captanian 2020).

Indeed, research has established that housing insecurity and eviction, as well as its impacts to health and well-being, are distributed unevenly with the most severe affects for those already struggling to get by economically or living in precarity (Desmond 2018). This further compounds already present social inequities, especially those along the intersectional dimensions of race, gender, ability, age and poverty (Takagi 2019). For example, while much of the country saw a period of brief flattening of evictions following the sub-prime mortgage lending crisis in the U.S., the San Francisco Bay Area's housing crisis deepened, especially for lower and middle-income, older, Black and Latinx and people with disabilities (San Francisco Anti-Displacement Coalition 2016). Following the 2007 – 2009 economic downturn, the tech and biotech industries experienced boom times and venture capital flowed to support their growth. This spurred real estate speculation and investment as higher-income people began buying and renting properties, creating conditions for higher profit margins in all forms of housing. With slow development of new, affordable housing an eviction crisis and housing insecurity looms over much of the Bay Area tenants (Dougherty 2020; Pardes 2020; Buhayar and Cannon 2019).

The housing crisis has worsened with the COVID-19 pandemic and economic declines. The loss of businesses and jobs disproportionally impact lower income residents and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, further escalating housing insecurity and inequity. While the U.S. legislature passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act in March 27, 2020 and many local initiatives placed "eviction moratoriums" in place to protect residents, those efforts often included loop holes and many have now expired. The federal eviction moratorium is set to expire on December 31, 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Department of Health and Human Services September 4, 2020). The pandemic boost in federal unemployment benefits expired on July 31, 2020. Housing advocates began to sound alarms that those living with the most precarity – low income communities of color, disabled, and elderly residents may be on the brink of facing widespread evictions (Buhayar and Cannon 2019). Given the pandemic related economic impact, hundreds of thousands of renters are at increased risk of displacement (Jones and Grigsby-Toussaint 2020; Roberts 2020). To make matters worse, the intensification of what is known as the fire season in California continues to displace people from their homes. The Bay Area lies at the nexus of these emergencies, representing an important place to draw lessons from prior housing crises.

Through analysis of previously collected, open-source narratives of eviction, this paper contributes to this growing literature on the effects of eviction on health. We argue that eviction is a public health crisis. Threats of eviction and loss of one's home are traumatic events. For those able to stay in place, many experience a dis-connection to place and others. Following a methods section, we present an analytic model of the relationships among housing displacement and health. Three overlapping social processes shape health: (1) *Root Shock and Neighborhood Change* illustrates experiences of eroded social-ties and a loss of connection to place. (2) *Eviction Events* include threats and loss that together produce physical and emotional manifestations of stress – fear and worry, frustration and anger, and loneliness and disconnection. (3) *Activism for Housing Justice*, shows how many built on or became experts in housing rights and participants in community activities. The analytic model of the interaction between housing and health shows the toll of gentrification, housing precarity, and eviction on people's lives in the Bay Area (Wolin and Perkins 2018). At the same time, it captures the ways that Anti-Eviction Mapping Project's (AEMP) oral histories and members of the collective are able to co-shape and amplify the expertise of those sharing their stories. Specifically, how housing advocacy and activism found ways to press-back against the forces of eviction through "counter narratives" of displacement. These experiences serve as lessons for the coming decade as COVID-19 and its after-shocks may produce another eviction crisis across the Bay Area. We offer recommendations to mitigate evictions and its health effects.

METHODS: Community Engaged Scholarship as Activism

This paper begins with a unique partnership between San Francisco State University's public health graduate students and AEMP's Narratives of Displacement project. AEMP was founded in the San Francisco Bay Area in 2013 at the height of an eviction crisis in the city. AEMP was established to document the seemingly unique contours of the Bay Area –the rapid growth of tech companies and venture capital funding, the prolonged period of real estate speculation and housing price increases, and the governmental policies that supported both housing ownership as well as policies that support tech, development, and gentrification across our neighborhoods.[3] AEMP began in partnership with the San Francisco Tenants Union, a non-profit tenant rights organization, and then through a collective membership structure of volunteers collected and aggregated eviction data to create data visualization, data analysis, and digital storytelling. The unique aim was designed to resist dislocation through evidence-based activism, with an important component: The Narratives of Displacement Project[4] designed to collect narratives as an intentional approach to build community power through a participatory oral history format that combines with community organizing to empower and activate project participants to collectively fight for their homes (Maharawal and McElroy 2018; McElroy 2018).

Through conversation, AEMP Erin McElroy and SF State Professor Laura Mamo designed a partnership utilizing a reciprocal approach where Dr. Mamo's masters-level class learned qualitative methods of research and AEMP furthered their goals of reaching Bay Area youth and developing evidence-based activism through oral histories. As the class entered "the field" of housing and health, we began by writing reflective memos of our own situatedness to

[3] http://www.antievictionmap.com/

[4] See the Narratives of Displacement Oral History Project http://www.antievictionmap.com/about-the-narratives-of-displacement/

the Bay Area housing crisis and relationship to experiences of housing precarity and health. We invited partners from AEMP and the Narratives of Displacement Oral History Project to our class sessions to introduce the mission and their work and to co-share in goal setting. Students explored the AEMP website, read papers written from AEMP members, listened to the many open-source narratives on AEMP's website, and joined community AEMP activities as much as possible. We found that we shared AEMP's theoretical grounding in critical race and feminist studies, as well as a goal of decolonizing knowledge – shifting expertise to those often marginalized (Spivak 2003; Stoler 2002; Woods 2002; Simpson 2014; Kurgan 2013; Chambers et al. 2004; Reyes Cruz 2008; Graham et al. 2011). As students read, discussed, and learned critical public health approaches grounded in the social determinants of health, we engaged in learning the traditions and tensions of qualitative research theory and methods (Luker 2009; Marmot and Allen 2014). Students interrogated their own expertise as interpreters of social life as well as their own positions in structural power and authority. We understood oral history as a form of "shared authority," a dialogue "from very different vantages about the shape, meaning and implications of history" (Frisch 1990, xxi-xxii).

Following AEMP, we did not "extract" stories and convert them into ahistorical and unidimensional narratives about victimhood and loss; we resisted reducing tenants' lives to the events of their eviction alone without placing these in an ecological and social context. This approach did not merely bear witness to stories of suffering; but paid close attention to the ways oral history and their many interactions (e.g., among interviewer-interviewee, among listeners, and among student interpreters) are entangled with stories of resistance and contradiction, and put into relation with one another. Our course approach was to see ourselves as entering this interaction, situated in and shaped by power relations, and in interpreting these stories cognizant of our own role in shaping their meaning. Like AEMP, our class sought to counter conventional approaches of academic methods that stand outside of social life and interpret the lives they observe as data. Instead, we read and listened to these stories as "counter" projects designed to co-create collective analyses while also building our own resistance to the housing crisis (Kerr 2008). The analytic authority, then, would be shared with the story-tellers and focus not on the "event" of eviction alone, but on the holistic stories of their lives.

AEMP selected previously collected interviews from their open-source collection of Narratives of Displacement to reflect the experience of eviction in the Bay Area. These interviews would be transcribed and analyzed specifically for relationships between eviction and health.[5] Research steps began as students listened and carefully transcribed the narratives – an act of reciprocity to AEMP who had not had the funds to move these recorded narratives into transcribed documents. Then, over two years, in Fall 2016 and Fall 2018, Master of Public Health (MPH) students focused course learnings on literature review, analyzing documents, and learning the skills of interviewing and observing on the theme of housing and health, in partnership with members of AEMP. In Fall 2018, three former MPH students had become collective members of AEMP and returned to class to co-lead our partnership (Adrienne Hall, Maureen Rees, and Maria Acosta, MPH 2018)[6]. MPH students read, transcribed, and applied critical grounded theory procedures of open coding, axial coding and theme development. As

[5] The audio narratives selected for transcription and analysis were selected from the Bay Area. Interviews are open-sourced on the AEMP website. Respondents provided media-release to AEMP.
[6] Hall, Rees and Acosta were also working as co-editors of "Counterpoints: A San Francisco Bay Area Atlas of Displacement & Resistance." (Anti-Eviction Mapping Project 2021)

students analyzed transcripts in teams, they engaged in constant comparison and discussion with each narrative and then across all 16 oral history narratives. Through discussion, students worked through agreements and disagreements about what was going on in the narratives and how to understand these stories. Along the way, we explored literatures at the intersections of housing, place based health, race, class, and gender and sexuality and political- economies with individual, family, and community health. We understood our work as part of the engaged practice of political organizing and social movement building, supporting the goals of the AEMP to (1) create a record of the eviction epidemic through stories of communities under threat of displacement and cultural erasure; (2) to generate data useful to activists and tenants; and (3) to build solidarity and collectivity to combat the alienation that eviction produces (Maharawal and McElroy 2018).

FINDINGS: Narratives of Housing, Narratives of Health

> *"Secure housing sets everything up. If you don't have secure housing, you can't function at work, your relationships are going to suffer, your mental health is going to suffer, your physical health is going to suffer, it's so much of being a productive member in our society." – Narratives of Displacement*

Sixteen narratives of displacement from the San Francisco Bay Area archive shaped a model of the relationships among housing precarity and health (see Figure 1). At the heart of the model are the three social processes that we found to be most significant as drivers of health and well-being: Root shock, eviction events, and activism for housing justice.

Figure 1: Model of Housing and Health

Root Shock and Neighborhood Change: Disconnection to Place and Others

Narratives revealed a profound disconnection to place that occur with neighborhood change. While varied, the feelings of disconnection to place shared conditions of a neighborhood where housing changes hands and residents' come and go for reasons that may be unknown. While varied in scale and scope, narratives shared stories of weakened ties to place, to others, and to community. This, in turn, produced feelings of loss and isolation: the experience of root shock and an erosion of the mazeway -- the rupture of the shared sense of place and our place

within it, described by Mindy Fullilove (Fullilove 2016) and echoed by other social scientists documenting the erosion of community-stabilities (Desmond and Kimbro 2015; Oishi 2010; Sampson 2019, 2012). We found that as neighborhoods gradually became homes to higher-income residents with businesses and services addressing their likes and wants, this shaped eviction threats as well as residents' health and well-being.

In longtime San Francisco resident Arthur's[7] memory of neighborhood, it was a connection to both place and to others within it that produced what he called community, and served as a means to describe the loss of community he experienced.

> "For me, it was the place where I shot my first basketball at the local gym, the first place I read a book at the local library. It was a community where kids were playing in the street and there were families and you had homeless people on Cortland Ave. and you had some people who drank a lot, but it was the *community* - it was people who knew each other and would help each other out."

What captured our analysis was not how he looked back in time to his childhood with fondness, but the ways he makes sense of what is valuable in place. As Arthur said, "people knew each other and would help each other out." He continued, "If we had a tree. We didn't just enjoy the tree, the people down the street enjoyed the tree. The people who walked past the tree in the morning enjoyed the tree... I mean I don't know what dollar values an accountant would put on that but it makes a difference." This narrative of the value and contours of community was what students began to interpret as an erosion of the mazeway and the production of root shock.

Cisco, also a long-time San Francisco resident, shared Arthur's feeling. A self-described activist and artist, Cisco was born in San Francisco and is active in housing rights. He described the city around him as feeling empty. It is "like a façade that looks good on the outside," he said, but one that is vacant on the inside. When he walks down the street glancing into the businesses, he said, "... what I see now in the City is very disturbing. I feel like this is just becoming a graveyard,…" For qualitative research, the graveyard metaphor captured the experience shared across the sixteen narratives. Cisco described what it is like to be at once among a thriving and growing area with new businesses, yet also to be in a state of isolation and feel alone.

Many students understood that feeling of dislocation expressed in the narratives: of not belonging to place. The people you knew and the places that once were there are gone; you no longer recognize, nor feel connected to place. These produce a sense of being out-of-place, of not belonging. Cisco continued, "it has become a tech hub." San Francisco was years into a technology industry boom with start-ups and Silicon Valley technology companies exploding in size and employees and the city steeped in controversy over their outsized role in the housing crisis and other inequities in the city. The technology boom had not only brought tech workers, mostly highly educated young white men to many neighborhoods changing the contours of the city, but also brought change to neighborhoods once home to working class, Latinx, African American or immigrants. Despite the many ways the city was bursting at its seams, Cisco's narrative and use of the graveyard metaphor invoked the powerful loss experienced by many of the story-tellers.

[7] Pseudonyms are used for all narratives.

Diego spoke of his connection to the Mission district, once known as a working class, Latinx neighborhood and a place well-known as fast gentrifying. Diego had lived in his apartment for close to 20 years. He spoke of multiple threats of eviction from his landlord over this period, but especially in the 2010s. The neighborhood, he described, had changed from a predominantly residential one to an area full of bars, retail and restaurants that, in his perspective, arrived to serve the taste of the neighbors moving into the area. For Diego, the shops, restaurants and bars do not create community, but bring outsiders in for the night or serve the new, high-income and mostly white residents of the neighborhood. Much have been replaced, the front stoop and steps that local tenants once sat and connected with one another.

We found that root shock can be experienced within a gentrifying neighborhood or result from the move to a new place following loss of one's home. That feeling of a graveyard, for example, was recounted by Penelope. Penelope moved to the Bay Area in the late 1980s and found a home in the Mission district. She was evicted almost twenty years later following the dot-com bubble. Her building was sold to new owners who displaced the tenants forcing Penelope, in her mid-50s to move outside of the city, across the Bay, for affordability. This move took her away from friends, community, and places she called home. When describing her new experience with place, she said: " I don't walk around here and be like, Oh, you know, I want to get to know a person, I want to go to that place. And the stores are all kind of like strip mall things." Penelope's interview captured the isolation brought on by involuntary displacement in general, and the particular ways an eviction often pushes people far from a long-time home to an unknown area far away and often out of the city.

Residents like Arthur, Cisco, Diego and Penelope understand that their experiences are part of broader social and economic structures that have affected generations of people displaced. When Diego continued to share his story it was clear that he understood his experience of being evicted in the context of larger historical and social-structural forces. He described how the economic structure has led to eviction, run-down businesses, and mass incarceration of those residing in these neighborhoods. He points to the ways rent control, to him, is necessary to prevent greed and real estate from removing communities and changing lives.

> "People had been there for three or four generations. Then when these dot-com boom firms moved in they sort of moved out the Filipinos, moved in these companies that four years when the economics changed [um] the companies all went, you know, bust. And this whole neighborhood was turned into this ghost town of empty business buildings. And it sort of like had a caustic impact, on the city .... So one of the purposes of rent control is to sort of preserve intact communities by inhibiting real estate speculators and greedy landlords from just sort of running."

The experiences of eviction from the Mission district of San Francisco, a historically Latinx and immigrant community, as well as the Filipino area of the South of Market described by these long-term San Francisco residents displaced by eviction, highlights what researchers have shown to be the uneven effects of economic booms and busts on immigrant and other communities of color in ways that reinforce inequities (Pamuk 2004).

Victor was in his mid-30s and living in the Western Addition neighborhood, a historically African American area of San Francisco. He too was aware of these changes, noting their impact especially on Black and other communities of color across San Francisco:

> "...the Mission lost about ten thousand of its residents. I know of not a whole lot of people that grew up here that still live here. …that's a unique one. When it comes down

> to the Black population in San Francisco, the situation is much worse, as we know that the average, the median income for Black families is about twenty five thousand dollars, whereas, you know, for a white family, is about a hundred and ten thousand dollars and with the rent the way that it is, you know, the black population just continues to be decimated. … that is especially sad, you know, in the historically Black neighborhoods, like Western Addition, like the Fillmore."

These narratives of root shock, we argue, counter long-held ideas that eviction is a sudden and random loss. Instead, it often follows patterns of inequality. Narratives reflect deep understanding of the ways capital and power flow in American cities. Cisco, Arthur, Victor and Penelope are experts; able to reflect on and give meaning to displacement. This includes the feelings of isolation as well as despair and anger that form in the process of losing one's home and place.

Eviction Events: Living under Pressure and with Uncertainty

When narratives turned to the specific "events" of eviction – the formal and informal processes of displacement, stories emphasized lives punctuated by "threats" that, in turn, produced fear, worry, and profound stress. It was often the tactics or strategies used to achieve the end of getting someone to leave a home that led to these feelings. Eviction tactics described in narratives include deception and manipulation as well as overt threats and harassment, and in some cases physical violence. These were often gradual yet constant forces that led people to feel under siege and produced a sense of powerlessness in the face of these threats of eviction. Diego, for example, described how landlords take advantage of tenants who are not well versed in tenant law, or who may not speak English well:

> "…half the people in the building were Latinos. They didn't have the greatest understanding of English, they didn't have, know what their [tenant] rights were. And so he [the landlord] would sort of systematically pick on them. I don't think he had anything against Latinos per se, but he realized that they were more easily victimized than people who knew how to work the system, who had lived here their whole life. So, he eventually got them all out except my wife."

Diego described that he too was manipulated by his landlord and made to feel "lucky" to stay in place. He was "telling me I'm too old to live here and I should feel guilty because my rent is subsidized." In this case, the tactic of producing a sense of luck and feeling of guilt was used to justify the landlord's refusal to fix and upgrade aspects of the property. The strategy fostered a false belief that tenants, especially those with rent control or some form of subsidy, are not entitled to upkeep of their homes.

Penelope described similar tactics of manipulation where landlords created false beliefs of tenant's lack of legal rights. When the new owner threatened Ellis Act evictions, Penelope described a stressful period that took hold as neighbors were pitted against one another to either leave and accept a buyout or stay and fight back. "It got kind of ugly," she said. The property management company threatened and misled tenants with legal actions causing fear and confusion for the residents. They tried to disrupt tenants' efforts to organize and fight the eviction by claiming they had no right to do so. Similarly, for Roxanna, evictions followed a series of confusing attempts to get tenants to leave homes. The manipulation began with one tenant's eviction, and then to the removal of all tenants and the rent control of the building:

> "... the newest tactic which had been to report us as an illegal in-law unit with the Department of Building Inspection, and they got a permit to remove our kitchen from the hopes that would get rid of us and once we're gone, the remaining tenant who lives upstairs would not be protected by the rent control because she will be the sole tenant and then they will be able to just raise her rent and kick her out as well."

Tactics that include intimidation and harassment can escalate into a violation of one's privacy at best, and violence at worst. As Victor illustrates in his narrative, some of the rules put into place are offensive, seemingly designed to get people to leave. Victor describes how the tactics, like the oft-cited example of not providing 24-hour notice of entry, made him feel:

> "…We're treated as animals; We're treated as second-class citizens by this corporation. We're treated as a non-entity. In fact they just would very much like to see us completely evaporate so they can bulldoze all the buildings down and rebuild."

For Diego, management entered his unit without the legally required advanced permission. When they arrived, they made claims that problems existed in his unit that required this unexpected and what he saw as an unwarranted entrance. He was told that some of his bookshelves in the hallway presented an alleged fire hazard. For Diego, this was a manipulation: Finding a problem as a tactic to support claims for formal eviction. What is most alarming is that for Diego, after being harassed by the management, the situation escalated to violence before resulting in his removal from the property and his home:

> "…And he cuts my hand somehow, and so, then, he pushes me back to where, from here, back to you know, back beyond my bathroom. And he starts saying 'what's in your bedroom? I want, I'm gonna see your bedroom.' And I say, 'you're not seeing my bedroom.' And he says 'what are you hiding in your bedroom?' Well, I am not hiding anything, I don't want a violent man in my bedroom. But he begins shoving me in the chest like this (thumping noise), you know, and I'm just, really upset."

These ongoing threats existed alongside the uncertainty of potential home loss and questions of where to go if forced to leave. Together, they resulted in ongoing stress and worry for people whose homes had become sources of discomfort. While many were determined to fight to stay in their homes, knowing how to do so and locating the necessary resources and supports created the first challenge of fighting the eviction. Colin was determined to fight the eviction, but lacked the knowledge to successfully do so. The realization that he needed to quickly educate himself and find the resources that would help him win the eviction case was incredibly stressful. Patricia describes the vicious nature of the fight to stay in your home:

> "I'm hanging, trying to hang onto this place-- my dream in San Francisco--but my fingers are bleeding instead of like, me just picking the, the fruits and doing the labor to fight for it. It's becoming more of like, I'm losing myself into the fight, I'm like bleeding into it, to the point where I'm like, 'God Patricia, do I really want to do this?'... I'm in the, like in the point where I can't return to what would be my normal life anymore."

For Patricia the eviction events made her feel as an outsider, disconnected from place, friends and community. The pressure to act quickly intensified her isolation as she faced her eventual move and leaving the place she knew so well. Patricia felt alone, without people to turn to for support. "Who should I call about this because it's so stressful and then it's so hard to talk to anyone about it because there's not that, you know, someone experiencing it would only be able to really understand." We found that stress does not diminish following an eviction, as it did not for Patricia. As Evelyn confirmed, "Looking for a place to live was traumatic…dealing

with boxes of belongings, the responsibility of finding a new home, all while managing daily responsibilities…" The need to find a new place to live, to pack and unpack, and especially to take on the costs of doing so in an unanticipated time and timeframe was consistently described as stressful and traumatic.

Further, as sociologist Matthew Desmond's research documents, displacement often leads to forced relocation to neighborhoods that lack resources and are poorer than the one people lived prior to eviction (Desmond and Kimbro 2015). In some cases this results in settling for a home that does not fit one's or one's children's needs in terms of schools, health care, jobs and other resources. For others it may lead to forced homelessness. Two narratives, Davis and Colin, reflected the ways eviction drives further inequity and impacts health status. For Davis, he moved from a multi-room apartment to a single room occupancy (SRO) hotel. In a SRO, he said, "you're dealing with all the crap that happens. Constant fighting, the rapes, beating up of girlfriends, all kinds of stuff. It's roaches and rats everywhere." The trauma of place cannot be understated for Davis. What he endures is now constant exposures to harm of others and potentially to himself. Colin, who faced multiple health obstacles following eviction described the stress that he felt while living on the streets as a result of his eviction:

> "I was fighting to get back on [HIV] meds. I was going through bureaucratic nightmares to get onto my meds and my T cells were dropping and I was getting really sick and my feet were so bad I had cellulitis that they were talking about amputating. I just got the medication just because I have to go back and show this and I didn't know what I was going to do all it was just amplify and magnify and catastrophe probably a bad situation and so all it did was increase my stress level because my body wasn't fine enough and I didn't know what to do."

Davis and Colin also shared their pain over the loss of material possessions as a connection to their former lives and pre-eviction identities. In both narratives there was "no choice" but to lose one's possession. "That was really painful," Colin stated. He described that he has been asking the court for 2 years where his things are:

> "… my wedding ring, my family photos, my mother's recipes, not just my clothes and my underwear my medication things that are...my grandmother's silver set I would like to know where these are."

Additionally, Colin's loss of possessions may be contributing to his employment instability:

> "I am not sure but all my manuals, all my tools to do that kind of work are gone. They took any ability for me to go back and even try to like make a living."

Evelyn also captured the ways eviction tactics and the eviction itself ultimately led to psychosocial loss and isolation: a separation from others, from place, and from community. She described losing her neighbors who while not kin or close-friends, "provide some little network and safety net." Once she moved to a new place, Evelyn was dis-heartened and unable to find self-motivation to invest in a new place:

> "I've been talking with friends, they've said well you know you can plant trees in your new neighborhood and you can volunteer at your new local school and I just think oh god. I did all that investing only to be evicted why would I want to put my heart into a neighborhood again? But you know you have to I guess get passed that or just climb under a rock."

Evelyn described the impact of a physical move away from the city that was not her choice. It's a "psychological" separation from place, from one's roots, and from community, she said:

> "I got used to it [living in the Mission] and I kind of didn't think 'oh I live in this place that's got a cultural mix and a real Mexican identity' because that's my heritage … I had this constant connection. And I'm missing that…. [I am also] disconnected from a queer perspective. I was just in the city the other day and there's like this little rush of 'oh it's Pride month' and stuff is happening and I feel so disconnected from that just physical distance…"

Activism for Housing Justice: Finding Solidarity and Support

An important aim of AEMP was to build solidarity among project participants who could help one another fight evictions and collectively combat the alienation that eviction produces. Our findings confirm that the narratives of displacement were instrumental in providing social connections among people experiencing eviction. While community engagement – especially in the form of social justice activism--was more prominent for some than it was for others, all of the narratives described interactions that helped them traverse the eviction events. Further, some were explicit "counter-narratives" reflective of activities to challenge power and what was becoming almost an ordinary event of evicting residents in the Bay Area housing crisis.

Narratives were punctuated by processes of finding solidarity; what Victor called "like-minded" people. Victor discussed how the community first started organizing and gaining clout:

> "… as soon as we started having regular tenant meetings, we were able to identify uh key positions, key tenants, and where folks have said you know they were basically of a like-minded nature. They said: we are not moving, what's happening to us is really atrocious, and we're here to fight with you. You know let's, let's work together. Let's pull together, you know together we stand, you know divided we fall."

For Victor, similar to others, standing together was a place of strength; to be in solidarity with like-mindedness allowed people to fight back, even if fighting came by necessity not by choice. Victor called it "a matter of survival" that turned into a social movement. He described the news coverage that came with the protests and organizing he and others were doing for housing justice. "I think at that point we basically saw that you know this is a movement and when you know folks just started recognizing us we said okay, you know like, we getting some traction." In standing together to fight evictions, Victor spoke to how their organizing resulted in some small successes, even though their full list of demands have still not been met:

> "Well, as far as the tenant harassment I think it's gotten, it's gotten better because they're afraid of us. They definitely know that from any transgressions, from any transgressions that they undertake, you know, the response from the tenant and the tenant from the community is gonna be very swift. But, you know, we had to, we had to be under the yolk for a long time, you know. For about a year a year and a half…before we actually could sit down in a room together and start, you know, start talking about things."

Roxanna and Wanda became experts in tenant rights and joined a world of community-organizing. As Roxanna said, "I learned more about tenant law than I ever wanted to know and I think that if I were ever faced with something like this again I'll be much better suited to deal with it having gone through it." Now, "I'm talking to the Chronicle, talking to [AEMP] and just let people know that I mean this is happening everywhere and you have rights and don't roll over

it anytime unless you have to cause that is what they want and if you do so that is just pave a way for them to do that to somebody else." Wanda, shared this experience of taking social action. She described speaking before the Fremont City Council regarding unfair rent hikes and eviction. Standing up for what is right and just has always been a pillar of who Wanda is. The housing crisis – and all the turmoil that comes with it – compelled her and others into action.

> "Fairness has always been a part of me from little and I laugh because I'm a Libra, and I'm like 'How much of that is actually of fairness, of justice.' So it kills me when I see such a lack of justice for people on any front. And [housing insecurity] is a huge one and it's now personally affecting me. And you know, my awareness of it, it has definitely heightened but I don't want to stop with myself. You know- see, a lot of people stop themselves when their crisis is done. What can I do to help myself and help other people? I'm willing to. Other people are not willing, or [are] unable to step in."

Wanda explained that regardless of the outcome with City Council, she is determined to continue to fight against unfair rent hikes and evictions: "I will fight it, you know, until there was a decision, even if it wasn't in my favor." She continues: "It's funny because I feel like I have been called to action for other things but I just never - I always have been so, you know, apprehensive for different reasons, you know, but this one – housing – is serious."

Two narratives spoke to a capacity to heal from root shock. Penelope discusses doing lots of research collectively and advocating for various tenant needs, and how this resulted in strong relationships, long-lasting friendships, and a sense of community. She said,

> "And we were like okay let's see will try to find will do research if he got a buyout if he got money where he could put it that wouldn't affect his SSI so we started advocating for him....And I ended up getting to be really close with my neighbors [names omitted]. We were like such a team and we took control of, at some point; even I, like, took control … of the meetings, of like saying what could be said and what could not be said at the meetings, at our actions. What were we going to do? We had to do it together."

Colin's healing process was shaped in volunteering and his long-term social activist roots. His narrative described community engagement as a permanent and important part of his life. As he told this story he added the caveat that his consistent community activism took place despite a transient living situation being homeless himself after an eviction. He spent time telling of why solidarity and connection with others around housing, homelessness, and rights is so important to his own life and community-engagement: He said,

> "Having been there helps me become compassionate toward serving the people who are there in any way I can... talk to people... Get to know... Because whether or not it is speaking for a population that doesn't have representation... talk to them and get to know people... I was outdoors with other homeless people... they were a good place I go to breakfast, showers twice a week check in with regulars who volunteer there... there is a sense of community... At St. Anthony's [a SF based non-profit that serves homeless people] there was just was a group of us who kind of found each other and we were homeless all at the same time..."

Colin's community engagement included a personal commitment to volunteering to care for others, many who are now experiencing homelessness or are living in poverty with HIV:

> "I pick up needles and I keep people safe and I volunteer to get people safe syringes, water, cookers...sometimes we give snacks out we have regular people who say thank you and they know us... I also volunteer with through positive force which is another

group I also support and volunteer with the 50 plus group... throughout San Francisco [to] rebuild the community..."

We found that as residents were threatened with eviction they not only reached out to organizations to learn more and along the way gained expertise, but that they shared their expertise in solidarity with others. So, while many felt alone and isolated, activism served as a needed response.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Narratives of displacement documented from the dot-com collapse and the Great Recession serve as lessons for the COVID-19 pandemic and other economic and social crises that are sure to come. Narratives show that many and complex ways housing displacement is a public health crisis affecting people's emotional and physical health. Housing precarity in all its forms can produce a traumatic disconnection from place that result in feelings of loss and isolation. The trauma and consequences of being evicted from community and the supports a community provides has been documented by other social scientists (Desmond and Kimbro 2015; Oishi 2010; Sampson 2019, 2012). These findings reflect an "erosion of the mazeway"—a ruptured sense of shared place and our place within it (Fullilove 2016).

Narratives further show the specific ways eviction tactics contribute to tenant stress, fear and worry. The difficulties that weighed on tenants included lack of choice, uncertainty, pressure to find a place to live, and how to maintain continuity of resources (health, schools, and others). Further, undue pressure, intimidation and, at times, violence placed people in living conditions that were harmful and dangerous. We found that the stress of involuntary displacement, leave little time to prepare or adjust while also forcing hard-choices between basic necessities and housing costs, between staying close to health care or severing ties to needed services, and in the worst cases forcing people to homelessness (McConnell 2012; Newman and Holupka 2014). These narratives complement and deepen the data of eviction showing the ways housing and health are tightly intertwined. Yet, these narratives also show that eviction, for some, can lead to or amplify housing justice activism as a means to find solidarity, build support and effect change.

Research and Policy Implications

Research has shown that housing insecurity and eviction follow already occurring patterns of inequality (Burgard, Seefeldt, and Zelner 2012; Currie and Tekin 2011), creating the greatest burden on those already struggling to get by economically (Desmond 2018) and compounding already present social inequities along the intersectional dimensions of immigration status, race, gender, ability, age and occupation (Takagi 2019). Additional research is needed to better understand the relationships among housing, gentrification, eviction and health. Such research can guide policy agendas to advance health and health equity.

As researchers, policy-makers, and advocates we must seek to reduce housing precarity and displacement to also reduce health inequity, especially for immigrant, lower-income and BIPOC residents in all neighborhoods. We recommend that all policies lead with principles of racial and social equity. When it comes to making policy there needs to be an open acknowledgement of the differential impact on BIPOC communities and those marginalized by

gender, sexuality, and other social statuses (these are intersecting). Further, policies, need to begin with historical knowledge of disinvested neighborhoods and places and resist allowing investors to enter and displace people putting profits above health. Periods of intense economic investment and speculation often follow long periods of disinvestment, as well as economic downturns. Housing cannot follow unregulated capital markets. Policy-makers must be cautious of the rise of "crisis capitalism," wherein capital consolidates in economic declines. Housing policies are needed that recognize the erasure of the indigenous people who originally stewarded the land we live on as well as the displacement of others who came later. We can take our lead from organization like the Sogorea Te' Land Trust[8] that are working to return indigenous land to indigenous people and similarly find ways to ensure places and homes are able to stay in the hands of those who reside there.

We advocate for policy efforts designed to stabilize housing, such as rental assistance and moratoriums in crises to protect against tenant harassment, strict or over-zealous enforcement of housing codes, and other tactics of displacement. In addition to protective efforts, neighborhood level and structural change policies are needed that ensure a large range of housing types and thus diversity of neighborhoods could ensure the mazeway remains intact. We recommend policy makers partner with community organizations that can help ensure that all residents threatened with eviction and/or being priced-out of gentrifying neighborhoods feel part of the community and are able to connect to new opportunities that enhance well-being (see Ellen and Captanian 2020). For example, we follow San Francisco's Tenants Together (Inglis and Preston 2018) and others who suggest policies that (1) Work toward affordability such as expanding rent control, state-wide; regulating real-estate speculators and create tax structures for large-scale property-ownership; investing in affordable housing and universal housing vouchers to provide stability for tenants. We also advocate (2) regulating eviction processes by postponing rent payments during crises, such as COVID-19 in ways that balance small landlord needs (via tax structures); requiring landlords to state a cause for eviction, or require just cause for eviction, this needs to be state-wide; providing a fairer timeline for evictions; creating clear eviction information and steps for those being evicted to follow to stay in their homes; and providing a right to counsel for those being displaced.

Summary

Housing is a social determinant of health, a public health issue, and a human right. Housing and health policies must consider equity, to make visible the ways immigrant and other BIPOC communities and residents are most affected by precarity, harms, and economic shocks, like COVID-19. Structural changes to housing, food, education, jobs, transportation, and health care are all needed to ensure people get the healthy lives they need and deserve. Another housing crisis is upon us with the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic that include loss of businesses and jobs. This further escalates housing insecurity, evictions, and inequity. As people are forced to move, rents and housing costs will be depressed provoking the conditions for investment and speculation to return again. Yet this will not be the last housing crisis nor the only time and place where protections are necessary to ensure that power and profit do not consolidate once again leaving those marginalized to fight to survive and stay in place. The current COVID-19 pandemic and looming economic crisis will likely increase evictions as rents cannot be paid. It will be those most marginalized: low income communities of color, people

[8] https://sogoreate-landtrust.org/shuumi-land-tax/

with disabilities, and the elderly who will be most at-risk of losing their homes. Additionally, those whose work is under- and low paid (e.g., teachers, artists, restaurant and service workers, health care providers, and "gig" workers) will be especially vulnerable to eviction. Policy's mandate is to keep people in their homes, in part because primary prevention of COVID-19 relies on people staying at home. But more so, because stable homes and neighborhoods provide continuity to culture, resources, and care networks, including health care. People need to be able to stay in their homes and communities to ensure overall health and well-being.

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