Bloomberg Philanthropies City Data Alliance

Action Plan for Understanding & Addressing Evictions in Allentown

Implementing, Communicating, Integrating, and Scaling Allentown's Resident Impact Data Project

February 28, 2025

01 Executive Summary

Purpose

This report seeks to summarize the resident impact data project (RIDP) work done by the City of Allentown in partnership with coaches and analysts from the Bloomberg Center for Government Excellence as part of the Bloomberg Philanthropies City Data Alliance from June 2024 - February 2025.

Key findings

Allentown deepened and broadened its knowledge about the impact of eviction on its community through the RIDP. The city sought data and insights from cross-sector subject matter experts already working in eviction mitigation and prevention. Through data cleaning, analysis, mapping, and discussion, the city validated that serial evictors who regularly file evictions against their tenants—such as Park Run Management Co. who filed almost 7% of all eviction filings in the county—exist in the city; that 77% of all eviction cases are won by the landlords; and that eviction cases are mostly occurring in the 18102 zip code in Allentown. In this report, 'serial evictors' refers to landlords or property managers who repeatedly file eviction lawsuits at the same address.

Path forward

The most powerful takeaway for Allentown from the RIDP was the power of cross-sector subject matter expertise and data. To advance the city's work, it is crucial to establish a regular cadence of collaboration with partners to develop a coordinated action plan for preventing and mitigating eviction, allowing each partner to contribute their unique skills and resources for meaningful impact. In tandem with its partners, Allentown is joining a cohort of cities focused on eviction prevention and mitigation which plans to meet and collaborate over a series of months.

02 Introduction

What are resident impact data projects?

The resident impact data project (RIDP) is an intensive demonstration project to test and improve city data infrastructure and problem solving oriented towards resident impact. This project demonstrates the importance of integrating data into the fabric of city governance and policy-making. As part of the Bloomberg Philanthropies City Data Alliance, the RIDP is used as a way for cities to assess needs and opportunities for a citywide data strategy.

With support from program coaches and data analysts, cities complete an analytical project that addresses long-standing challenges and delivers solutions with positive and direct impact on residents' lives. This hands-on experience provides valuable insights and practical feedback, helping to test, refine, enhance, and generalize the development of the citywide data strategy. By identifying a specific challenge, each city can demonstrate the feasibility and benefits of new and improved data practices, provide a realistic roadmap for future efforts, and a test bench to create a more robust strategy. Moreover, the successful execution of these projects illustrates the significant value of data-driven decision-making. By showcasing how data can be leveraged to address and resolve critical urban issues, the program underscores the transformative power of data in improving quality of life for all residents.

Background

Allentown started its RIDP with the desire to work on a high-priority issue for residents. From regional and local reports, the city understood that Lehigh Valley faces an eviction crisis and that transience from evictions negatively impacts many community members and stakeholders. Evictions can also lead to less optimal housing situations such as overcrowding, low-quality housing, or even becoming unhoused.

To direct the right policy or programmatic interventions to address this issue, Allentown wanted to learn what is correlated with or leads to evictions.

Team

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- Gerry Anthony, Director of IT, City of Allentown
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- Talib Shively, Help Desk Analyst, City of Allentown
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- Madison Schettig, Public Safety Analyst, City of Allentown
- Heidi Westerman, Director of Buildings, Standards, and Safety, City of Allentown
- Lori Molloy, Executive Director, North Penn Legal Services
- Samantha Shaak, Executive Director, Leonard Parker Pool Institute of Health
- Judge Mark McCants, Magistrate, Lehigh County

Objectives of the project

- Obtain and analyze eviction data to better understand data quality.
- Review existing housing data and reports to understand what is known about eviction trends.
- Create or deepen connections with organizations working on evictions to lend subject matter expertise to the project.
- Determine the extent to which evictions show geographic distribution patterns and whether some landlords are "serial evictors".
- Learn from and incorporate nonprofit partner expertise into decisions, including the following:
  - **North Penn Legal Services** offers free legal assistance, information, and self-help resources for family law, housing, public benefits, and other civil legal issues in Northeast Pennsylvania.
  - **Leonard Parker Pool Institute for Health** addresses eviction as a public health challenge, bringing expertise in holistic neighborhood development and capacity-building to support housing stability and community well-being.

03 Analysis and Findings

Problem statement

Lehigh Valley is experiencing an eviction crisis, with 18 renters facing eviction every day and the county having the third-highest eviction rate in the state. Allentown, in particular, has some of the highest eviction rates, with the 18102 zip code seeing the most significant concentration of evictions. Additionally, 77% of eviction cases result in rulings favoring landlords, and serial evictors are responsible for filing a disproportionately high number of cases. These patterns highlight a critical need for Allentown to better understand the factors that are correlated with or contribute to evictions.

Data analysis

Our data analysis focused on distilling geographical insights so the data could be mapped. We conducted an analysis of the Lehigh County eviction dataset containing over 38,000 observations related to eviction filings between July 2022 and June 2023. The eviction dataset included case details such as defendant (renter) and plaintiff (landlord) information, financial judgments, and case dispositions. Geographic values for the defendants (renters) and plaintiffs (landlords) include city, state, and zip code. An additional variable used to support geographic analysis was the magistrate judge, as a proxy that aligns with magisterial districts. Additionally, we used the voting precinct map layer from Lehigh County's ArcGIS repository to aggregate the precincts and obtain the exact boundaries for the magisterial districts based on the 2024 election.

Prior to the analysis, we cleaned and deduplicated the data to focus on individual cases, removing variables containing personally identifiable information (PII) to protect privacy. Due to spelling and format differences in landlord business names, we completed significant data cleaning and used statistical and AI tools to identify likely matches in this data field.

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Summary of findings

Eviction prevalence: During this period, 7,136 unique case defendants[1] were involved in 5,328 eviction cases in Allentown. Nearly half (48%) of evictions were concentrated in zip code 18102.

Case outcomes: 77% of cases resulted in rulings favoring landlords, while only 0.77% favored tenants.

Financial impact: The average rent for all the eviction filings was $1,216.58, with a median of $1,180. The average claim amount by landlords was $2,299.51, with some claims exceeding $11,000. 75% of all eviction filings were for rental properties with rents less than $1,400.

Eviction filers: There were 1,343 unique plaintiffs (landlords) identified. The most frequently occurring landlord was Park Run Management, with 359 filings (6.7% of all eviction filings).

Judicial oversight: Six judges handled over 93% of eviction filings, with Judge David M. Howells Jr. presiding over 21.4% of cases.

Limitations and challenges

The eviction dataset is limited to data collected through the eviction filing, hearing, and enforcement process between 2022-2023. Therefore, the analysis does not show trends for evictions prior to or following this time period.

Several fields that could be valuable in the analysis are not present—including the property address at which the eviction took place. As a proxy, we used 'defendant zip code' to identify where evictions occurred in Allentown. Defendants with out-of-state zip codes were excluded from the analysis.

The analysis of "serial evictors" counted the number of filings per unique plaintiff but did not connect these plaintiffs with geographic information to link serial evictions to specific properties.

Without a unique identifier for defendants or plaintiffs, the analysis relied on names to determine unique values. The analysis of eviction frequency to identify "serial evictors" did not include data on the reasons for filing an eviction case or the

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[1] We considered each defendant and case as a "unique case defendant". It could be the case that the same name appears in multiple cases, however each appearance is considered a unique defendant.

landlord's rental practices. The analysis of serial evictors also does not distinguish landlords who use eviction in bad faith as a singular tool to create a churn of tenants and benefit their business. Based on the limited time available for the project, this analysis does not account for factors that may increase the likelihood that a single landlord pursues more evictions, such as owning or managing more units relative to other landlords.

Opportunities for further analysis and evaluation

Allentown can further explore eviction patterns, especially on the plaintiff side, through the following analyses:
- Consider investigating ownership of the "serial evictors" list using the local business registry or other county or state databases.
- Use rental registration data to reveal the relationship between evictions and code enforcement violations.
- Conduct further data cleaning and research to identify the addresses of the properties with the most evictions in the city.

Analysis of other factors in the eviction dataset may help differentiate between factors preceding eviction. Tracking these frequent eviction filers and analyzing their rental practices could inform potential regulatory measures.

There may be opportunities to undertake further analysis into the filing outcomes and the data around rent levels and rent owed, with assistance from external partners with subject matter expertise in the eviction process and the meaning behind this data.

04 Anticipated Impact

Achieving the city's goal of preventing and mitigating evictions relies upon first identifying and addressing the root causes of housing instability—including patterns of eviction disproportionately affecting specific populations who should be prioritized for eviction prevention efforts. This project's theory of change centers on reducing eviction rates by equipping renters with resources and legal support while promoting responsible landlord practices. In the long run, Allentown aims to foster a more stable and affordable housing landscape where renters and landlords are well-informed about their rights and responsibilities, ultimately creating sustainable housing solutions and preventing future evictions.

05 Allentown Action Plan

The goal of the resident impact data project is to inform action that will have a meaningful impact on residents. Bloomberg Philanthropies City Data Alliance staff will guide the city team in assessing progress of this action plan at regular impact check-ins following program completion.

Goals

- Improve access to relevant city data, such as code enforcement violations, for key stakeholders involved in the evictions process.
- Improve communication with renters and landlords about their rights and responsibilities.
- Collaborate with partners to identify key problems or gaps in the eviction process and create an action plan to address gaps in information-sharing.
- Gather information from residents and partners about resources, policies, and programs that the city can consider in order to improve the housing rental environment in Allentown.

Next steps

- Join the Impact Tulsa 2025 Student Eviction Prevention Community of Practice and collaborate with key partners, including The Leonard Parker Pool Institute for Health, North Penn Legal Services, and Community Services for Children, to develop coordinated strategies for eviction prevention and mitigation.
- Improve access to code enforcement data for partners to better understand the relationship between code enforcement and evictions.
- Enhance code enforcement data quality through modifications to data collection and reporting, providing city staff and key partners with timely, reliable data to make evidence-based decisions.

Timeline

Q1 2025: Begin regular meeting cadence with partners.

Q3 2025: Identify and implement ways to improve code enforcement data access and quality.

Q4 2025: Create action plan for the city to pursue with regard to eviction mitigation and prevention.

Q1 2026: Implement the action plan.

Responsible parties

Laura Cole, Manager of Civic Innovation at the City of Allentown, will serve as project manager for the city's ongoing work. She will rely on support from other city staff as subject matter experts and will coordinate with department and executive leadership to identify a plan of action for the city.

06 Communication Strategy

Internal communications

Allentown's RIDP is an opportunity to demonstrate to staff how data can inform operations and strategy to achieve the city's goals. The city's project manager will establish an internal committee of subject matter experts who are actively engaged in this project to deepen their knowledge of eviction trends in the city. For communication about this project to the broader range of staff, the city will leverage the expertise of their data governance committee and nascent community of practice to identify the best channels and storytelling methods. Through this project, the city has created a workable cross-sector model of collaboration that can be applied across other strategic priorities.

External communications

Allentown held a press release to announce the launch of its citywide data strategy and the progress made on the RIDP. The city also created an external-facing webpage that provides an overview of the City Data Alliance program, outlines the data-driven initiatives included in the CWDS strategy, and presents the findings of eviction analysis conducted for the RIDP. Moving forward, the city will continue to leverage a cross-sector model of collaboration with external stakeholders.

07 Recommendations

To successfully build on the foundation that has been laid with its RIDP project, Allentown should pursue the following actions and resources:

- Seek additional qualitative information from landlords and renters via interviews or focus groups and/or information gathered by external partners to gain a deeper understanding of the practical realities and challenges faced during evictions.
- Develop specific communications related to the project about rental housing rights and responsibilities and share with residents through established channels, both digitally and in physical form.
- Work with external partners to obtain more regular access to eviction data sources and to suggest opportunities to enhance or improve upon this data with additional fields like property address of the eviction.
- Overlay evictions data with city data sources to understand the correlation between city programs like rental licensing and code enforcement and eviction outcomes.
- Improve upon internal data sources related to rental housing like rental licensing and code enforcement by integrating or upgrading fields to improve data quality and make data more useful.
- Dedicate time from the project manager and other members of the team to continue the momentum of this project.
- Seek support from IT and external partners for continued data analysis.
- Seek engagement and support from executive leadership to prioritize and resource the action plan.

08 Citywide Data Strategy Integration

Data quality: The RIDP underscored and illustrated data quality issues in code enforcement data while also providing data quality solutions through data cleaning and management. Allentown's CWDS outlines several key commitments, including the development of standardized data quality metrics and protocols; the establishment of consistent validation and quality assurance procedures; the implementation of error detection and resolution protocols; and the creation of measurable data quality benchmarks for each department.

Data governance: This RIDP provides an excellent case study on opportunities in data accessibility and transparency. When we set out to obtain the primary dataset from an organizational partner, we learned that partners regularly face challenges in accessing city code enforcement data. As a result, the CWDS outlines governance commitments including standardized data partnership agreements and protocols; building collaborative platforms; launching joint data projects; and developing metrics to evaluate partnerships effectively.

Data capacity: Allentown's lack of dedicated data capacity has been an ongoing point of concern, both in terms of its ability to implement the next steps and recommendations for this project, as well as to replicate the RIDP approach in other priority areas. The city plans to build capacity and buy-in through implementation of its Data Governance Committee, who will provide expertise and feedback in the further development of the RIDP action plan.

Data use: The RIDP provided an opportunity for city staff to engage with a new topic and collaboratively prioritize data questions. Upon gathering and reviewing data, they discovered the extent to which available data answered their key questions. Subsequently, several far-reaching and thoughtful conversations transpired about the implications of the data insights, both with city staff and external partners—encapsulating the goal of using data to drive action. To adopt a more proactive approach to addressing community needs, improving operational efficiency, and enhancing service delivery, the city has outlined several key commitments to improving data use in its CWDS, including mapping high-priority processes across

departments; identifying opportunities to integrate data into existing workflows; developing a process improvement framework; establishing pilot programs; creating feedback mechanisms; implementing iteration protocols; and building tools to measure progress and impact.

Data transparency: As demonstrated by the aforementioned data access limitations (see "data governance" above), Allentown can support data transparency as the team enters the implementation phase of this project. Via the CWDS, the city has committed to launching a public-facing performance dashboard; developing a data-driven community engagement strategy; building robust reporting frameworks; creating tools to track progress; establishing a regular public reporting schedule; and implementing a system for gathering and incorporating community feedback.

09 Acknowledgements

The Allentown team would like to express its sincere appreciation to The Leonard Parker Pool Institute for Health, North Penn Legal Services, and Community Services for Children for their partnership in eviction mitigation efforts and data-driven community engagement.

10 Appendices

Allentown RIDP Technical Report
Allentown and Lehigh County Evictions by Magisterial District Map
Voting Precincts in Lehigh County
RIDP Exploratory Analysis Slides (12/02/2024)
Allentown RIDP - Questions
Allentown Citywide Data Strategy