

Housing Report: Fall 2021

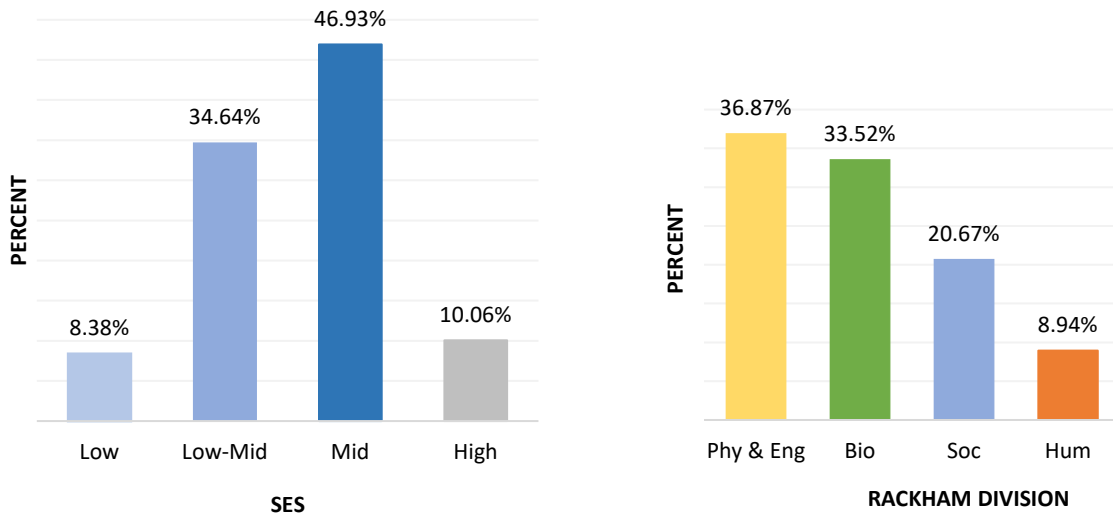
In September 2021, the Michigan Doctoral Experience Study (MDES) was administered to first-year Ph.D. students. As part of a module on financial circumstances, respondents were asked the following question: “Have you had any difficulty finding suitable housing in and around Ann Arbor?” Students reporting difficulties were then asked to report the nature of the difficulties.

I. Who is having difficulty finding suitable housing?

Overall, about 27 percent of the 668 respondents (n=179) indicated that they had difficulty finding suitable housing. In the previous year, 21% of the respondents reported difficulties.

Figure 1 indicates that in 2021, the largest proportion of students who reported difficulties were in a middle family income range, followed by those in a low to middle range. Figure 1 further shows that students from Physical Sciences and Engineering tend to experience the most difficulty finding suitable housing than students in other divisions, which is consistent from 2020. Closely, a large proportion of students in Biological and Health Sciences also reported difficulties finding housing compared to those in Social Sciences and Humanities and the Arts. This trend is also different from last year, during which students in Social Sciences were the second largest group to report difficulties with housing search.

Figure 1. Housing search difficulties by SES and Rackham division



II. Why do students have difficulty finding suitable housing?

Doctoral students described difficulty in finding suitable housing for several reasons (see Table 1).

Difficulty type	% reporting
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Housing costs and related issues	Affordability of housing	75
	Location	32
	Housing quality and living condition	18
	Commuting and transportation (e.g., parking)	16
	Roommate challenges (e.g., limited privacy)	9
Housing search and related issues	Timing of housing search	14
	Lack of information	11
Contract issues	University housing	10
	Off campus housing	13
Other issues	Pet, disability (access), stipend timing	8

Table 1. Main difficulties finding suitable housing

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=166). Excludes difficulties that are on the aggregate below 5%.

Housing costs and related issues

Similar to 2020, the majority of responses (75%) were related to the affordability of housing options in Ann Arbor. Nearly a third (32%) of respondents referenced the high cost of renting in Ann Arbor that ultimately force them to consider living farther away from campus or outside of Ann Arbor. This presented additional issues regarding commuting and transportation (16%), and safety (1%):

“There are very few rental properties available, particularly within walking distance to campus. All rental properties are incredibly expensive. The housing I have secured is managed by an uncaring and rather neglectful landlord company. Living in the next town over seems to be the only reasonable option for most graduate students, but that is a difficult situation to find yourself if you do not own a vehicle. All of these factors make the prospect of creating community in the UM and Ann Arbor areas rather daunting.”

“It was impossible for me to find suitable and affordable housing in Ann Arbor. Prices are incredibly high, and totally unsustainable within the limits of my program’s funding. Most of the students I know who live in Ann Arbor have either a dual-income household or live with roommates (the latter of which is not ideal for me as I am immunocompromised and we are living during a pandemic). However, by finding housing in Ypsilanti, I was able to fit my living expenses into my budget despite the extra stress and cost of commuting (wear on my vehicle, paying for parking and gas, etc.).”

“I wanted to find housing live by myself but it is very difficult to find anything that is affordable. I ended up finding housing in Ypsilanti that was affordable but the management is very unethical

and my neighbors are unsafe. Police have visited my apartment building multiple times due to one of my neighbors being a sex offender. As a Black man living in this space, I've felt a very heightened anxiety to having so much unexpected contact with police. Yet I don't feel like I'm in the position to move due to the costs involved.”

Respondents who secured housing in Ann Arbor area then explained that their housing choice was at the cost of lower quality of housing (18%) and roommate challenges (e.g., limited privacy) (9%):

“The vast majority of rentals here are overpriced for low quality. The current apartment I'm in has water that stains my bathroom red, a smell of marijuana (I had to request maintenance to come clean the carpet. The landlords didn't bother to fix it before I moved in), no parking, unfinished wall painting, bubbles on the walls, and numerous other issues. I desperately want to move to Ypsilanti... (omitted)”

“Housing pricing is extremely expensive given the stipend. You need to purchase a car and live outside of UM area in order to live in affordable housing. Instead, I've had to settle for living with 4 other people, in a house in terrible shape in order to be able to afford rent.”

Housing search and related issues

A substantial number of respondents also indicated that difficulties with finding suitable housing were related to housing search process including timing (14%), lack of information (11%), and challenges of finding a roommate(s) (4%). Respondents highlighted that the timing of admission and enrollment decisions left insufficient time to do housing search, often remotely with limited information and tours. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic continued to add a layer of complexity:

“It was hard to find housing by the time I accepted my offer mid-April. I also did not know where to look for housing other than using the google search engine. Although the university housing website provides some resources for on-campus and off campus housing, it was not particularly extensive.”

“When I arrived at Ann Arbor, all apartments were fully booked! After one month! I am still staying with a friend until the end of October where I expect to move to an apartment in Ypsilanti.”

“Northwood will not tell people whether they have housing until at least 30 days before the anticipated move in date. This was too worrying for me because many students expressed on the Reddit for U of M that there have been problems with not getting housing in Northwood and they were screwed over. This was a huge stressor for me. I ended up getting a more expensive off-campus housing, which was a huge problem because many of the places were already full from undergrads getting their housing earlier than I even decided on going to grad school.”

“The calendar to look for a house started earlier in the year or even a year before, making it hard to get a place on time, particularly for incoming [international] students. The university housing option, the application for an apartment, was declined due to incomplete vaccination status and to consider the first-month rent in advance.”

Contract issues

Regarding both on-campus university housing and off-campus housing, about 23% of respondents indicated that they experienced administrative difficulties and contract issues during housing search (e.g., delayed move-in dates due to unfinished construction, unresponsive landlords):

“I was talking with a few different people in the spring about housing options that I'd found on the Michigan housing portal, and all of them just stopped talking to me at some point. One situation confirmed I had a room for the fall and then they also ghosted (in the parlance of the day) in July. I eventually found a property management company with a few open options for the fall, but that was after a lot of anxiety over finding a place.”

“I have a place but they lied about the move in date. It turns out they weren't finished with construction and have delayed my move in date at least four times since August 24th. I'm receiving daily funds from them and hotel accommodations but it's been a frustrating situation.”

“I only found out that my housing application on campus was approved about a week before the move in date. As a result I almost signed another lease for a location much less suitable for my needs.”

“Signed lease with The One Apartment, which delays my move-in date for long only a few days before my original move-in date. Was able to end the lease now but it was frustrating.”

International student specific challenges were also reported (4%). It was primarily related to their visa status and other relevant circumstances (e.g., difficulty of contacting landlords/property management being in a different time zone, abroad):

“I didn't have my visa, so I had to rent an apartment more expensive than I expected because they accepted me without a visa.”

“I am now [in September] in the process of finding suitable accommodation. I will move to Ann Arbor with my wife only in mid-October (because of the visa problems), and we have not found accommodation yet.”

Other issues

Some respondents (8%) noted a number of miscellaneous difficulties related to finding suitable housing. Overall, the responses mainly discussed challenges finding pet-friendly housing, accessible housing for someone with disabilities, and culturally inclusive environments:



“We have two cats and my husband works from home and needs a separate office. We could not find affordable 2+ bedroom apartments that would allow pets within reasonable commuting distance to campus via public transportation.”

“It was difficult to find wheelchair accessible housing. I managed to find something I can work with, but it is not ideal.”

“When I started to look for a room in a shared apartment, some roommates regretted when they knew that I am from Colombia. That made me feel bad, so I decided to live alone even being more expensive.”

Community Context

The finding that students are having difficulty finding housing is hardly surprising giving the national context of Ann Arbor real estate. Rental markets are highly competitive and above the state average. As data from U.S. Census American Community Survey indicates, the 2019 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 \$839 to \$1,139. These are highly competitive numbers comparable to

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.

III. Conclusion

Compared to 2020 cohort, a larger percentage of survey respondents reported difficulties with finding suitable housing in 2021. Most cited difficulties were associated with rental housing costs in the city of Ann Arbor, which had additional implications mainly on the location and quality of housing. Living further away from campus due to rental costs also led to longer commute and increased costs related to transportation. Many students continued to report that they started housing search too late without prior knowledge about the competitive Ann Arbor housing market.