



Eviction and Health: A Vicious Cycle Exacerbated by a Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has put an increasing number of people at risk for eviction, which is associated with many adverse health outcomes and contributes to health inequities. Emergency and long-term interventions are needed to address this public health crisis.

What's the Issue:

Eviction, which is relatively common among renters in America, is a severe form of housing insecurity associated with significant health impacts. Recently, the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have increased the number of renters at risk for eviction and its related negative health outcomes. Because eviction in general disproportionately affects women, families with children, people with low-income, and people of color, the health consequences of eviction likely widen both racial and socioeconomic disparities in health.

Housing displacement poses a particular health risk during a pandemic, as eviction often leads tenants to move in with friends or relatives, which can increase spread of COVID-19 and its related morbidity and mortality. With almost 33 percent of eviction filings against Black renters and over three-quarters of evictions due to nonpayment of rent (2017), lower-income Black and Hispanic communities have long been disproportionately affected by eviction and the adverse health outcomes associated with it. The pandemic has exacerbated these disparities, as Black and Hispanic people have died of COVID-19 at higher rates than their White counterparts; have experienced significantly more rent-related financial stress; and continue to face higher eviction rates during the pandemic.

What's Next:

As the evidence linking eviction to health has grown, clinicians, health systems, and policymakers have begun to pay more attention to eviction and to interventions to improve housing security and health. The COVID-19 pandemic has added further urgency to addressing the health consequences of eviction. Eviction moratoria, emergency rental assistance programs, and supplements in unemployment insurance have kept eviction rates below historical averages during the pandemic. However, demand for rental assistance has outstripped funds and rents have continued to accrue. In fact, in the last quarter of 2020, about one in six renter households (estimated at 12.4 million adult renters) reported being behind on rent in the United States.

This evidence indicates that without rental debt forgiveness or grants to households to pay back rent, evictions are expected to rise precipitously as moratoria expire. In the short term, financial assistance to renters and extensions of moratoria can dampen the economic fallout of the pandemic. However, long-term policy interventions are needed to help close the gap between historically rising rents that are outpacing renters' wages, all exacerbated by the financial crisis related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The brief outlines policy approaches to reducing eviction and mitigating its harms. It details the temporary eviction moratoria enacted under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act and ordered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Also noteworthy are some of the state and local programs that were enacted to provide emergency rental assistance. The brief concludes that addressing the eviction crisis in the longer term requires a multipronged policy approach: financial assistance to renters; expanding legal protections for tenants; and increasing the scale of federal affordable housing and rental aid programs.

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