

2020 Results: Housing Report

In September 2020, Rackham administered the Michigan Doctoral Experience Study (MDES) to first-year Ph.D 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, 21 percent of respondents indicated they had difficulty finding suitable housing. In 2019, 26 percent of students reported difficulties. As data in Figure 1 indicates, the percent experiencing difficulty is higher for students in a low to medium family income range. Students from Physical Sciences & Engineering and Social Sciences tend to experience more difficulty finding suitable housing than students in Biological & Health Sciences and Humanities & the Arts.

Figure 1. Housing Difficulty by SES

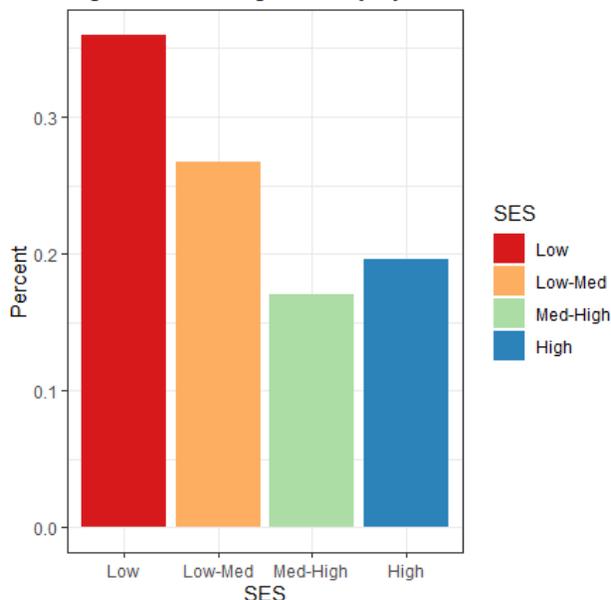
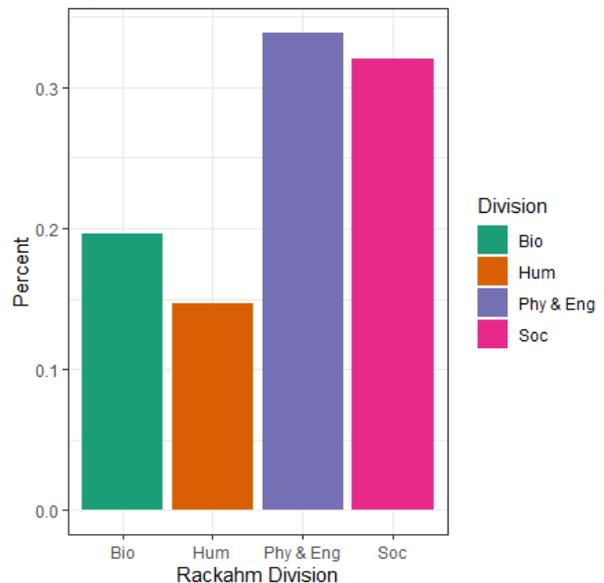


Figure 2. Housing Difficulty by Rackham Division



Why do Students have Difficulty Finding Suitable Housing?

Doctoral students described difficulty in finding suitable housing for several reasons (see Table 1). The majority of responses (75%) were related to the affordability of local housing options. This is similar to 2019, in which 76 percent of students mentioned affordability concerns. One respondent described these issues related to affordability, stating:

“I don’t necessary feel that I need to explain to the researchers that the city of Ann Arbor is in the middle of a housing crisis. Graduate students are paid less than the standard cost of living in Ann Arbor, which renders us unable to afford suitable housing for our needs. If I were living off my stipend alone and not financially reliant on my partner, I would not be able to find suitable housing (1 bedroom apt.) within my budget while still planning for the future (retirement/emergencies). This is a huge injustice at this university. While reliance on my partner is not an issue for me personally, I can see how

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this kind of imbalance could be used in other relationships as a manipulation tactic and form of abuse. U of M could mitigate this by giving grad students the funds required to live independently while still preparing for long-term financial success through investments and retirement funds.”

“I didn’t have my license to begin with and was planning to get it this summer, but because of the virus, the DMVs in my home state weren’t going to be open in time for me to get one. Even before that happened though, it would’ve been favorable for me to live near campus or near a grocery store so that I could walk to these essentials, but not many places were within walking distance of those kinds of plazas, or were priced in a way that I couldn’t afford. It’s good that I’m near a bus stop in case I need it, but I would rather just be in walking distance because now I’m not sure when a feasible time for me to get my license would be.”

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

Difficulty Type	Percent Reporting
Affordability of housing	75
Commuting, parking, and location	21
Timing of housing search for newly admitted students	19
Housing quality	16
Lack of information	16
Challenges coordinating from a distance	15
University housing concerns	7
Roommate challenges	7

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=130).

As Ann Arbor’s housing market continues to tighten (Table 2), students sought housing options outside of Ann Arbor. Nonetheless, this presents additional commuting challenges, including unreliable and time-consuming public transportation options and parking expenses. For example, 21 percent of students mentioned issues with community, parking, and location. A substantial number of respondents (19%) also said 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 (the last fall/winter). Respondents also mentioned a lack of information about housing options and challenges in coordinating finding housing while residing abroad or in another state (16 %).

Although Table 1 presents problems encountered by respondents as discrete categories, most respondents simultaneously experience issues related to affordability, timing, quality, and location, with the Covid-19 pandemic adding a layer of complexity:

“Coming in as a first-year student, many of the housing options were already taken given that re-signing usually happens in the fall while notifications about acceptance into graduate programs are released early spring of the next year. This along with the restrictions of traveling and visiting apartments associated with COVID made it difficult to find and view housing. It was hard to make the most informed decisions as someone who was not familiar with Ann Arbor or Michigan. I felt that I was left with more expensive, non-inclusive, and options that were further away from campus and the U.M. community.”

“Finding housing that is in good condition and near campus is impossible given the funding provided by the program. Most “affordable” housing hasn’t been renovated in a long time and is

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in poor condition. Good quality housing that is also affordable is far away from campus which necessitates the additional expenses associated with owning a car, including a campus parking pass which are extremely expensive and not conveniently located on campus.”

Students who had partners, children, or pets discussed the distinctive challenges they faced due to most housing being tailored to undergraduates and traditional graduate students. As one respondent noted:

“As a graduate student, I have a spouse and I have pets that are like family to me. I did not want to be in university housing because I would have to give up my pets and they are very important to my emotional well-being. Additionally my partner and I did not feel safe living in proximity to younger students. The Ann Arbor area is not pet-friendly for renters. The rents are relatively high.”

Students relocating to Ann Arbor have difficulties in finding housing information and options from a distance, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic:

“Very difficult to identify housing due to COVID. University-owned Graduate housing did not meet requirements and declined my application.”

“A lot of places are hidden from internet and you need to do a research about areas and deals.”

“COVID made this all quite a bit more difficult than I imagine a “normal” year might have been. I had to find a living space sight unseen and was unfamiliar with the area, as such I found it personally necessary to go a bit above my ideal budget to ensure that I was in a safe and quiet neighborhood (an experience that would have been quite different if I had gotten to visit Ann Arbor before moving out here).”

Community Context

Students having difficulty finding housing options are not surprising. The Ann Arbor real estate and rental markets are highly competitive and above the state average. As data from U.S. Census American Community Survey indicates, the 2018 Ann Arbor rental vacancy rate was 3.46 percent, down from its 2010 level (Table 2). During this same period, the median rent increased from \$1,136 to \$938. While the 2017 rental vacancy rate improved from 2016, it is still likely that the rental markets will remain challenging for Rackham students for the foreseeable future.

Table 2. Housing statistics for Ann Arbor, selected years

Year	Rental Vacancy Rate	Median Rent
2019	3.6	1,139
2018	3.5	1,116
2017	5.1	1,062
2016	2.6	997
2015	1.9	978
2014	4.6	981
2013	3	930
2012	2.8	921
2011	4.1	863
2010	8	839

Note. Data from the U.S. Census American Community Survey. 2017 is the most recent data publicly available.