

The Effects of Legal Representation on Tenant Outcomes in Housing Court: Evidence from New York City's Universal Access Program

Abstract

Housing is one of the areas where it may be most critical for poor people to have access to legal representation in civil cases. We use the roll-out of New York City's Universal Access to Counsel program (UA) to assess the effect of legal representation using detailed address-level housing court data from 2016 to 2019. The program offers free legal representation in housing court to tenants with income at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty guideline. We find that tenants who gain access to lawyers are less likely to be subject to possessory judgments, face smaller monetary judgments, are less likely to have eviction warrants issued against them and are less likely to be evicted. Lawyers have larger effects in poorer places and in those with larger shares of non-citizens. Our results support the idea that legal representation in civil procedures can have an important positive impact on the lives of poor people.