

RURAL POVERTY AND SOCIAL STIGMA:
HOUSING INSECURITY IN AMERICA'S DAIRYLAND

by

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ABSTRACT

To explain the stigma around housing insecurity, scholars often rely on urban samples and focus on the hypervisibility of people sleeping in public spaces, on park benches, and on public transportation in cities. Unlike in urban contexts, people experiencing housing insecurity in rural places are often unseen: they are doubling up with friends and family, living in vehicles or abandoned buildings, and camping in state parks. As such, rural housing instability is often referred to as “hidden.” This hiddenness makes theories built on hypervisibility and urban samples partial and unable to account for the stigma around homelessness and housing insecurity in rural contexts. Based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork and 37 in-depth interviews in five rural counties in Wisconsin, this paper finds that the stigmatization of housing insecurity in rural areas hinges on its *social hypervisibility*. Limited public services and infrastructure force rural residents experiencing housing hardships to rely on their social networks, making their struggles known to others, even when they are not directly observed. *Social hypervisibility* contributes to stigma by hindering access to jobs and housing, as well as discouraging individuals from seeking help. These findings demonstrate that existing policies and resources not only fail to support people experiencing housing insecurity in rural areas but also exacerbate stigma, intensifying the marginalization of people struggling to survive in rural poverty.

INTRODUCTION

To explain the stigma around homelessness and housing insecurity, scholars have often focused on hypervisibility in public spaces (Gowan 2010; Herring 2019; Snow and Leon 1993; Vitale 2008). In the absence of adequate and affordable housing, people may spend “abnormal” amounts of time in public spaces or use those spaces in “abnormal” ways (e.g., sleeping on park benches, riding public transit for extended periods and without a specific destination, panhandling on street corners, or picking through trash for food and supplies). Scholars theorize that the publicness of such “abnormal” behavior makes it hypervisible to housed people using those same public spaces in more “normal” ways. That hypervisibility then renders such “abnormal” behavior—and the unhoused or housing insecure people engaging in that behavior—especially vulnerable to stigma and scorn.

These arguments are important. However, given that some forms of homelessness and housing insecurity may be less hypervisible than others, there is reason to suspect that theories built on hypervisibility cannot fully account for the stigma around homelessness and housing insecurity across space and place. Research has shown, for example, that rural homelessness and housing instability are often “hidden” (Antin et al. 2024; Belden and Wiener 1999; Cloke, Johnsen, and May 2007; Edwards, Torgerson, and Sattem 2009; Fitchen 1992; Lawrence 1995; Roberston et al. 2007; Rollinson and Pardeck 2006; Yousey and Samudra 2018). This hiddenness reflects the fact that, unlike in urban spaces, people experiencing rural housing insecurity are often unseen: they are doubling up with friends and family, camping in the countryside, living in isolated substandard housing and in

vehicles parked on the outskirts of town (Cloke, Widdowfield, and Milbourne 2000; Edwards et al. 2009; Sherman 2023).

Building on these prior studies, this paper aims to expand theories of stigma around housing insecurity to account for variations in the visibility of these problems by asking: *How does the stigma around housing insecurity relate to its visibility? And how does this relationship vary across geographic contexts?* I focus on the case of rural housing insecurity, using 6 months of ethnographic observations and 37 in-depth interviews in five rural counties in Wisconsin. I find that the relationship between stigma and housing insecurity in rural areas hinges on its *social hypervisibility*. The scarcity of public services and infrastructure forces people experiencing housing hardships in rural areas to rely on their social and kinship-ties within the community. These dense social networks then make their struggles known to others, even when they are not directly observed. This *social hypervisibility* then facilitates stigma by shaping people's relationships, behavior, and opportunities to climb out of poverty.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. I first contextualize and define housing insecurity. Then, I provide a brief overview of the previous research on the stigma around homelessness and housing insecurity and contrast theories from a narrow urban view to what I call a broader relational and rural-encompassing view. I then discuss my data collection methods, sample, and findings. I conclude with research implications for the study of stigma around homelessness and housing insecurity.

DEFINING AND CONTEXTUALIZING HOUSING INSECURITY

Although homelessness is a more familiar term, I focus on the broader term of housing insecurity because it better encompasses the full extent of the dynamic social and structural processes that result in the wide range of housing-related outcomes associated with poverty (Antin et al. 2024; DeLuca and Rosen 2022). Housing insecurity is understood as the loss of, threat to, or uncertainty of safe, stable, and affordable housing (DeLuca and Rosen 2022:344). The experience of housing instability is not uniform. It can take various forms: homelessness, housing cost burden, evictions, residential movements, doubling-up with friends or family, overcrowding, living in substandard housing or neighborhoods that lack transportation, jobs, quality schools, and other critical amenities.

While housing insecurity affects the entire country, there is variation in the experience (Webb and Brown 2017). These include the difference between transitional and chronic housing insecurity (Culhane et al. 2007; Kuhn and Culhane 1998), and the experience of housing insecure families versus adults (Buckner 2008; Whitbeck 1999). Yet, less is known about the variations in housing insecurity across different geographic spaces and places.

Poverty in the United States is often conceptualized as an urban problem (Sherman 2006). Housing insecurity and poverty are understood as inextricably linked (Rollinson and Pardeck 2006). The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines homelessness as living in a temporary shelter or unsheltered sleeping in places not intended for human habitation. This definition is based on conceptualization of unhoused people as visibly living on the streets and able to utilize available services at large, usually

well-established agencies. Such definitions are consistent with the patterns observed in urban areas, as commonly documented in urban sociology (Duneier 1999; Gowan 2010; Herring 2019; Snow and Leon 1993).

In contrast, people experiencing rural housing insecurity are less likely to be living in public spaces and also have less access to services from large, well-established social service agencies (Cloke et al. 2007, 2000; Edwards et al. 2009). Instead, they tend to manage housing insecurity by doubling up with family and friends, living in vehicles or motels, and camping in remote locations that are distant from community visibility (Duncan 1999; Edwards et al. 2009; Fitchen 1992; Sherman 2023). The hidden nature of rural insecurity is compounded by the fact that there are also far fewer shelters and formal services in rural areas than in urban areas (Rollinson and Pardeck 2006). These factors make it difficult to locate and measure how many people are experiencing housing insecurity in rural communities (Cloke, Milbourne, and Widdow 2001; Edwards et al. 2009).

Lack of visibility and measurement challenges in rural settings impair the funding allocation to address housing insecurity. Finite federal, state, and charitable funding tends to be directed towards areas with the largest visible populations of unhoused people (Belden and Wiener 1999:79). Data on the amount of people experiencing housing insecurity in the United States is collected by the nationwide Point-in-Time (PIT) count. HUD requires communities receiving federal funds from the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Grants program to conduct an annual PIT count, which counts sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing housing insecurity in rural and urban areas on a single night in January. Measuring unsheltered populations requires service providers and

volunteers to count but not necessarily engage with people who are sleeping in public spaces such as sidewalks, public parks, transit centers, and near centralized service centers such as shelters. Estimates from the PIT count provide the crucial data used by federal, state, and local stakeholders to determine funding allocations to struggling communities.

This operationalization is less valid under non-urban circumstances. Recent sociological research on rural poverty has shown that in the absence of formal services and emergency housing, people rely on understudied rural subsistence strategies that are less visible to the public such as doubling up with friends and family, camping in remote locations, and hunting and fishing for food (Sherman 2009, 2023). The scattered and hidden nature of housing insecurity in rural spaces weakens the validity and the reliability of the PIT count as a method for helping us understand the size of the problem. One of the main barriers to achieving accurate counts is that rural housing insecurity is less visible (Rollinson and Pardeck 2006). Rural spaces are less geographically concentrated and lack service centers, public parks, and transit centers, which lessen the likelihood of being able to locate unsheltered people. Many people experiencing housing insecurity in rural spaces will not be counted because they are not in places that researchers or volunteers can easily find (Rollinson and Pardeck 2006). The social ecologies in rural contexts weaken the validity of the PIT count as a measurement tool that can reliably and accurately identify people experiencing housing insecurity (National Health Care for the Homeless Council 2013; Rollinson and Pardeck 2006). These inaccurate estimates impair funding to impacted communities and tell us very little about the experience of housing insecurity in rural areas.

While there is no uniform definition of the term rural, several salient characteristics distinguish rural poverty and housing markets from their urban counterparts. Deindustrialization, the consolidation of rural school districts, migration to urban areas, and fundamental changes in agricultural production practices has led to an economic decline in many rural communities, resulting in the rise of “rural ghettos” (Davidson 1991; Flora and Flora 2003; Green 2020; Wilson and Rahe 2016). As a result, existing housing stocks tend to be old and substandard in rural areas, which contributes to affordability pressures on residents attempting to pay for repairs, maintenance, energy costs and accessibility modifications (Gershenson and Desmond 2024). High rates of homeownership in rural areas contribute to shortage of rental units (Gershenson and Desmond 2024). Construction costs are often high in rural communities because large scale development does not occur, which reduces the incentive for private investment (Laywell 2024). Rural populations are also older than the American population as a whole and tend to lack accessible and essential services such as public transportation, medical services, and retail (Smith and Trevelyan 2019). Thus, rural costs of living are higher due to fewer public service and private investments. These characteristics exacerbate the already challenging “hidden” nature of rural housing insecurity.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Homelessness and housing insecurity are highly stigmatized (Clope et al. 2001; Edwards et al. 2009; Link et al. 1995; Meanwell 2012; Phelan et al. 1997; Snow and Leon 1993). While definitions of the concept vary, stigma is broadly understood as the mark,

attribute, or status that is subject to devaluation (Goffman 1963; Kusenbach 2009; Pescosolido and Martin 2015). As a process, stigma arises when elements of labeling, stereotyping, exclusion, discrimination and status loss co-occur (Link and Phelan 2001). Early or so-called “old” research on housing insecurity and its associated stigma focused on skid row populations of adult males who visibly lived on city streets (Rollinson and Pardeck 2006). After World War II, the visibility of these populations declined and so did research on the topic (Shlay and Rossi 1992).

The growth and “increased visibility” of “new homelessness” throughout urban centers in the 1980s led to more social science research, including the stigma associated with this form of poverty (Phelan et al. 1997; Shlay and Rossi 1992). The “new” homeless are more heterogeneous, younger, and are increasingly families with children (Rollinson and Pardeck 2006; Snow and Leon 1993). Research suggests that people experiencing housing insecurity tend to be perceived as irresponsible, lazy, improvident, deviant and sometimes dangerous (Link et al. 1995; Snow and Leon 1993). However, these empirical investigations into the stigma around housing insecurity have focused almost exclusively on larger metropolitan areas.

Theorizing Stigma from a Narrow (Urban) View

Previous attempts to explain the stigma around housing insecurity have tended to focus on the hypervisibility of homelessness as the source of this stigma. The existing literature is dominated by an urban focus because of the visibility and accessibility of the unhoused people in metropolitan spaces (Rollinson and Pardeck 2006). Such explanations

may work most effectively in urban settings like those traditionally studied in urban-based ethnographies but may be less applicable in rural settings.

Some of the influential sociological studies include Gowan's (2010) ethnography on unhoused individuals in San Francisco and Snow and Anderson's (1993) ethnography of life on the streets in Austin, Texas. Snow and Anderson document how visibility renders unhoused people vulnerable to stigmatization by the broader society. Their examples include how homeless people congregating in front of service centers waiting for dinner renders them vulnerable to harassment by police, people driving by who hurl insults, and high school students on a school bus who shouted insults such as "get a job" (Snow and Leon 1993:198). Gowan's (2010) research on unhoused individuals in San Francisco examines the different responses to the stigma of being homeless, focusing on the "intensely public work" of unhoused people who relied on collecting recyclables and dumpster diving in the city (Gowan 2010:156). Additional research includes Duneier (1999) on the experience of poor Black men on the sidewalks of New York City, New York; Borchard (2010) on unhoused individuals in Las Vegas, Nevada; and Desmond's (2016) ethnography of evictions in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

These ethnographies have produced a set of empirical regularities based on urban conceptualizations of housing insecurity. Several stylized facts have emerged from these studies. For example, the experience of housing insecurity as being associated with living in public spaces (Duneier 1999; Gowan 2010), having "fractured social networks" (Borchard 2010), social ties that are "disposable" and short-term (Desmond 2012), and experiencing high levels of stigma associated with being visibly poor (Snow and Anderson 1993). Yet, few

studies have considered that such patterns may not generalize to non-urban circumstances.

These explanations are useful; yet there is reason to suspect that they may not explain every case. The minimal research that has been conducted on rural housing insecurity suggests that the experience of rural poverty does in fact differ from those in urban contexts. These patterns may help to explain why coping strategies for housing insecurity differ in rural communities from those typically seen in urban settings (Edwards et al. 2009; Fitchen 1992; Sherman 2023). And they also suggest that the stigma around housing insecurity may operate differently in these contexts as well.

Rural sociologists, for example, have shown that unlike the short-term connections typically documented among people experiencing urban housing insecurity (Desmond 2012), social ties in rural communities tend to be “small and tight, persisting over long time periods” (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Sherman 2023). These dense ties also shape the behavior of people experiencing poverty, with the high level of social cohesion in rural communities creating pressure on the poor to behave in ways that align with local values and norms (Sherman 2006, 2009).

Rural sociologists have also highlighted the consequences of a lack of public transit in rural settings and its implications for rural populations experiencing housing insecurity. Edwards, Torgerson, and Sattem (2009), for example, find that lack of public transportation undermines the use of already slow and minimal state housing services. This may help explain why public assistance is less common among the rural poor, even when eligibility for such services is taken into account (Duncan 1999). Recent sociological scholarship has

also found that eviction rates in rural areas can rival and even surpass those in major cities (Gershenson and Desmond 2024). Given these factors, it is crucial that we gain a better understanding of the experience of housing insecurity and its associated stigma in rural communities.

Theorizing Stigma from a Broader (Relational and Rural-Encompassing) View

Building on these prior studies, I ask: *How does the stigma around housing insecurity relate to its visibility? And how does this relationship vary across geographic contexts?* In light of the research discussed above, and in adopting a relational perspective that treats poverty and its consequences as the product of “dynamic, unfolding relations” rather than fixed and unchanging (Emirbayer and Desmond 2015:79), I hypothesize that the stigma of housing insecurity in urban contexts reflects its physical hypervisibility, while the stigma of housing insecurity in rural contexts instead reflects its social hypervisibility. Essentially, because of the density of rural social ties, people’s struggles with housing insecurity may be well-known to others in their communities, even if their struggles are not physically visible, as they might be in urban contexts. That social hypervisibility—like physical hypervisibility—may then facilitate stigma by allowing others to pass judgment on people experiencing housing insecurity for violating community norms.

RESEARCH METHODS AND FIELDSITE

Based on 37 in-depth interviews and six months of ethnographic fieldwork, this paper examines how the stigma around housing insecurity relates to its visibility and how this relationship varies across geographic contexts. I focus specifically on the case of housing insecurity in the rural southwest region of Wisconsin.¹ While significant attention has been paid to housing insecurity in Wisconsin's largest metropolitan city (Desmond 2016), less is known about the experiences of stigma, disadvantage, and displacement in Wisconsin's rural communities. As previously mentioned, Wisconsin's rural communities are experiencing many of the challenges facing most rural communities across the United States: aging populations, service deserts, slower growing or declining populations, and consequences of the changing structure of agriculture. As American agriculture practices have moved from a system based on family farms to global commodity systems controlled by multinational corporations, the availability of rural jobs has become a critical concern for communities and policymakers (Lobao and Meyer 2001).

Although federal interventions have increased since the 1980s, administering housing and homeless services are still administered at the local level and is typically managed by nonprofit organizations (Rollinson and Pardeck 2006). The Haven Service Center (HSC), a small nonprofit in Earlville, Wisconsin, was chosen as a fieldsite because it is the sole housing service provider in southwest Wisconsin and distinct in two important ways. First, it provides a wide range of housing services including home repairs, emergency

¹ All names, including those of people, places, and organizations, have been changed to protect confidentiality of participants and field site.

rental assistance, weatherization programs, and other supportive housing services. Rather than being a traditional shelter designed to provide temporary housing for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, the wide range of housing services speak to the variation in the experience of housing insecurity that this project aims to study. Secondly, because the organization provides housing service for five rural counties, it provided me with the opportunity to explore additional variations in the stigma and experience of housing instability by connecting me with groups of people working and residing in different rural communities of Wisconsin.

The southwestern half of Wisconsin was chosen as a fieldsite because of its large rural population. This project relies on the U.S. Census Bureau's latest definition of rural, which is areas with fewer than 5,000 residents and 2,000 housing units. Wisconsin has long had a large rural-dwelling population and a large amount of rural land area (Jones and Ewald 2017). By the Census definition, approximately 97 percent of Wisconsin's land area is rural, and 30 percent of the state's overall population resides in rural areas (Jones and Ewald 2017). Cow-to-person ratio is a common measure of rurality and in many western Wisconsin counties that are dependent on dairy farming, cows do indeed outnumber people (Jones 2017).

I began my fieldwork in Earlville, Wisconsin, in May 2023, with the aim of exploring the coping mechanisms of people experiencing rural housing insecurity. Over the course of six months, I completed 37 tape-recorded, open-ended, in-depth interviews in English with rural service providers and individuals experiencing housing insecurity. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 73 years old, and the majority (86 percent) of the participants were

White, which reflects the dominant racial group in Earlville (94 percent, according to the 2021 Census). The remaining 14 percent identified as Latino. Participants were recruited through contacts in the community, encounters while I was at HSC, and a snowball sample was used to find subsequent interviews.

Of the 37 people I interviewed, 19 were currently or had recently experienced housing insecurity and 18 were service providers. My sample includes 16 men and 21 women. The average interview lasted between 40 minutes and one and a half hours. I conducted a second follow-up interview with four service providers and eight of the people who were currently or had recently experienced housing insecurity. I used MAXQDA to transcribe my interviews and techniques from the grounded theory tradition to conduct open coding and group data according to emerging themes (Glaser and Strauss 1999). Recurrent themes that emerged in my data analysis included how the slow violence of waiting for and providing housing services is exacerbated in rural spaces by the lack of shelter options, no public transportation, and limited resources. Motel residency also emerged as an important mechanism that reinforces housing instability by proliferating insecurity. I was particularly surprised by the theme of stigma, especially in how some service providers and unhoused individuals described those experiencing housing insecurity. I became curious about how the small size and tight social networks in a rural town like Earlville influences interactions, which in turn shape stigma, and how that stigma impacts the experience of housing insecurity.

Ethnographic methods were employed to enhance the understanding obtained through interviews, to identify inconsistencies, and to observe social practices and

interactions. Knowing that people experiencing housing insecurity in rural areas are often “hidden”, interviews and participant observations are a more reliable and valid method for identifying and understanding their experience. The focus on counting alone tells us very little about how and why people experience housing insecurity. While the PIT count attempts to measure housing insecurity in one night, the ethnographic method enabled me to spend many months documenting the experience of rural housing insecurity across various locations and contexts.

In the field, I took the role of researcher-volunteer. I participated in the rural PIT count, weekly staff meetings, and community events in various towns in the southwest region. This allowed me to meet and recruit people from as many different social networks as possible. I spent multiple days a week in HSC’s office in Earlville. By observing how staff made discretionary decisions, responded to formal and informal situations, and otherwise rationalized their actions, I gained insight into the moral, ethical, and subjective dimensions of their frontline work. The actions and rationale I observed in the field complimented my interview data by comparing what people said to how they acted (Jerolmack and Khan 2014).

FINDINGS

In this study, I find that, when it comes to housing insecurity, the relationship between stigma and (in)visibility varies across contexts. As previous research has shown, the stigma of housing insecurity in urban contexts hinges on its hypervisibility. Or, more specifically, what I will call its *physical hypervisibility*—in the sense that urban structures

force people struggling with housing insecurity into public spaces in ways that make their challenges easily and directly observed by others. By contrast, and as I will show here, the stigma of housing insecurity in rural contexts hinges on its *social hypervisibility*—in the sense that the lack of public services and infrastructure in rural communities forces people struggling with housing insecurity to rely on their social networks to help them manage these challenges. The dense social and kinship ties then make these struggles known to others, even if they are not directly observed. This social hypervisibility—like physical hypervisibility—then facilitates stigma by allowing others to pass judgment on people experiencing housing insecurity for violating community norms (e.g., norms around financial independence and “good choices” like steering clear of substance use). That risk of stigma then discouraged people experiencing housing insecurity from asking for help, as doing so would likely lead to social hypervisibility of their struggles.

How place shapes social ties and the experience of housing insecurity

Social networks in rural towns are more dense and tight-knit than in dispersed urban areas (Edwards et al. 2009). These strong social and kinship-ties are an important source of support in rural towns like Earlville that lack public transportation, shelters, and other services. Riding along with Kathleen, the Director of HSC’s housing services, in the summer heat with the windows down in her spotless Chevy truck through the streets of Earlville, she was constantly running into people she knew. It was my first week in the field and we were driving down the four blocks of Earlville’s main street when a passing car suddenly honked. Kathleen leaned out of the window to wave before turning to me and saying, “That’s my

sister.” The next week, we were driving back to the office from a meeting when she abruptly pulled over into an empty parking lot as a van full of people pulled up alongside us.

Kathleen got out, leaving the driver door wide open and leaned into the car window, hugging the teenager in the passenger seat and waving at the kids in the back of the van. When she got back in the truck, she told me they were her cousins and nieces.

Without relying on social networks, managing housing insecurity is very difficult. Consider 40-year-old Amelia Moore, who has struggled to find housing in rural Wisconsin for over a decade. Amelia’s social and kinship-ties were impaired by her struggle with substance use and the time she spent incarcerated in her late 20s. Since then, her criminal record has continued to create barriers for both employment and housing. “Because of my criminal background and my horrible credit, I’m constantly denied by every place and job I apply to,” Amelia explained. After months of applying to jobs and sleeping in her vehicle, Amelia recently secured a part-time job at a fast-food restaurant in town, making \$650 a month. Given her limited resources and the barriers created by her criminal record, Amelia has tried to rely on institutional support for housing and apply for available housing units. Yet, even attempting to access those resources has involved what Amelia called an “ungodly amount of phone calls,” along with resources she does not have. “They won’t even run your application unless you pay a \$100 fee,” said Amelia. In the interim, Amelia has continued to live in her vehicle.

Those bureaucratic hurdles reflect the lack of funding for housing services in rural communities. In the absence of sufficient funding, rural communities can provide support only for those who are most desperate, which usually means those living unsheltered

outside. Kimberly Norris, a 56-year-old Latina woman, is disabled and cannot work, so she survives on \$1,000 a month from Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). After couch surfing for three years, she realized that in order to get to the top of the local housing list she had to qualify as homeless—meaning she had to live unsheltered outside:

“So, I basically camped at that campground for part of the time in order to be able to say I was homeless, because if you say, you're homeless, you get bumped up on the very long waiting list.”

Kimberly wanted to avoid living outside but having exhausted the support she could get from her social networks, and given the long waiting lists for public support, she felt she had no other choice.

Living in these conditions is difficult and dangerous for rural residents. Consider Emma White, a single mom with two young children who is also disabled and surviving on SSDI. These limited resources have made it difficult for Emma to afford rent, let alone a down payment on a house. Emma does have some family and friend in the community, but they do not have the space or the resources to house Emma and her children, especially in the long term. Thus, Emma has experienced housing insecurity on and off for the last nine years. She described the long process of finding available housing and the toll it has taken:

“It's hard to find housing because it's always like they're full or it's a long waiting list. It's a long process. I normally sleep at a park on a picnic table. We slept in a camper or an RV for a while. It's hard bouncing around with two kiddos, a five-year-old and a nine-year-old. Last night I literally cried myself to sleep because it feels like my life is going down and it feels like I just don't know if I can go any longer sometimes. But when I look at my boys, I think, like I can do this. I can fight for this.”

While waiting to hear back about an available housing unit, Emma had been living in a tent with her two children when a summer storm destroyed many of her belongings and left her injured.

“The storm was so strong it like ripped the tent down,” she described. “I messed up my whole arm real bad. I tore some muscle a little bit. Thank God I got my kids out. Two seconds before it went down on me. Oh, my gosh.”

With the help of local service providers, she was able to move into a mobile home community, but her housing hardships continued.

“The trailer that I was in was really bad, full of mold. They told me to leave for about a week so they could fix the problem. My phone ran out of data, and I couldn't pay for my phone bill until I got paid like a week later. They thought I had abandoned the trailer, so they took all my stuff out of the trailer and the two rainstorms ruined our flat screen and the kids' beds, toys, and clothes so we had to start all over. I am still in flip flops from like a year ago. I haven't had a pair of shoes in a long time, but I will give my shirt off my body before I lose my kids.”

As we see in Emma's case, the suffering of waiting for housing resources is exacerbated in rural spaces by the lack of shelter options and public transportation. This suffering is also intensified in places like Wisconsin where weather can be life-threatening to people experiencing housing insecurity.

To that end, seasons also complicate survival for those struggling with housing insecurity in rural communities. Horace Jenkins, who is now 52 years-old, was 47 when he first became unhoused in the same county in southwest Wisconsin where he grew up. Horace became unhoused after decades of taking seasonal jobs on local farms that came with housing. “Your body starts wearing out from all the farming,” Horace told me, “All the

bending over milking cows, standing for hours, and driving equipment took a toll on my joints.” He took a part-time job at a local factory that produced metal castings but quit after a few months. “My lungs started hurting from coughing up black crap from the dust,” Horace said. Unemployed and unhoused, Horace ended up living in his truck for three years and relied on hunting and fishing for survival.

“I mostly bathed in the river right down over there. Foodwise, I grew up fishing, so I caught squirrels, turkeys, and fish. I kept a grill in the back of my truck and grilled them over wood I chopped.”

When asked how he managed in winter, Horace recalled experiencing temperatures 40 degrees below zero one winter. “I lost four toes to frostbite!” he exclaimed. Horace attributed his survival to “the companionship of his German shepherd and the use of lots of heavy quilt and blankets.”

Small-town stigma

Earlville’s small size shapes the experience of housing insecurity and its associated stigma by making these struggles socially visible, even when they are not physically visible to others. As Horace explained:

“As soon as you have a crisis, everybody in this small town wants to gossip about everybody. They don’t say a word until something happens to a person. And then *everybody* wants to chime in.”

Given the lack of anonymity and how fast gossip spread in his small town, Horace tried to avoid telling friends and family that he was living in his car.

This social hypervisibility of rural struggles could be a mechanism for activating social support, but, in the case of housing-related struggles, that support also came with stigma and shame. Sabrina, for example, talked about how her community often came together to support those in need, noting:

“There was this lady who’s house burned down earlier this summer, and yeah, a bunch of people made her meals for weeks. And like, there’s obviously those great signs of time when people are super supportive, and the whole community comes together to do things to help people. And like, my family, when my mother got her surgery, we had like so many people helping that I’m so grateful for who were just like, super helpful and super understanding. A lot of times, I feel this is a very supportive community.”

Sabrina was also able to rely on her community for support—couch-surfing with friends—when, at 18 years old, she left her family farmhouse due what she described as conflict with her parents, particularly her father. Yet, that community support also came with a risk of stigma and shame.

“Everyone knows everything. It can be a yucky feeling. It’s just like a whirlpool of gossip here because we’re all so close to each other because it’s so small. It’s as if all eyes are on each other all the time.”

Given her town’s small size and dense social ties, Sabrina suspected that everyone in town knew she was couch surfing and that at least some in her community judged her for not being able to afford a place of her own. Thus, while she appreciated being able to rely on friends to help in the wake of family conflict, she also saw such support as a double-edged sword.

This risk of judgment led some rural residents to hide the fact that they were experiencing housing insecurity. Frank Brennan is 73 years old and had experienced housing insecurity on and off for decades following his return from his return from serving in the Vietnam War. “I was really messed up when I came back,” Frank told me, “I couldn’t hold down a job and basically became a ghost for 50 years.” He explained the reason he didn’t tell members of his community about his housing hardships was because of the shame that accompanies being talked about by the whole town as a failure:

“It’s not that I don’t want to rely on other people. I think it is about shame. People look at you like you’re a failure. They don’t want to be talked about by the neighbors who say, ‘Oh my god, you know, this, this, and this around the whole town.’”

As we see in Frank’s case, the small size and social cohesion of Wisconsin’s rural communities is both an asset and a barrier for people experiencing housing hardships. While small size and tight social networks provide a vital source of support in the absence of formal services and infrastructure in rural communities (Brown and Swanson 2003; Gjesfjeld, Weaver, and Schommer 2012; Manthey 2024), these factors also appear to discourage rural residents from seeking help. Small-town gossip often fueled feelings of shame, influencing both the help-seeking behavior of unhoused individuals like Frank as well as their opportunities to climb out of poverty.

Perceptions of stigma around housing insecurity

This stigma stemmed from the fact that people experiencing housing insecurity were perceived by more economically stable members of their communities—including housing service providers—as lacking work ethic and/or making poor choices, such as abusing alcohol and drugs. During my first day onsite, Kathleen set up an office desk for me. I couldn't help but notice how meticulous she was in cleaning up the area, wiping down the desk, lint rolling the office chair, and dusting down the monitor screen. "You must keep a clean house," I said teasingly. "I grew up in a filthy, run-down house," Kathleen replied, "I won't be livin' like that again." This type of moral boundary-making—and its emphasis on the work ethic and responsibility—is well documented in the literature, and often operates to form distinctions between groups in rural communities (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016; Sherman 2009, 2023).

Thus, even when service providers had grown up in rural poverty themselves, and even when they acknowledged the challenges of living in poverty and the structural problems of a lack of affordable housing, some still employed individualistic accounts of housing insecurity (e.g., emphasizing a lack of work ethic or motivation) and spoke of people experiencing housing insecurity in derisive ways. "People just don't want to work," Kathleen would routinely say. During one lunchtime conversation at HSC, Nancy, a housing case manager, discussed the role of personality. "Not everyone's personality can handle working," she said. Jodi, another employee, nodded her head in agreement while chewing her bite of a Kwik Trip chicken sandwich. "People are always giving excuses as to why they can't work," Jodi replied. When discussing her experience working with people experiencing

housing insecurity, Kathleen would commonly refer to them as “them people.” She could easily get riled up talking about clients, throwing her hands up in frustration, saying “you wouldn’t believe what I have dealt with”, referring to the scenarios she has encountered in her 21 years of working at HSC.

More economically stable members of the community—including service providers—also tended to equate housing insecurity with substance use, which added to the stigma. Meredith Hansen, for an example, is a licensed social worker who provides mental health and housing navigation services in Lacine, a small town in southwest Wisconsin. When I asked her to tell me about the challenges she faces in trying to house her clients, she described the stigma surrounding substance use:

“Three years ago, I didn’t have a single client with a meth issue. Now, I rarely get a referral that doesn’t have a meth issue. And you know, if I were a property owner, I wouldn’t want to take these people either.”

People often turn to substance use as a way of managing the physical pain and emotional stress of poverty and precarity (Galea and Vlahov 2002). As a result, the economic decline of certain rural communities in the US—sparked by larger patterns like deindustrialization (Green 2020), scarcity of healthcare services and mental health providers (Carpenedo Mun et al. 2023; Douthit et al. 2015), and federal funding focused on extractive industries and agricultural productivity at the expense of other social problems like high rates of poverty and unemployment (Wilson and Rahe 2016), has led to rising rates of substance use, particularly prescription opioid use (Carpenedo Mun et al. 2023; Ibragimov, Young, and Cooper 2020). Yet, more economically stable members of rural

communities still stigmatize those who develop substance use disorders. This stigma can have consequences for people's recovery. Research has found that people from rural communities were significantly more likely to identify social stigma as an impediment to seeking and accessing treatment (Robertson and Donnermeyer 1998). People experiencing housing insecurity sometimes internalized the stigma they faced for their struggles and even weaponized it against others who were struggling as well. Take 41-year-old single mother Amber Zachery. She first began experiencing housing insecurity after being incarcerated. When she was released and put on probation, she managed by staying with friends and sleeping in her car. Amber was eventually approved for housing support from the county, which began paying \$2,500 per month for her to live in a twin-bed motel room with her five-year old daughter. In talking about the other people experiencing hardship who were put up in the same motel Amber said:

"I feel like this place needs to have a little more class, people who know how to work. They shouldn't let just anybody in. These people trash their rooms, and have you seen their cars? They're filthy!"

Despite her own hardships, Amber still perceived others in similar situations with scorn. This scorn was also amplified by the stigma around substance use. When I asked Horace Jenkins if he knew other people in town who were living in their vehicles he replied:

"Oh yeah, most of them are lazy meth addicts. Lots of them choose to live in their vehicles. You just can't trust people like that."

Housing insecure people in rural Wisconsin towns were perceived as lacking work ethic, being lazy, and making poor decisions like substance use. Due to the size of small

towns and the density of rural social ties, people experiencing housing insecurity were stigmatized even by those who had not directly observed their struggles with housing insecurity. This social hypervisibility limited their opportunities to climb out of poverty.

Impact of social hypervisibility

Social hypervisibility amplifies the challenges associated with rural housing insecurity, including challenges relation to education and employment. Dylan Hill grew up in New Jersey and moved to a small, rural town in southwest Wisconsin of just 70 people when he was in eighth grade. Dylan described the adjustment as “challenging,” especially living in a three-bedroom apartment with seven other family members where his father was abusing drugs. This home environment made focusing at school difficult for Dylan. Yet, Dylan’s teachers, who he described as “pretty rough,” seemed to have little sympathy for him, and he was ultimately expelled and send to an all-boys behavioral school during his sophomore year. After the all-boys school closed due to revelations of staff violence, including an incident where a staff member broke a boy’s arm, Dylan returned to his small town in Wisconsin, unhoused. For a while he lived at the laundromat. “There were other times,” Dylan explained, “when I lived at the park in a tent, or just couch surfed but a lot of my buddies were in and out of prison.” Dylan’s hardships were widely known in the community, and the stigma impacted his opportunities. Dylan described how his reputation followed him into his twenties, negatively affecting his job prospects in the area:

“I went to try to get a day job with a local construction company. When I got to the job site, there was somebody that I knew from awhile back, and I was just at the wrong place at the wrong time. This person saw who I was, I saw him walk over to

the supervisor, and the supervisor came back and was like, 'No, we got too many people working today. We don't need you.' I was like, 'Oh, oookay,' Dylan said as he rolled his eyes and shook his head. 'It's how things go around here.'

As we see in Dylan's story, and as prior research has also illustrated (Ferguson et al. 2012; Murran and Brady 2023), early experiences of housing insecurity can create behavioral and educational challenges for young people. These challenges can ultimately lead to housing insecurity later in life. In rural communities, the social hypervisibility of housing insecurity compounds those challenges by making it difficult for people to secure jobs. The small population size and tight social ties in these communities contribute to a lack of privacy that makes it more difficult for individuals to escape stigmatizing reputations.

Social hypervisibility also compounds the challenges associated with rural housing insecurity by discouraging people from seeking help, even from people they knew and trusted, because doing so would render their struggles socially visible to others and leave them susceptible to the shame of stigma. Recall, for example, how Horace was reluctant to tell his friends and family that he was living in his car, out of fear that he might become the subject of the gossip mill.

In rural communities, and because social service providers often live in or grew up in the communities they serve, this hypervisibility discourages people experiencing housing insecurity not only from seeking informal support from friends and family but also from seeking formal support from organizations like HSC. Born in Mexico, Tatiana Hernandez, who is 55 years old, had been living undocumented in Wisconsin for most of her adult life. Being undocumented left Tatiana with few opportunities for paid employment

and thus made it difficult to find and keep suitable housing. As a result, Tatiana had spent years working on dairy farms in exchange for housing. Despite the challenges of these arrangements, Tatiana was reluctant to seek either informal or formal housing. It was only after the terrible housing conditions on the farm led to bedbug bites covering her entire body that Tatiana finally approached HSC for support. It took three months to get Tatiana emergency housing at a run-down motel (in exchange for cleaning the rooms of paying customers)² and another four months to assist with the first three months' rent on a small, ground-floor apartment in her rural small town.

I accompanied Kathleen and Tatiana on the day she moved out of the motel and into her new apartment. Tatiana was sitting outside under an ash tree waiting for us with all that she owned in a single suitcase and multiple black plastic bags tied in knots. She was no more than 5 feet tall, a blue bandana wrapped around her head, and two thin lines drawn as eyebrows. She had a playful sense of humor, often making light of her challenging situation. Together Kathleen and I helped her load up her few belongings and moved her into a small apartment rented by the Havens Service Center. Walking into the apartment, I flipped the light switch, and the exposed lightbulb flickered on. The apartment had a small kitchen attached to the living room, and a small bedroom attached to the bathroom. Kathleen immediately started tidying up—gnats scattered as she opened the kitchen cabinets—and showing Tatiana where the light switches were, how to turn on the television, which shelf held the linens, how to recline the recliner, what day and time the

² Rural communities like the one I studied in Wisconsin rarely have emergency shelters and thus often contract with motels to provide emerging housing instead.

trash goes out, and where the dish soap is located. As Tatiana followed her around the apartment, nodding at Kathleen's instructions, she pulled out a necklace out from under her baggy shirt and kissed the gold pendant with the face of *la Virgen María de Guadalupe*.

When we finished unloading the truck, I asked Tatiana how she felt about moving in. She sighed, shrugged her shoulders, and replied:

"I feel bad, you know, embarrassed. All my life I have always been on my own, by myself. I never ask for help, and it feels bad that now I have to be seen asking for help."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Existing theories of the stigma of housing insecurity hinge on the visibility of these struggles, but they do not always work outside of urban contexts. In this study, I find that, when it comes to housing insecurity, the relationship between stigma and (in)visibility varies across geographic contexts. As previous research has shown, the stigma of housing insecurity in urban contexts hinges on its hypervisibility (Gowan 2010; Herring 2019; Snow and Leon 1993; Vitale 2008). Or, more specifically, what I will call its *physical hypervisibility*. By contrast, and as I have shown here, the stigma of housing insecurity in rural contexts hinges on its *social hypervisibility*. The scarcity of public services and infrastructure in rural communities forces people struggling with housing insecurity to rely on their social networks to help them manage these challenges. The dense social ties then make these struggles known to others, even if they are not directly observed. This social hypervisibility—like physical hypervisibility—then facilitates stigma by allowing others to pass judgment on people experiencing housing insecurity for violating community norms

(e.g., norms around financial independence and “good choices” like steering clear of substance use). That risk of stigma then compounds the challenges faced by people experiencing housing insecurity (e.g., challenges finding housing and jobs and opportunities for education). Stigma also discourages people experiencing housing hardships from asking for help, as doing so would likely render their struggles socially hypervisible and thus risk subjecting them to stigma and shame.

Building on prior research on the importance of space and place in shaping people’s experiences and social relationships (Fuller and Löw 2017; Tickamyer 2000), this study reveals the geographical dimensions of stigma—how space and place-specificity shape the stigma around housing insecurity. As Goffman (1963) reminds us, stigma is rooted in relationships and is shaped by the culture of society. Yet, previous research has undertheorized place-based differences in the stigma around housing insecurity. Stepping into this gap, I show that, rural-urban differences impact not only the challenges faced by people experiencing housing insecurity and the resources available to them but also the stigma to which they are subjected and the mechanisms by which they are stigmatized.

Social hypervisibility is a mechanism of social distinction (Bourdieu 2010; Lamont and Fournier 1992)—it is one way in which communities identify and distinguish stigmatized groups. Research on social hypervisibility advances our understanding of mechanisms of distinction by identifying how small-town community members draw social distinctions and the ways these distinctions pattern their daily lives and interactions, especially those who are experiencing housing insecurity. While strong social and kinship-ties are important for the resiliency of rural communities (Berkes and Ross 2013; Burton et al. 2013; Van

Gundy et al. 2015), the concept of social hypervisibility illuminates their potential disadvantages for members of stigmatized groups.

In this paper, I have shown how social hypervisibility facilitates the stigmatization of people experiencing housing insecurity in rural communities. However, there is reason to suspect that social hypervisibility will also amplify stigma in other contexts, particularly contexts where social networks are primarily comprised of close, dense social ties, such as in school communities or religious communities (Coleman 1987; Ellison and George 1994; Hallinan 1987; Morgan and Sørensen 1999). Even if people in these communities succeed in hiding the potentially stigmatizing challenges they face, the ties within these communities may lead others to become aware of those challenges, particularly if people try to seek help from others in their networks or from institutional authorities who are part of their networks, as well.

A focus on the social hypervisibility of housing insecurity in rural communities also points to the need for more housing and homelessness services in rural areas and may inform policies related to these services, as well. In the absence of adequate institutional resources, and as I have shown here, low-income people in rural areas are often forced to manage housing insecurity by turning to others in their communities for help. In the process, however, they risk having news of their troubles spread throughout their communities in ways that might ultimately make it more difficult for them to secure housing, jobs, and other opportunities in the future, because of the lasting stigma they may face. Thus, more institutional resources are needed to address housing insecurity in rural areas. Existing federal rural policy has been criticized for “a lack of fit with conditions on the

ground in rural communities”, resulting in ineffective programs (Wilson and Rahe 2016:4). As illustrated in previous sections, these ineffective policies not only fail to support people experiencing housing insecurity in rural spaces but also weaken the validity of federal initiatives like the PIT count as a measurement tool that can reliably and accurately identify people experiencing rural housing insecurity. Future research could explore different evidence-based measurement models that effectively integrate community insights in efforts to identify and measure rural housing insecurity. This information can equip rural scholars, communities, and policymakers to better serve housing insecure populations with more equitable and accessible resources.

Housing remains one of the country’s most pressing social problems. Yet, minimal academic attention has been given to rural housing insecurity (DeLuca and Rosen 2022; Gershenson and Desmond 2024; Lawrence 1995; Lichter and Brown 2011; Rollinson and Pardeck 2006). The rural perspectives captured by this study provide the opportunity to reexamine and expand beyond the dominant perspectives of housing insecurity in sociology as well as public and policy attention that has been defined by a view of reality that privileges urban perspectives (Fitchen 1992). This study demonstrates the need to include rural communities in research on poverty by revealing how focusing too narrowly on urban contexts limits our theories and practices to address variations of housing insecurity.

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