For Black Families, Evictions Are Still At A Crisis Point — Despite Moratorium

February 24, 2021 · 7:21 AM ET
Heard on Morning Edition

PAM FESSLER

5-Minute Listen
Aniya's overnight shift at an Amazon warehouse became impractical when daycare and school were canceled for her two children because of the pandemic. She was able to avoid eviction with the help of a lawyer and emergency rental assistance but she recently received a letter saying that her lease would not be renewed and she had to vacate the apartment.

Pam Fessler/NPR

It's a simple fact. Black and brown families are more likely to be evicted than white ones. There are many reasons for this, but the pandemic has made matters worse and could widen the gap for years to come.

Aniya is a case in point. She's a mother of two, unemployed, struggling to get by. By the end of this month, she has to leave her two-bedroom apartment in Richmond, VA., and find a new place to live. This comes on top of an already tough 2020. We agreed not to use Aniya's full name because of possible repercussions on her ability to find another place to live.

"My children being home from school, trying to work. It was just a lot," she says. "It was a lot of pressure on me, trying to figure out what we were going to do, being that now there was a whole life change, a world change, really."

COVID meant Aniya's overnight shift at an Amazon warehouse was no longer practical, because her children's daycare and school were canceled. She had to homeschool the boys, whose father does not live with them.
Aniya has converted one corner of her living room into a mini classroom, with colorful plastic table and chairs, piles of books, and posters with simple words for her boys, ages 3 and 5, to read. "Your beginner words," she says, like "dream," "happy," "mom" and "house."

Aniya started having trouble paying her rent — $650 a month — shortly after she stopped working.

"After that, it was just pretty much, they were filing lawsuits against me and trying to get me basically out of the unit," she says.

The 24-year-old mother was able to avoid eviction with the help of a lawyer and emergency rental assistance, which covered all of the rent she owed, plus future payments. So she was surprised when she got a letter saying that her lease would not be renewed and she had to vacate the apartment by Feb. 28.

Aniya is hardly alone. National statistics are not available, but the Eviction Lab at Princeton University estimates that more than a million renters have faced eviction during the pandemic, despite government moratoriums. Research fellow Peter Hepburn says those affected, like Aniya, are disproportionately Black.

"Black individuals make up about 21 percent of all renters, but they make up 35 percent of all defendants on eviction cases," he says.
Black Renters Are Evicted At Higher Rates

Between 2012 and 2016, Black renters comprised a disproportionate share of evictions relative to their share of the renter population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Share of renters</th>
<th>Share of evictions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And those number don't take into account all those renters whose leases have not been renewed – something many landlords are allowed to do without cause — or who leave on their own accord to avoid eviction.

"Once you've been filed against for eviction, not even evicted necessarily but just having that filing on your record, it's going to make finding your next apartment that much more difficult," says Hepburn.

He says it's a downward cycle, exacerbated by the pandemic. Black families are more likely to rent, rather than to own their homes, and to pay a larger share of their incomes when they do rent. They also tend to have a smaller financial cushion to cover emergencies.

Now, during the pandemic, Blacks are more likely than Whites to have lost their jobs and three times as likely to be hospitalized with COVID-19. Being evicted only
increases those risks, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Palmer Heenan, an attorney with the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society, handled Aniya's case. He says most of his clients are Black and Hispanic mothers, and that their disadvantages keep piling up.

"It's really disheartening," says Heenan. "I had a client recently who had been evicted, who basically told me, 'How are my kids supposed to go to school if we're living out of my car? My car doesn't have Wi-Fi.'"

Heenan says many of his clients already live in substandard housing, in neighborhoods that lack essential services such as grocery stores and good schools. But if they lose their apartment, they often end up someplace worse.

Aniya says she took her apartment last year because it was so affordable and she needed a place to live. She and her kids had been homeless for a few months, staying with friends.

But she soon saw its many flaws. She shows how she uses a rolled up towel to seal a leaky sliding-glass door that opens onto her second floor balcony.

"I use this so our living room is not freezing cold," she says.

The door also doesn't lock. Neither do the windows in her children's room. That's not to mention the peeling paint, malfunctioning refrigerator and a bee infestation last summer. You can still see dead bees in the grooves under her windows.

We contacted Aniya's landlord, K-R-S Holdings in Richmond, but they declined to comment for this story. Landlords often argue that they can't maintain their properties if people don't pay the rent, and that if landlords go out of business, it will only add to the lack of affordable housing.

Congress has approved $25 billion in rental aid to help with the crisis and is considering $25 billion more.
But Jaboa Lake, an analyst at the left-leaning Center for American Progress, says it’s not enough to address the need.

"That still doesn't even touch the back rent that is owed. And we know again that back rent owed is disproportionately impacting families of color," she says. Recent Census surveys have found that the share of Black, Hispanic/LatinX and Asian renters behind on their rent is substantially higher than for White renters.
During The Pandemic, Renters Of Color Face Higher Rates Of Housing Instability

Since August, the share of Black, Asian and Hispanic/Latinx renters who are not caught up on rent has been consistently higher than the share of white renters.

A whopping 56 percent of black renters also say it's likely they'll have to leave their homes within the next two months because of eviction.
"People are taking out loans, they're using their credit cards, they're selling their personal belongings" to avoid losing their homes, says Lake.

She worries about what will happen once the pandemic is over and these families find themselves saddled with debt. Having a bad credit score can hurt an individual's ability to get another apartment or even a job.

Congress and several states are looking at solutions, such as providing debt relief, expanding rental assistance — which also helps landlords — and expunging eviction filings from a tenant's record.

In the meantime, Aniya has decided to move on. Her plan is to go live with relatives in North Carolina, so she can get back on her feet and start anew.