

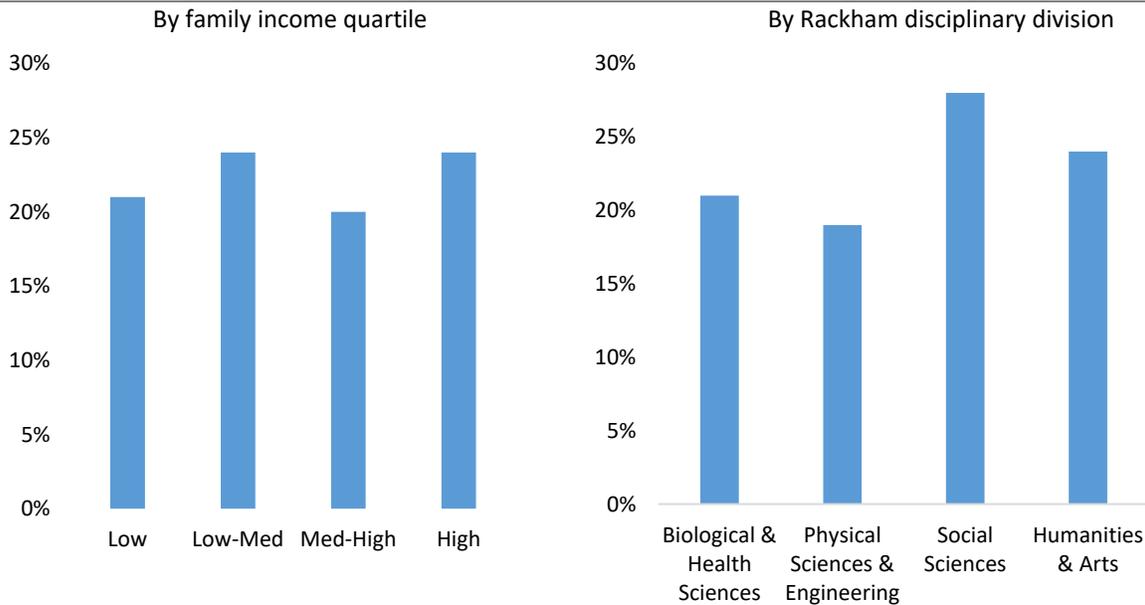
2018 Results: Housing

In September 2018, 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, twenty-two percent of respondents indicated that they had difficulty finding suitable housing. As the left graph in Figure 1 indicates, the percent experiencing difficulty is roughly the same across students’ family income. Students from Social Sciences and Humanities & the Arts tend to experience more difficulty finding suitable housing than students in Biological & Health Sciences and Physical Sciences & Engineering.

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



Why do Students have Difficulty Finding Suitable Housing?

Doctoral students had difficulty finding suitable housing for several reasons (see Table 1). The vast majority of responses (66%) were related to the affordability of local housing options. For instance, one respondent stated:

“Adequate housing for grad students within the comfortable range for monthly payment is rare. Often times, 70% of our stipend goes to JUST housing rent that doesn't even include utilities and/or living expense (grocery/loan payoff/etc.). Forces me and people like me to move away from Ann Arbor and or seek roommates when neither of which are the most feasible solutions.”

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

Difficulty Type	Percent Reporting
Affordability of housing options	66
Timing of housing search for newly admitted students	38
Commuting, parking, and location	16
Issues with University housing	16
Lack of information	14
Quality of Housing	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=134)

A substantial number of respondents (38%) also mentioned 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 2018 cohort was more likely to mention this difficulty than the 2017 cohort. It is not clear whether the Ann Arbor housing market continues to tighten. Perhaps because of these problems, some students sought housing options outside of Ann Arbor but noted additional costs involved with commuting to campus and issues with transportation. Sixteen percent of students mentioned issues with University Housing which included the limited availability for first-year students, problems with communication, restrictions on pets, and quality of units. Respondents also mentioned the lack of information provided about housing options and limited websites.

Although Table 1 presents problems encountered by respondents as discrete, most respondents simultaneously experience issues related to affordability, timing, quality and location:

“By the time I knew I was coming to Michigan, housing was almost always far away, expensive, or run-down. Additionally, university housing does not let us know whether or not we are able to obtain university housing until very late in the process, by which time many private housing options are unavailable.”

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:

“On campus housing is either too expensive or a slum apartment. I live thirty minutes away from campus because there are no suitable options for low income adult students with families and pets.”

Students relocating to Ann Arbor have difficulties in finding housing information and options from afar:

“There's not much information of housing for international students who try to find house through online before moving to US. I've encountered two schemers who tried to sell rooms that never existed. I reckon that there are risks of finding houses on-line, but international students have no other choices.”

Community Context

Students are having difficulty finding housing for good reason: The Ann Arbor real estate and rental markets are highly competitive. As data from US Census American Community Survey 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 publically available. Rent is in US dollars and includes median utility costs.

Practices to Help Alleviate Housing Difficulties

Rackham may not be able to expand the availability of rental units in Ann Arbor, but some steps 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.*