Hundreds of thousands of Americans face homelessness during pandemic as states begin lifting restrictions on evictions

Trévon Austin
26 May 2020

With nearly 40 million officially unemployed in the United States, state and local governments are preparing to throw workers and their families out of their homes and into the street. Across the US, moratoriums on eviction proceedings and home foreclosures, set in place during the onset of the pandemic, have either been lifted or are set to expire early next month.

Nationally, there has been a patchwork of temporary safeguards for renters and homeowners invoked as tens of millions of workers lost their jobs in the economic fallout caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Some states, such as South Dakota and Wyoming, never had any protections in place. Others, including Florida, Mississippi, California, and Illinois are set to allow evictions to resume in early June.

Cities are spending millions on rent assistance, only to see funds quickly drained by overwhelming demand. According to NPR, a rental assistance program in Houston, Texas ran out of funding in 90 minutes.

Texas paved the way for other states after it lifted bans on evictions in place since March. On May 19, Texas courts were opened for landlords to file eviction proceedings against tenants. A mixture of emergency orders from cities and counties protect renters in metropolitan areas such as Austin, El Paso, Dallas, and San Antonio, but Houston—the fourth largest city in the US—and Fort Worth have issued no additional protective measures.

Accordingly, Fort Worth and Houston will now be among the first major metropolitan areas in the country that will see a sharp rise in evictions, despite significant job losses. According to state figures, more unemployment claims were filed in Harris County, which accounts for about 98 percent of the Houston metropolitan area, than Dallas County and Travis County combined: 184,281 claims in the Houston area, compared to 92,380 in Dallas and 42,623 in Austin.

Houston's City Council and Democratic mayor, Sylvester Turner, have done nothing to extend protections and have simply called on the state to extend protections. When asked about issuing orders like those in other Texas cities, Houston's attorney's office suggested it was not possible from a legal perspective. When local media reached out to city officials, they declined to offer any explanation.

Many of the country's largest cities are still under state moratoriums but have not passed local eviction measures. In Chicago, evictions have been halted until Illinois lifts its state of emergency, which is currently slated for the end of this week. In states like Florida, landlords have filed hundreds of eviction cases, waiting for the state's moratorium to expire. In Hillsborough County alone, the home of Tampa, 250 cases have already piled up in courts waiting to be processed. Neighboring Pinellas County already has 190 cases pending.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo extended a moratorium for tenants and homeowners affected by the pandemic until August 20. For cases not related to COVID-19, evictions will resume June 20. Under Cuomo's executive order, those who qualify for unemployment benefits or who are experiencing a "financial hardship" as a result of COVID-19 are temporarily protected from eviction.

However, many point out that tenants will likely be required to prove that they qualify for the exemption. Attorneys and advocates argue that this burden of proof

© World Socialist Web Site

will leave many tenants vulnerable. In New York City, where it is estimated that as many as 25 percent of renters, who make up nearly two thirds of the population, missed their rent payment in May, an end to the eviction moratorium heralds an impending social disaster.

Advocates for affordable housing say that millions across the US are at risk of homelessness. The National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates that at least $100 billion in emergency rental assistance is needed nationwide to stave off a catastrophe. According to a Washington Post-University of Maryland poll, a majority of the nation's 43.8 million renting households have lost income during the pandemic. Additionally, the fact that 40 percent of households making under $40,000 a year lost jobs in March spells ruin for a significant portion of the population.

Renters must rely on a confusing patchwork of local laws and ordinances for security against eviction, which attorneys say have little or no legal precedent. Many attorneys say they are unsure what happens after state moratoriums are lifted, even in cities with eviction measures in place. Some worry that legal battles could ensue where tenants will struggle to mount a defense without any financial resources. In states like Florida, most renters are required to pay the amount of outstanding rent before they can fight an eviction.

The federal CARES Act, passed with the support of the Democrats and Republicans in Congress in March, includes a hold on eviction proceedings and foreclosures nationally until late July, but the exemptions only apply to residents in properties that receive federal funding or assistance. The Urban Institute estimates that the law protects 12.3 million households, only 28 percent of renters and homeowners.

Even when residents are protected by federal law, they could face challenges. Tenants and homeowners, without the aid of an attorney, could bear the burden of proving they are benefactors of federal or state protections. There are also reports of landlords illegally threatening tenants with evection despite federal rules, with some cases being held up in courts.

It is important to note that even though many are still legally safe from eviction, rent suspension is virtually unheard of. Tenants unable to make rent payments report being fined with late fees that only place them closer to being kicked out of their homes once restrictions are lifted. At best, the mishmash of eviction moratoriums has delayed the eruption of evictions as rent payments pile up and workers lose their jobs and income.

The number of eviction proceedings is expected to spike quickly but the ultimate impact will not be seen for many months. Eviction processes can take months before residents are forcefully removed from their homes by armed county sheriffs. Furthermore, those who have received short-term assistance from the one-time $1,200 stimulus check and a $600 expansion of unemployment payments will soon be told there is no money to pay for extending such initiatives.

The impending social disaster in the US, triggered by the pandemic, lays bare the irrationality of the capitalist system. While it rapidly shoveled trillions of dollars to prop up Wall Street through the CARES Act bailout and "quantitative easing" by the Federal Reserve, the American ruling class has shown it is both unwilling and incapable of providing aid to millions during a public health crisis that has claimed the lives of over 100,000 people in America. Millions now face for the first time the prospect of homelessness, hunger, and joblessness while the wealthiest enrich themselves from social devastation.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site