In Richmond, VA, eviction burden weighs heavier on Black and Brown residents

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The federal ban on evictions, extended by President Biden through March, is a much-needed, yet only temporary pause on a looming crisis impacting hundreds of thousands of American families. Retro Report, a non-profit news organization, reports from Richmond, VA, which has one of the highest eviction rates in the nation, on how Confederate history and race are the biggest factors in determining which residents are at a higher risk of being evicted.

Read the Full Transcript

Hari Sreenivasan:

President Joe Biden’s latest relief plan includes billions of dollars to help renters who have fallen behind on payments because of pandemic-related job losses.

He’s also extended the federal ban on evictions through March which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention enacted as a public health measure.

But the federal pause on evictions is not an automatic ban. Since last spring, in the 27 cities tracked by Princeton University’s Eviction Lab, nearly 250,000 tenants have been evicted.

Retro report, a non-profit news organization, wanted to know how that’s happening, and to whom. They went to Richmond, Virginia, a city with one of the nation’s highest eviction rates, to look for answers.

Brian Palmer reports.

Brian Palmer:

In his first days as President, Joe Biden issued a flurry of orders and announcements on a range of issues —immigration, pandemic relief, education. Less noticed were his administration’s moves to deal with another national problem, that of evictions.

Joe Biden:

This cannot be who we are as a country. We cannot let people be evicted because of nothing they did themselves.

Brian Palmer:

Announcing that the CDC’s eviction moratorium would be extended by at least two months. That moratorium, which is not a blanket ban, has slowed eviction filings in cities like Richmond—but it hasn’t stopped them.
Ezekiel Hicks:

I had been diagnosed with Coronavirus. So, I stayed quarantined in the house. When I first got the eviction notice I was in the bed.

Brian Palmer:

Ezekiel Hicks pays a $1,000 a month for an apartment in the southside section of a city where, even before the pandemic, roughly one in nine renters faced eviction — meaning a landlord won a court case against a tenant or actually kicked them out.

Ezekiel Hicks:

I get up and I look at the door. I see a yellow piece of paper on my door. And I read it and it was like, you know, "You have 30 days to be —we want you out of here at a certain date, at a certain time."

Palmer Heenan:

Mr. Hicks is like so many Virginians, Richmonders, Americans right now. He was current on his rent right up until the time that he lost work. But because of COVID-19 literally in Mr. Hicks's case, he was unable to work and as a consequence, now he's unable to pay his rent.

Brian Palmer:

Without income, Hicks missed some rent payments starting in May. Over the next several months, as his landlord tried to evict him, the amount he owed ballooned to $6,000, including not just back rent but late charges, plus his landlord's legal fees. Hicks's situation isn't unique, according to Professor Benjamin Teresa, who studies housing and urban development.

Benjamin Teresa:

People who were already predominantly renters, in terms of working in the hospitality sector and hotels and services that are hard hit by both the pandemic and recession, that they've lost hours or lost their job completely. And so, they're even more vulnerable to losing their homes to eviction.

Brian Palmer:

The moratorium gives tenants temporary relief; but when it ends, back rent comes due—in full. That puts the burden right back where it was before the pandemic: on the segment of the population that has long been marginalized and disadvantaged.

Brian Palmer:

About 25 percent of people here live below by the poverty line. Researchers at Virginia Commonwealth University found that the decisive factor in evictions in Richmond isn't lack of money. Even after controlling for income and property value, they found Richmond's most decisive factor in evictions — is race.
Benjamin Teresa:

The most influential factor at the neighborhood level on eviction rates in a neighborhood is the racial composition of the neighborhood. So as the neighborhood has a higher share of Black and African-American residents, it also has a higher eviction rate, and then, conversely, if the neighborhood is whiter, it has a lower eviction rate.

Brian Palmer:

While there's no perfect comparison, two examples from Virginia show a stark contrast. Nearly 50 percent of Richmond's population is Black, and the pre-pandemic eviction rate was just over 11 percent. Buh-cannon and Dickenson counties have nearly the same poverty rate as the city of Richmond, yet their eviction rates have been below 1 percent. Both counties' populations are also more than 95% white.

Brian Palmer:

Why does the burden of evictions weigh heaviest on Richmond's Black and Brown citizens? One explanation may lie in the past, when a racial caste system ruled the South, says housing advocate Tracey Hardney Scott.

Tracey Hardney Scott:

This is still the home of the Confederacy, so racism runs rampant in here. And the best way to control Negros, is to keep them in a place. And so the best place to keep them is totally in low income, lack of, lack of, lack of, lack of resources, lack of education.

Brian Palmer:

Until the mid-20th century, Blacks were largely excluded from political decision making, confined to certain neighborhoods, redlined into zones where banks wouldn't offer mortgages—and generally made second-class citizens by American law and custom.

Julian Maxwell Hayter:

If you want to know what's going on in African American communities in the 21st century, you've got to walk through the fire of Jim Crow segregation. There are residual effects from the public policies in the mid-20th century that continue to still resonate profoundly in the 21st century.

Brian Palmer:

The century that gave us the novel coronavirus, which has hit Black, Brown, and indigenous people—all historically marginalized—with particular ferocity.

Julian Maxwell Hayter:
This is precisely what happens when people who have been compressed in the neighborhoods who live in multi-generational households, who work on the front lines of particular jobs, underpaying jobs, that carry a high amount of the viral load. Diseases may not care about race or socio-economic status, but socio-economic status and race have a profound influence on the nature in which diseases affect certain people and not others.

**Brian Palmer:**

Hicks eventually recovered from the virus. Despite being legally covered by the moratorium, it took the help of a legal aid attorney to pay back rent with funds from a city rent relief program and to get his eviction case dismissed.

**Ezekiel Hicks:**

Right now, my rent is paid up through a program that he introduced me to. And my rent is paid up and I’m trying to get this other job because the job I had, I can’t do that no more so.

**Brian Palmer:**

Hicks says he has saved some money to pay rent, but he’s been hunting for steady work for months. He’ll make ends meet any way he can.

**Ezekiel Hicks:**

Plasma center, different jobs, odds and ends jobs. I can't go through this no more. You know, I'm a grown, independent man and if I got to, I will go pick cans up and cut grass, rake leaves, whatever to pay my rent.

*By – Brian Palmer, Retro Report*