One major cause of evictions can be explained in eight words: Evictions in Virginia are too easy for landlords.

To evict, a landlord sends a notice. Six days later if the eviction is for unpaid rent, or 31 days later if the eviction is for some other reason, the landlord can file an eviction lawsuit in court. No attorney is needed. The court provides a free lawsuit paper. The cost to file with the court and notify the tenant is $58.

The landlord gets a court hearing in three weeks. At least 75% of the tenants will not come to court, according to a survey conducted by the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society. At least 95% of the remaining tenants will not have an attorney, a study by the National
Center for State Courts shows. At least 99% of the time the landlord will win.

The landlord immediately may ask for the Writ of Eviction. As soon as 11 days later, but usually 15 to 25 days later, the sheriff will evict the tenant.

If you were a landlord, why would you not do this? The landlord likely did not get paid. (At least 90% of Richmond evictions are for nonpayment.) The landlord has expenses — mortgage, employees, management, maintenance, insurance, taxes. The landlord is not a social service agency and has no obligation to house people. The landlord operates a business to make money and show a profit.

Even a nonprofit landlord operates a business to not lose money. If too many landlords lose money, they go out of business. The shortage of rental housing becomes worse.

So evictions really are not that bad.

Except they are.

Because evictions ignore the social costs they impose, not only on tenants, but also on a society as a whole.

If you operate a factory, it is easier to make money if you pollute air and water rather than using pollution controls. It is cheaper to build cars without seat belts and safety equipment instead of installing them. Making pajamas flame-retardant costs more than not making them that way.
We recognize the social costs of pollution, unsafe cars and flammable pajamas. We don’t allow businesses to pass those social costs on to the rest of us. The business has to absorb those social costs, even if the business makes less money.

But we don’t do that for landlords wanting to evict. We ignore the social costs, allow landlords to pass them on to the rest of us, and make it easy to evict. Too easy.

An eviction directly and negatively affects a child’s education. Ten of 18 Richmond elementary schools in neighborhoods with eviction rates above the city average are unaccredited. Six of seven Richmond elementary schools in neighborhoods with eviction rates below the city average are fully accredited. Eviction is an education issue.

The Richmond eviction rate increases as the share of the minority population increases, even when holding income and other factors stay constant. Eviction is a racial issue.

Eviction poses an immediate risk of homelessness and loss of personal property. An eviction judgment, or even the filing of an eviction lawsuit, makes it much harder for a family to rent again. It also might make a family ineligible for affordable housing.

Evicted families invariably move into poor-quality neighborhoods and housing. Evictions break up social support structures — schools, churches, and nearby family members and neighbors. Eviction is a social issue.

For workers who get evicted, the likelihood of being laid off is 15% higher. Eviction is a jobs issue.
No problem in Richmond affects more people, more seriously, in more areas of their lives than eviction. As Matthew Desmond, the author of “Evicted,” said: “Eviction is not a symptom of poverty; it is a cause of poverty.”

So how do we reduce this cause of poverty? We have to make it as easy for a landlord not to evict than for a landlord to evict.

Richmond’s voluntary Eviction Diversion Program, which should start between mid-September and early October, is a good — but small — first step. Between 300 to 500 tenants might have 25% to 50% of their rent arrears paid by the program, as long as they pay the first 25% of the arrears by the first court date, pay ongoing rent as it becomes due, and — most crucially — the landlord agrees.

But more is needed. More eviction prevention money to keep evictions from coming to court. More tenant-friendly court forms and procedures so fewer tenants fail to come to court. And more legal aid and volunteer attorneys to defend those tenants who come to court.

When not evicting becomes as easy as evicting, only then will we see eviction rates come down.

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