

Raquel Rutledge Audio Transcript

One ethical issue – that I've come across recently in doing the work that we do in investigations – has to do with minimizing harm. And it's something we really didn't think about at the outset necessarily. We were working on a project on electrical fires and how they disproportionately impact African-American renters in Milwaukee. And we hired a master electrician to go out and randomly inspect homes where people were willing to let us in and take a look at their electrical systems to see if they had obvious dangers, obvious electrical hazards that the electrician could spot. So we went in and we knocked on 50 doors and there were 15 people and families that let us come in and do inspections. And the electrician found fire hazards and serious danger with exactly 14 of the 15 places. So there were quite a few problems.

So we had the reports and our dilemma was how we share this information with people. How imminent is the danger with this fire risk? And do we share it with just the tenants or do we share it with the landlords as well? And our concern was that the homes where we were inspecting are a population of people that often have limited options in where they live. And so we were concerned that there could be possible retaliation against the tenants for allowing us into their homes. And a lot of the people ... where we went, the people have had evictions on their records and other challenges to finding homes. So the, the question that we're asking is, you know, the risk of the fire versus the risk of retaliation and could somebody end up homeless? We think we're doing a public service by alerting somebody to a potential firetrap in their house, but are we not paying attention to unintended consequences? That could be, the landlord gets ticked off and raises the rent or kicks them out and they end up homeless.