

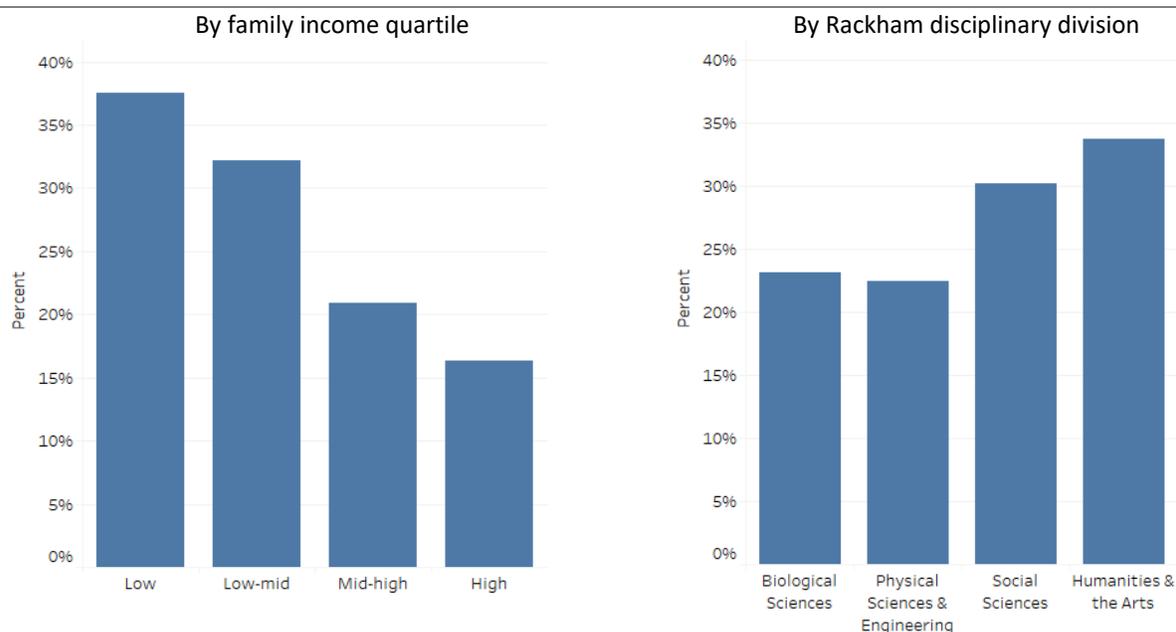
## 2017 Results: Housing

In September 2017, Rackham administered the Michigan Doctoral Experience Study to first-year PhD students. As part of a module on financial circumstances, respondents were asked the following question: “Have you had any difficulty finding suitable housing in and around Ann Arbor?” If respondents answered “Yes,” they were then asked to describe the nature of their difficulties.

### Who is Having Difficulty Finding Suitable Housing?

Overall, one quarter of respondents indicated that they had difficulty finding suitable housing. However, as the graphs in Figure 1 indicate, the percent experiencing difficulty varies according to students’ family income and their program’s discipline type. Almost 40% of students from low-income families experienced difficulty finding suitable housing near U-M, as did more than one-third of students in the Humanities and the Arts.

Figure. 1. Percent of first-year U-M doctoral students who experienced difficulty finding housing



### Why Are Students Having Difficulty Finding Suitable Housing?

Doctoral students had difficulty finding suitable housing for several reasons (see Table 1). The vast majority of responses (67%) were related to the affordability of local housing options. For instance, one respondent stated:

*“Cost of living is too high. [The] RMF stipend isn’t comparable with Ann Arbor cost of living and other personal expenses. I live in Ypsilanti which is slightly cheaper however I’m still barely able to make ends meet.”*

Many students mentioned living in surrounding communities like Ypsilanti as a means of finding adequate housing, but also noted that doing so introduced additional costs related to commuting to campus. A substantial number of respondents (26%) also lamented the difficulty of finding housing given the timing of their admittance into their program (spring) in comparison to when most leases are signed in Ann Arbor (fall/winter). The poor quality of housing was mentioned in 18% of responses. Students also mentioned difficulty communicating with University Housing and a lack of information about housing options as barriers to securing suitable housing.

Table 1. Main difficulties finding suitable housing reported by new doctoral students at UM

Difficulty Type	Percent Reporting
Affordability of housing options	67
Timing of housing search for newly admitted students	26
Quality of housing options	18
Issues with University Housing	17
Commuting, parking, and location	17
Lack of information	13

*Note. Percent reporting refers to the proportion of respondents mentioning a given difficulty type out of all respondents who answered the open-ended question on housing difficulties (N=187)*

Although Table 1 presents problems encountered by respondents as discrete, most respondents described a constellation of difficulties. The following student simultaneously experienced issues related to affordability, timing, quality, and location:

*“After being accepted into my program in March, I found it difficult to find suitable housing close to campus (so I could walk to class/my lab). A lot of the housing was either in very poor condition or way out of my budget.”*

Students who had partners, children, or pets discussed the unique challenges they faced due to most housing being tailored to undergraduates and traditional graduate students. For example:

*“While looking for housing after accepting Rackham's offer in April [2017], most affordable apartments near campus that were suitable for my family (fiance + small dog) were offering leases beginning in summer of 2018. On-campus does not allow unmarried couples or pets. We were unwilling to sign a year lease and pay thousands of dollars in deposits without seeing the apartment first, so had difficulty finding an apartment when we arrived in Michigan in August. This resulted in higher monthly rent and a much longer commute.”*

## Community Context

Students are having difficulty finding housing for good reason: The Ann Arbor real estate and rental markets are highly competitive. As Table 2 indicates, the 2016 Ann Arbor rental vacancy rate was an incredibly low 1.7, down 74% from its 2010 level of 6.5. During this same period the median rent increased 29%, from \$922 to \$1,189. Absent any major local initiatives to build affordable housing, it seems likely that the rental markets will remain challenging for Rackham students for the foreseeable future.

Table 2. Housing statistics for Ann Arbor metro area, selected years

Year	Rental Vacancy Rate	Median Rent
2016	2.6	997
2014	4.6	981
2012	2.8	921
2010	8	839

*Note. Data from the US Census American Community Survey. 2016 is the most recent data publicly available. Rent is in US dollars.*

## Practices to Help Alleviate Housing Difficulties

Rackham may not be able to expand availability of rental units in Ann Arbor, but there are steps that can be taken to reduce the difficulties experienced by incoming PhD students:

- *Rackham can encourage departments and programs to provide timely notice to admitted students about the challenging housing market.* Given that Ann Arbor rental leases are often signed up to a year in advance, it is critical that newly admitted students be informed about the timing of the market as soon as they are admitted so that they can begin their housing search. Information about University Housing and the Off-Campus Housing Service could be provided in admission letters and other correspondence with students.
- University Housing is particularly attractive to international and out-of-state students who find it difficult to travel to Ann Arbor to tour potential rentals on the private market, yet numerous such students reported learning about whether they would receive on-campus housing in August. *Rackham can work with University Housing to improve communications with graduate students, particularly around notifying new students about apartment availability earlier.*