The Eviction Crisis Is Already Here and It's Crushing Black Moms

Mass evictions could be enormously destabilizing for communities of color, experts and housing advocates warn.

By Emma Ockerman

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In late March, Lacresha Lewis was fired from her job as a package handler at FedEx. She had called out of multiple shifts because she couldn’t find anyone to care for
“I knew without that job, I wasn’t going to be able to make the full payment of rent,” said the 35-year-old single mother, who is Black.

She pays $1,025 a month for an apartment in Beaumont, Texas, and her stimulus check came just in time for her to make April’s rent. But in the months that followed, Lewis quickly fell behind, since she, like many Americans, hasn’t yet received the unemployment benefits she applied for. About two weeks ago, her landlord told her they’d proceed with evictions in August, Lewis said.

“I understood where they were coming from, because they’re under contract with people that they have to pay to, but also everybody knows what everybody is going through,” she said. “Everybody should be more understanding.”

Amid widespread job loss, reduced hours, and pay cuts, more than 12.5 million renters, like Lewis, were unable to make their most recent payment, according to
Black or Latinx — the populations that are also more likely to rent, and more likely to spend a bigger portion of their income on housing. That’s while Black and Latinx people have been disproportionately harmed by the virus itself, and the resulting job loss.

Housing advocates anticipate that eviction filings against those vulnerable, non-paying households could eventually build into an onslaught of homelessness, especially as the patchwork safety net created to prevent widespread poverty during the pandemic erodes.

More than half of all U.S. states, including Texas, now lack the eviction moratoriums that were temporarily implemented by court or executive order at the onset of the pandemic, leaving the decision to move forward with proceedings up to local courts, city governments, and landlords. The CARES Act eviction protection for tenants living in federally backed properties expires July 25, and Congress is still determining whether it will extend or slash the extra $600 weekly benefit for unemployed workers that’s set to end this month.

For some Americans, the eviction crisis is already here.
to a recent Center for Public Integrity report that examined more than 8,000 cases filed between March 27 and July 10.

That disparity was present before the virus, too. Over the past few years, as the affordable housing shortage has deepened nationwide, regional studies of eviction records in Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Chicago, and Boston have shown that renters residing in predominantly Black neighborhoods face higher rates of eviction filings. And women are especially vulnerable. According to one January analysis of eviction data from the American Civil Liberties Union, landlords filed evictions against Black women at almost twice the rate of white renters in 17 out of 36 states between 2012 and 2016.

“The overwhelming majority of our housing clients are Black mothers,” said Isaac Sturgill, the housing practice group manager at Legal Aid of North Carolina, which represents low-income tenants. “That problem is just going to be exacerbated.”

“It’s a very dark thought”
Black and Latinx renters — primarily women, often single mothers — will be evicted during a global pandemic. They’ll build up credit card debt while trying to survive. Their cars will be repossessed because they can’t make payments, potentially leaving them without a place to shelter. And they may wind up in bankruptcy court.

“I don’t want to think about what our society will look like when a good number — large numbers — of single moms, are unemployed, struggling to raise their kids, dealing with homelessness and hygiene issues,” Karni said. “It’s a very dark thought.”

Mass evictions could be enormously destabilizing for communities of color, experts and housing advocates warn. Evictions can wear on a person’s credit score, stain their rental history, and push families into substandard rental units as they search for affordable housing in a country that increasingly has little of it to go around.

Lewis, for example, was evicted last year and was homeless for several months as a result. To get back on her feet, she had to work two jobs, her children had to receive social security benefits, and she had to be willing to pay twice the usual security deposit on the apartment she moved into in December. She doesn’t want to go through that again.
told VICE News that “FedEx Ground takes these concerns seriously and will have the appropriate representative contact Ms. Lewis to clarify this matter.”

A wave of evictions may ultimately erase the little progress that’s been made in addressing housing segregation over the past few decades, said Eric Dunn, director of litigation at the National Housing Law Project. People with eviction records will be pushed out of more desirable homes and communities and into the neighborhoods where landlords are willing to overlook tarnished credit and rental histories.

“What it’s really going to do is re-segregate communities the same as redlining and other policies of that nature did over the preceding decades,” Dunn said.

That could be compounded by foreclosures, too. Homeowners are also suffering, even if not on quite the same scale as renters. Nearly 15 million owner-occupied housing units have little to no confidence in their ability to pay next month’s mortgage bill, according to Census data. Nearly 2 million of those homeowners are Black, which is especially concerning since that demographic has already faced declining rates of homeownership.

“The foreclosure cases are definitely coming,” Sturgill said.

And the landlords who’ve gone months without payment may be among them.
There’s a domino effect that takes place when property owners can’t collect rent, said Robert Pinnegar, the chief executive officer of the National Apartment Association. Landlords aren’t paying just their mortgages but also often the salaries of their own staff, maintenance costs, and property taxes.

Already, properties that low-income renters can afford are in short supply, in part because they’re not profitable to build.

If operators of the nation’s remaining affordable buildings are forced into foreclosure or selling off their units, the squeeze on affordable housing could become even more dire.

“You only need to get one or two months behind in rent, and the whole model, especially for smaller operators, becomes in jeopardy,” said Pinnegar. “We had a housing affordability crisis going into this, and my fear is that harm is done to the delicate balance of our housing stock, and we have an even worse problem on the other side of this.”

Pinnegar supports direct rental subsidies to those “that truly need help,” he said, in addition to widespread mortgage forbearance. In the meantime, he said, property owners should work with their residents to keep them in place by offering payment plans.
emergency rental assistance and $75 billion in mortgage relief in the HEROES Act, the $3 trillion relief package that the House of Representatives passed in May. There's also a bill, introduced in June by Sen. Elizabeth Warren and others, to stall many evictions until March 2021.

But those proposals are unlikely to succeed in their current form in a Republican-controlled Senate.

“Without significant federal intervention, there will be a wave in evictions and a spike in homelessness across the country,” said Diane Yentel, the president and CEO of the National Low Income Housing Coalition.

Natasha McLean was laid off from her job transporting kids with disabilities to and from school in March. She hasn't paid the $775 monthly rent for her Richmond, Virginia apartment since then, and is now among the renters who are currently on the knife’s edge of eviction and frustrated with government inaction.

McLean only just began receiving unemployment benefits in June, right around the time Virginia’s supreme court allowed the state’s eviction moratorium to end. By
“We’re supposed to be the richest country in the world, and I don’t feel like there’s help for people in my predicament,” the 42-year-old said.

Her attorney, Palmer Heenan of the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society, successfully requested that her case be delayed until September, using a new state law that temporarily protects tenants impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic from immediate removal if they request help in court. That gave her a bit more time to catch up.

“I can’t say that eviction is worse than going through a criminal prosecution, but if it’s not worse, it certainly comes close,” Heenan said. “The ramifications of eviction are catastrophic.”

Cover: Annie Gordon, left, and Jenny Clark, rally for protection from evictions Saturday, June 27, 2020, in the Mattapan neighborhood of Boston. Massachusetts' tenant eviction moratorium is slated to expire in mid-August. (AP Photo/Michael Dwyer)