

# How Students Pick Their Housing Situations: Factors and Analysis

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## **Abstract**

*To learn about why students choose to move out of university provided housing, Kefei and Anthony conducted a research about five factors that students consider when choosing their living situations. During our research, we interviewed with an expert from the university, reviewed some past research studies, conducted three focus groups to gather qualitative data, and sent out online surveys to collect quantitative data. Our major hypothesis was that students considered rent as the most important factor and safety as the least important factor when they made their housing decisions. However, we found that nearly all participants of our online survey considered safety as the most important factor. At the end of this paper, we offered some explanations and policy implications to the University Housing Department based on what we learned from the research.*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

At the beginning of their sophomore year, a number of students move out of their dorms and live in an apartment or a house. In the Champaign-Urbana area, there are 14 University residence halls, 14 Private Certified houses, and a plenty of apartments available. Why do students move out of their dorms after their freshman year? What factors do students consider when they make their housing choices?

The purpose of this paper is to provide information about how students choose their apartments and housing choice in general, to analyze why students consider certain factors more important than other factors, and to explore some suggestions for University Housing to attract more students. During the research, we reviewed past research studies related to student housing, conducted three focus group interviews, sent out online surveys, and interviewed experts in order to get a better understanding of students' decisions on housing, and to compare different perceptions by students and university officials. Our main hypothesis was that students choose their apartments based on factors such as location, rent, amenities, safety, financial situation, and roommate choice, with rent the most important factor and safety the least important factor. After conducting the research, we drew the conclusion that students do consider the factors that we proposed when they make their housing decisions, but they value safety the most among other factors.

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, first-year students are required to live in a certified facility (University Housing, Private Certified Housing, or a certified fraternity or sorority) for their first year. The Office of the Dean of Students maintains certified housing standards and grants recertification. Students can freely choose their housing accommodations after their first year.

There are several university policies that might affect students' choice of housing. According to the Smoke-Free Policy, "all campus facilities and grounds are smoke free, meaning a complete prohibition of smoking any materials." Under this policy, students who smoke can choose to quit smoking by participating in quitting programs offered by the university, or move out of university housing to accommodate themselves. Moreover, the Sports in the Hall Policy prohibited the use of any sports equipment due to the risk of personal injury, damage to the residential facilities or individual property, and disruption within the environment. With these restrictions, students who possess these properties may choose to move out of residence halls in order to place these properties inside their rooms.

Other factors can have positive impacts on students' choice to live in university housing. For example, university residence halls and certified houses are typically near the academic buildings, and also near the MTD bus stops. Students would prefer university housing because of the convenient locations, saving time on transportation. Also, student organizations and residence halls usually hold a variety of activities for students to participate in their

spare time. Free recreational facilities are another reason for students to choose university housing. Therefore, although some policies imposed on students restrict students to a certain extent, the university has provided various benefits that attract students to live in campus housing.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

We have read various scholarly articles relevant to our research topic. Many of these articles come from the University of Illinois, but some come from other universities with similar housing situations as the University of Illinois. We believe by referring to these papers, we can comprehend our topic better and have a better direction to conduct our research.

One factor that was analyzed in students' housing choice is risk assessment. According to a study by Sadayuki (2015), students who prefer university housing over private housing do so because of the lack of risk involved with university housing. These risks involve broken amenities, bad customer services, etc. In the apartment market, students sometimes have to balance between a lower priced but risky apartment, or a higher priced safer one. With this consideration, it could be better to stay in university residence halls to avoid those risks.

In another research paper, Seow-Eng, Petrova, and Spieler (2013) pointed to location and safety elements in students' housing choice. They found that although there is growth in the off-campus market, a majority of university students still prefer living on campus because of the convenience it provides. In terms of safety, universities with higher crime rates see a greater number of students living in university housing compared to schools with lower crime rates.

Delgadillo and Erickson (2006) examined student satisfaction with off-campus housing. Findings revealed that apartment manager's responsiveness and fairness can also determine student satisfaction with off-campus housing. All these articles provided us some factors to consider when we examine the important factors that affect students' housing decisions. After full consideration, we decided to include six factors that could be easily assessed in our research analysis, which are rent, safety, location, amenity, financial situation, and roommate choice.

## III. HYPOTHESES

We drew our major hypothesis that students valued rent the most and safety the least when making their housing decision. To be more precise,

we split our main hypothesis into five questions based on different student groups. These hypotheses are listed as follows:

1. People who have a part-time job rate rent higher than safety, location, and amenities.
2. People who feel safe around their apartments may not think safety as an important factor, so they may rate it low.
3. People who do not pay their own rent are not as concerned with the cost of their living arrangements as opposed to those who do pay their own rent.
4. International students rate safety as the most important factor.
5. People who live in houses do so because they can live with many of their friends.

## IV. METHODOLOGY

### *Interviews with Experts*

Due to a conflict of schedule, we only sent a list of questions and got an email response from an Associate Director. As a result, we found that the university was providing a quality service to students, and the university housing department had a precise perception about students' preferences.

The Associate Director is from the Housing Information Office, which oversees the Office that provided University Owned Residence Hall & Private Certified housing options for students. According to the Associate Director, the university determined the semester rent by calculating a per night cost based on the number of nights in a semester and the cost to provide programs and services, such as rooms, meals, on call staffs, and academic programs. To secure students' safety, the university had security and access committees that continuously evaluate the policies that are related to safety. Some examples are card access, security patrol, and security cameras. To evaluate amenities, the Office took a consideration on student feedback, market trends, and costs to the students. Besides, students were provided with flexible roommate options.

Furthermore, the Office also did surveys to learn about students' opinions. According to the survey, students left the university provided housing mainly because room and board price was too high, quality of life/social/noise/policies/RA, or just time/ready to move on. On the contrary, students chose to stay in the dorms because of location,

community atmosphere, or other cost considerations. In sum, the university has a relatively precise understanding about students' choice, and we will compare it with our survey results in the following paper.

We adopted both focus group interviews and online surveys to get qualitative data and quantitative data in order to test our hypotheses. From the focus group interviews, we could gain more insights about considerations of different individuals, and we were able to ask questions to have them clarify some possible confusions. As for online survey data, we could easily see the whole population's choices and conduct statistical analysis. Through drawing diagrams and doing regression analysis, we could see the correlations of different factors that affect students' housing choice.

#### *Focus Group*

Having read about the previous studies by students who also participated in the Ethnography of the University Initiative, we realized that it is difficult to recruit strangers to participate in focus group interview within the time limit. Hence, we recruited participants by finding our friends to participate in the research, and having our friends recommend their friends to participate. As a result, we conducted three focus groups, with one group including three people, one group including four people, and a control group including five people who lived in fraternity houses. Participants from the other two focus groups all lived in apartments.

We selected the Undergraduate Library and Armory as public places to conduct the focus group interviews. Kefei moderated two groups that lived in apartments, and Anthony moderated the control group that lived in fraternity houses. Our focus group questions were constructed in an order that starts with ice-breaking questions and generally moves to deeper questions. In order to maintain a comfortable interview atmosphere, we asked some follow-up questions when we found the answers needed more explanations, and we allowed participants to discuss with each other as long as the topic was relevant to our research study.

Some of the in-depth focus group questions were as follows:

1. Why did you choose to live in your current accommodation?
2. Who pays the rent?
3. How comfortable do you feel about your living accommodation?
4. How long does it take from your living accommodation to class?

5. Rank the importance of the following factors from a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being least important, and 10 being most important) when you choose your living accommodation, and briefly explain. Location, rent, amenities, safety, your relationship with your roommate.

#### *Online Survey*

To answer our research question by using quantitative data, we decided to send out online surveys that complement our focus groups. We were given suggestions from our peers and our instructor on how to adjust the questions to be more easily understandable and answerable for an online survey. Moreover, to find individuals willing to participate in our survey, we designed the survey that took no longer than fifteen minutes to answer. When we had our final set of questions prepared, we created our survey using the website, Qualtrics, as the survey generator. Some sample questions include:

1. Rate the importance of the following factors when you chose your living situation: roommate choice, rent, location, safety, and amenities.
2. How often do you make housing payments?
3. Do you currently have a paid job?
4. Do you have student loans?
5. How safe is the neighborhood around your residence?

We distributed the link to our survey throughout various social media groups and email lists we had compiled in class. After we started receiving feedback, we checked frequently to make sure those data were valid. Having finished the data collection process, we analyzed the data using a statistical software called Stata.

#### *Focus Group Results*

All participants in our three focus groups were students from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, ranging from sophomores to juniors, and varying in different majors. The participants all lived in university residence halls or private certified houses during their first year attending the university. After the first year of college, the participants in our control group lived in the same fraternity house, and the participants in the two other focus groups lived in apartments.

When we asked about roommate choice, all

except one participants had at least one roommate. Also, the participants claimed they got along with their roommates. However, their explanations were quite different. While some people gave all the positive evaluations on their roommates, some participants did not talk to their roommates, as long as they did not interfere with each other, because “this type of relationship prevents any disagreements from happening”, according to one participant.

In order to learn why they chose their current apartments or fraternity house, we directly asked for the reasons. Participants who lived in apartments mentioned convenient location, complete amenities, relationships with roommates, and fair rent. To be more specific, the participants who were satisfied with the locations of their apartments stated that their apartments were close to the County Market or restaurants, and also close to their academic buildings. Those who mentioned utility were satisfied with the stove in the kitchen, and the internet speed. Furthermore, one participant claimed the rent was fair based on the quality of his apartment. The control group had a distinct perspective compared with the other two focus groups. All of the participants in the control group claimed that they wanted to live with their good friends and get to know others better. Additionally, the location of the fraternity was convenient for them to go to class. Apparently, participants living in the fraternity house put more weight on the roommate factor, or, to be more precise, they gave more weight to the social factor than other participants living in apartments.

As for how comfortable the participants felt about their living accommodations, the participants living in apartments all noticed some problems with the apartments. For example, one participant said the laundry machines were downstairs, which was inconvenient. Two participants complained about the old utilities and the poor maintenance service. Nevertheless, they were satisfied with their apartment overall. Similar things were mentioned in the control group. The participants living in the fraternity house complained about the loudness, the lack of respect, and the taste and cleanliness of food. In terms of positive feedback, they felt it was convenient to eat, sleep, and workout in the same building.

Different from our initial hypothesis, most participants said that their parents paid for their rents, not just international students. Some participants had a part-time job, but according to them, the amount of money they earned could not cover their rent and other expenses.

For the final questions, we asked the participants to rank different factors: location, safety, amenities, and rent. We did not ask about their financial situation because some people could be

sensitive about it, and we could actually infer it from their expenditures. As a result, participants from the two focus groups generally put location and safety as the most important factors when considering their apartments. Moreover, they considered safety as an important factor because they were concerned about the safety issues around their apartments, and they paid close attention to campus crime alerts. We also found that international students focused more on safety issues than domestic students did, thus proving our fourth hypothesis. Besides, for the control group, the participants’ responses were clear. They put location and rent as the most important factors with amenities and safety the least important factors. They explained that a major reason for them to choose the fraternity house was due to the convenient location to get to classes. Furthermore, they also mentioned that because they had siblings, they did not want to burden their family, so a cheap rent was preferable.

From the focus group interviews, some of our hypotheses got confirmed. As we stated in our hypothesis, people who did not pay their own rent were not as concerned with the cost of their living arrangements as opposed to those who did pay their own rent. Nonetheless, participants who did not pay for their rent still considered rent as an important factor because they did not want to put financial burden on their families. Another hypothesis was confirmed as well. International students did largely consider safety as the most important factor. Finally, from the control group’s responses, we could conclude that people who live in houses do so because they could live with many of their friends.

#### *Online Survey Results*

As a result of the online survey, we got 165 responses in total. Through analyzing the data, the results confirmed some of our hypotheses but contradicted with our main hypothesis that safety was the least important factor.

Our first hypothesis was that people who have a part-time job on campus may have more financial responsibilities, and therefore rate rent as their most important factor when choosing their living situations. As hypothesized, a major majority of individuals who have a part time job on campus did consider rent a very important factor when deciding where to live, according to the survey data. However, rent was also a very important factor among students who answered that they do not have a part time job on campus. This tells us that rent is crucial to students’ housing choice regardless of how financially stable they were. Furthermore, we ran a regression to see if students with a paid job lived in housing accommodations with a cheaper rent. We set

a dummy variable “paid job” and selected the amount of rent as the dependent variable. From the output, we the coefficient of paid job is a negative value. This indicates that students who had a part-time job tend to choose to live in places that had a cheaper rent.

Our second hypothesis was that people who continually feel safe around their apartment do not consider safety as a very important factor. Using the same process to test this hypothesis with Stata, we compiled the results into a diagram. [See Appendix A].

Surprisingly, the opposite was true of our hypothesis. Given the diagram above, a large portion of students living in very safe neighborhood consider safety as very important, while all students who lived in unsafe neighborhood only considered safety as a moderately important. Hence, we initially underestimated how safety impacts on students’ housing choices. One possible explanation for the result might be that people chose a safe neighborhood because they value safety a lot, rather than that people do not value safety because they lived in a safe neighborhood.

Our next hypothesis was that people who do not pay their own rent are not as concerned with the cost of their living arrangements as opposed to those who do pay their own rent. Using Stata we were able to examine both the importance of rent, and how involved parents are in a student’s financial responsibilities. Of the students surveyed, 92.48% considered rent to be at least somewhat important in their decision making process. To answer our hypothesis, we also examined parent’s financial involvement. As a result, it is evident that parents of the participants were very active in helping pay some costs during a student’s education. More than 50% of the students answered their parents covered all of their living expenses. In contrast, only less than 5% answered that their parents did not help them pay for any of their expenses. These findings contradict our hypothesis and suggest that even though some individuals do not pay for their housing, they still feel obligated to try and find a place with a reasonable price.

The fourth hypothesis we examined involved international students and safety. Due to the fact that international students are very far away from home, they would be more likely to rate safety as a very important factor when deciding where to live. According to the survey results, we found that of international students, 59% rated safety as a very important factor while only 6% rated safety as an unimportant factor when choosing a housing option. The finding confirmed our hypothesis that international students are very concerned with safety

when looking for a place to live.

Our final hypothesis was that individuals who live in a house do so because of the opportunity to live with many of their friends. To test this we examined how individuals living in a house responded to the question of roommate importance. We found that of individuals living in a house on campus, 70.37% rated roommate choice as very important. Interestingly, people who lived in apartments responded very similarly. 78.95% of the students who lived in apartments chose roommate choice as a very important factor. This percentage is even larger than the percentage of students who lived in houses. This shows us that living with your friends is not only an important factor among house dwellers, but remains true for most of the individuals who lived in apartments. However, among individuals who lived in university provided housing, only 65% of them thought roommate choice as very important. The lower percentage is reasonable because some students who choose to live in resident halls are willing to be assigned with random roommates.

## V. LIMITATIONS

Although we foresaw some constraints of the research and attempted to solve the potential problems, we still encountered some difficulties during the recruitment process, and when we conducted our focus group interviews. Specifically, through omitting the process of recruiting participants that we were not familiar with, our participants for focus groups and online surveys had some restrictions. For example, the participants had similar backgrounds as ours, and the participants were likely to answer questions in a similar way to how we could answer.

Another restriction was that we only got 12 participants for our focus group in total. Our expectation for focus groups was 5-6 people in each focus group, with 3-4 focus groups in total. Because of the limited size of the focus group, we were not able to analyze more individual’s considerations. Hence, other individuals’ different decision-making processes were not represented in the research.

Furthermore, despite the fact that we recruited a control group with students living in a fraternity house in the focus groups, we missed a control group of people living in dorms. The consequence was that we were not able to compare students’ reasons for staying in dorms with students’ reasons for moving out of dorms. Lastly, for each focus group interview, there was only one of us presented and moderated the interview. It would have been better if two of us both presented in the focus group interviews, with one person recording and asking questions, and another

person wrote down some notes and follow-up questions.

Similar constraints existed during our online survey recruitment process. Since we could not have the university send out surveys for us, we only sent the surveys to our friends and tried to let them send the surveys to their friends. Thus, the participants of the online survey might share some similarities with us.

## VI. CONCLUSION

There are many important factors to consider when students decide where to live. In our study, we chose six factors: rent, location, amenities, safety, amenities and financial situation to analyze. From the responses from our focus group participants, it was clear that location, safety, and rent were a key factor in deciding where to live. Meanwhile, the online survey data suggested that rent and safety were among the most important factors to consider, because most students do not want to burden their families and regard safety as a necessary element in housing choice. We were surprised to find that safety, which we considered as the least important factor, actually plays an important role in students' housing choice.

To attract students living in residence halls, the university could hold more activities to get students engaged in a social atmosphere, and get to know each other better. Moreover, the university residence halls should provide more flexible choices for students to choose their roommates. Since safety is a significant element in students' decisions, the university could provide more information about security methods (i.e. installation of security camera and the activities of campus police). The university policy makers can also work closely with the private housing providers to ensure that a specific set of standards on amenities are met. Last but not the least, the university needs to consider adjusting room and board price reasonably by controlling spending. We would leave this open-ended question to further research studies.

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## APPENDIX A

| Importance of Safety<br>Safety of Neighborhood | Importance of Safety |                      |                |
|--|----------------------|----------------------|----------------|
|  | not important        | moderately important | very important |
| unsafe   | 0.00%                | 100.00%              | 0.00%          |
| moderately safe                                | 6.90%                | 51.72%               | 41.38%         |
| very safe                                      | 6.00%                | 48.00%               | 46.00%         |