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Evaluation of the United Lift Rental Assistance Program in Riverside County



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, declared in March 2020 by the World Health Organization, caused further strain on an already-stressed rental market in Riverside County, California. In order to provide financial assistance to the residents of the area, Riverside County launched an Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) Program in partnership with Lift to Rise and Inland SoCal United Way. This program, hereby referred to as the United Lift Rental Assistance Program or simply United Lift, provided direct rent and utility assistance between the months of June 2020 through November 2022 and **distributed more than \$300 million countywide for over 35,000 households, representing 120,000 local residents.** These direct payments to families and residents around Riverside County sought to reduce evictions and keep renters housed during the financial hardship of the pandemic.

Researchers in the USC Price School of Public Policy contracted with United Lift to help evaluate the program. The evaluation incorporated a range of surveys and interviews, which were conducted with landlords and tenants across various points in the rental assistance program, to further understand the experiences that they faced with regard to United Lift and the Riverside County rental market conditions.

Methodology

The research team surveyed 2,452 tenants and 338 landlords who applied for assistance to help illustrate housing conditions in Riverside County and their process working with United Lift. A follow-up survey was conducted to assess the conditions for respondents at a different point in time; specifically, how their housing outcomes changed directly because of receiving rental assistance. The research team also conducted semi-structured interviews with 32 landlords and 29 tenants to gain insight into decision-making and strategies around residential mobility and household budgeting, as well as the process of applying for the program and how families anticipate meeting future economic challenges.

Key Findings

- There was a strong, and disproportionate, need for a rental assistance program such as United Lift in Riverside County.
- Rent was the highest priority for most respondents, even over other bills, with nearly **90% of the respondents reporting being unable to afford rent at the time of their application for assistance and nearly 20% reporting rent increases.**
- The United Lift program targeted specific populations in need for their rental aid, and the samples show that the program was effective in doing so.
- Receiving aid from United Lift seemed to act as an adequate stopgap, providing salient benefits for renters **including lower rates of housing instability and homelessness and improved food security and mental health.**
- Respondents used a range of strategies to cover rent—most commonly, they sought assistance from family and friends, used savings, paid rent with a credit card, or took out a loan.
- Black respondents reported **higher rates of eviction and rent increases** than other racial groups and **were disproportionately likely to apply for and receive assistance.**
- Program applicants disproportionately identified as female.
- Nearly half of households applying for assistance reported **earning less than 30% of AMI.**

OVER 40%

of those that received assistance reported cutting back on food expenses to afford the rent, compared to **52%** of those that had not received assistance.

MORE THAN $\frac{2}{3}$

of respondents reported cutting back on clothing and entertainment expenses, delaying bill payment, and going into debt to cover rent.

ABOUT 50%

of program participants and survey respondents were single parents.

Conclusion

There is abundant evidence from the data that shows receiving assistance benefitted recipients greatly. Receiving rental assistance was associated with greater housing stability for survey respondents. Those that had received assistance from the program were less likely to be experiencing homelessness, to be doubled-up with another household, or to have moved in the past year than people who had not received assistance. Those that received assistance were less likely to have received an eviction notice or to be behind on rent. Even though more than half of respondents were behind on rent across both survey waves regardless of receipt, those who received assistance tended to be fewer months behind. Once rent debts were at least partially paid off, the added financial flexibility helped out in other places. Tenants accepted into the program reported lower levels of food insecurity, poor personal health, and mental distress. Receiving assistance was synonymous with being less likely to use a credit card or loans and more likely to use cash to cover expenses, but these rates increased again by the time of the second survey, perhaps suggesting that financial challenges resurfaced once the rental assistance had been spent.

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