

BARRIERS TO COLLECTIVE ACTION:

Experiences with energy efficiency among New Haven, CT tenants



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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the Tenant Energy Advocacy project is to better understand low-income tenants' experiences with energy expenses, energy efficiency, and collective action around energy issues. To gain insight into this critical issue, student researchers at the Yale School of Public Health conducted 12 semi-structured focus groups with 41 tenants and 5 landlords from New Haven, CT, and 6 individual interviews with activists engaged in energy and housing issues in the state.

INITIAL FINDINGS

ENERGY EFFICIENCY IS NOT A PRIORITY IF BASIC NEEDS ARE NOT MET

It is difficult for tenants to focus time and resources on energy efficiency if their basic needs are not met. Many tenants mentioned that they lacked the bandwidth to explore energy efficiency programs or to advocate for energy justice.

“So you're faced with a lot of stressors and I'll be honest with you now we looking at the lens of where a lot of people, they're just thankful that they got lights on, never mind trying to find out about tubing their basements and insulating this and insulating that.”

TENANTS CONNECT POOR HOUSING CONDITIONS WITH POOR ENERGY EFFICIENCY

Many tenants did make the connection between energy efficiency, or lack thereof, in their units, energy expenses, thermal comfort, and poor housing conditions. While many tenants did not use terms like "energy efficiency", they did have a practical understanding of how things like drafty windows, improperly sealed doors, holes in the facade of their homes, etc., impacted their thermal comfort and energy expenses. They demonstrated this by seeking to find ways to weatherize their own homes, such as stuffing towels and socks around doors and windows and covering windows with plastic.

“Things during the winter months and duct taping this and that. Because that was survival of the fittest in the inner cities. You put the duct tape, the plastic and I mean plastic from your furniture, plastic from cleaners, whatever. You get creative, you can laugh, you get creative trying.”

TENANTS ARE HESITANT TO ENGAGE IN COLLECTIVE ACTION

Many participants expressed hesitancy when asked about participating in collective action surrounding energy efficiency, with many tenants expressing a lack of familiarity and consequent discomfort with engaging with their neighbors on these issues. Some tenants also shared that they were hesitant to engage in collective action because they believed they did not have enough information in terms of what to advocate for, or what the goals of said collective action should be. Our focus groups with Spanish language speakers also revealed a gap in knowledge about energy efficiency among the Spanish-speaking population in New Haven and a lack of outreach in Spanish regarding energy efficiency programs.

“Well, I would have to be well-informed in order to tell my neighbors whether I had a positive experience or something like that, because here, we practically don't see our neighbors.”

NEXT STEPS

This project will continue in the form of individual interviews, allowing the researchers to probe deeper into these themes with participants. Additionally, indoor air quality monitors have been placed in homes undergoing energy efficiency upgrades through I Heart My Home, with a goal to illuminate the link between energy efficiency upgrades, indoor air quality, and health. The findings may provide an additional rallying point for collective action around energy efficiency and better housing more generally.