Study will explore Franklin County’s high eviction rate

By Rita Price

Through face-to-face interviews, field observation and data collection, a new research project aims to dig into the reasons behind Franklin County's alarmingly high rate of eviction.

“We teach our students that before you run to solutions, you have to understand the problem,” said Trevor Brown, dean of the John Glenn College of Public Affairs at Ohio State University. “Why is it that so many individuals and families are being asked to leave their homes and places of shelter?”

The city of Columbus, Franklin County and OSU announced the commission of the study Thursday at the Glenn College, where graduate students are to lead the research as part of their studies.

Franklin County has the state's busiest eviction court, with nearly 18,000 cases filed each year. It's not unusual for a magistrate to handle 130 or more cases before noon on a weekday in Courtroom 11A at Franklin County Municipal Court.

That bustling, sometimes emotional scene was featured in Dividing Lines, a Dispatch series on rising income inequality in the city.

Eviction “is a crippling reality that my partners and I would like to analyze and comprehend,” City Councilwoman Jaiza Page said. “This study isn’t an indictment of anyone. It is a chance to come together.”
The work is to take an “ethnographic approach,” with researchers meeting tenants and landlords in their neighborhoods and in court to gather stories and information, Page and others said.

County Commissioner Marilyn Brown, who also helped to lead a task force on increased family homelessness, said eviction — perhaps unsurprisingly — emerged as a top cause. “Nobody should be in that situation,” she said. “And yet so many of our residents are.”

Marilyn Brown said the eviction study should look deeply into family circumstances, including type of employment, wages and hours worked, as well as unexpected triggers that can tip a household into financial crisis, such as illness or a loss of transportation.

Rising rents, displacement, housing quality and challenges for landlords also are part of the picture to study. Researchers expect to identify policy recommendations that the city and county could implement to help alleviate some of the causes.

“In any eviction case, there’s a tsunami of factors,” said John Glenn’s Trevor Brown.

A report released last month by the National Low Income Housing Coalition and the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio documented a widening gap between wages and housing costs throughout the state. Metro Columbus had the highest “housing wage,” with a worker needing to earn at least $17.04 an hour to spend no more than 30 percent of gross income on a modest two-bedroom apartment.

Many Columbus renters are nowhere near the 30-percent threshold, Page said, spending upwards of 60 or 70 percent of their monthly incomes on housing.

“There were families in court this morning,” she said. “Others received a notice on this rainy day.”

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