

Evictions caused nearly 11,000 excess COVID-19 deaths in six months in the US

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30 November 2020

Researchers from major universities in the US have determined that the lifting of state and local eviction moratoriums earlier this year contributed to an increase in COVID-19 incidence and mortality throughout the country, leading to 433,700 excess infections and an estimated 10,700 excess deaths.

The results are a damning indictment of the entire political structure in the US which has allowed thousands of evictions to proceed in states and cities across the country. Unable to guarantee safe housing for all, the demands of the capitalist system, which subordinates all aspects of life to profit making, have resulted in the unnecessary and cruel deaths of thousands of people, while at the same time prolonging and exacerbating the spread of COVID-19.

The authors, which include researchers from the University of California, Los Angeles; University of California, San Francisco; Johns Hopkins University; Boston University and Wake Forest University School of Law, found before moratoriums were lifted, the incidence rate, that is the number of growing cases, and the mortality rate ratios were relatively constant, “suggesting little evidence of pre-existing trends in states that went on to lift their moratoriums.”

However once states began allowing evictions to proceed, within ten weeks researchers calculated an increased incidence rate and a mortality rate 1.6 times higher compared to the previous weeks. Within 16 weeks states that had lifted their moratoriums saw an incidence rate 2.1 times higher while mortality jumped even more, 5.4 times higher, leading to thousands of deaths.

The study, which is awaiting peer review, focused on 43 states and the District of Columbia between March 13 and Sept. 3, 2020, that is, prior to the current massive “third wave” of infections following the deadly reopening of schools. The last two months have seen a massive resurgence of the virus, overflowing hospitals and morgues, forcing some governors and mayors to implement haphazard lockdown measures (without pay) and undemocratic curfews. Last week alone, over 10,000 people in the US succumbed to COVID-19.

Using publicly available data, the researchers write that they “used models [to] calculate cases and deaths associated with the lifting of eviction moratoriums as a difference between

predicted counts under observed moratorium conditions versus predicted counts under a counterfactual scenario in which no state lifted its moratorium during the study period.”

The study focused on all the states that instituted a moratorium, beginning as early as March 13 and as late as April 30. Only 16 states and D.C. maintained an eviction moratorium for the entire duration of the study, while seven states, Arkansas, Georgia, Missouri, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota and Wyoming, never implemented a state moratorium and thus were excluded from the study.

By the time the study concluded, 27 states, with Republican and Democratic governors alike, had lifted their respective moratoriums, leaving the limited federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) eviction moratorium, which began on Sept. 4 and expires on Dec. 31, 2020, as the only safeguard for millions of people who could be facing eviction in the next month. November data from the US Census Bureau estimates that of the 11.5 million adults who live in rental housing, 1 in 6 did not pay rent in October.

The researchers found that the median length of state moratoriums was only 12 weeks, which left ample time for landlords to evict tenants in between September CDC’s eviction moratorium going into effect and the lifting of state moratoriums, many of which expired at the end of July, along with \$600-a-week enhanced unemployment benefits.

The authors are unequivocal in their findings: “Lifting eviction moratoriums was associated with increased COVID-19 incidence and mortality in US states, supporting the public health rationale for use of eviction moratoriums to prevent the spread of COVID-19.” The authors noted an increased rate of mortality and incidence over time which they suggest is due to the fact that displacement due to eviction can cause “crowding” as family members move in together or evicted tenants move into homeless shelters, leading to increased infection. The authors hypothesize the increased mortality rate is due to increased homelessness as the result of eviction.

Acknowledging that their study relied on public-health data, which is increasingly being withheld by government officials, the researchers note that the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths “likely underestimate true incidence and mortality.”

Breaking down individual states by excess cases and deaths, the data reveals the deadly consequences of failing to provide basic shelter for thousands of people while the pandemic rages. Texas, which had the second most COVID-19 fatalities in the US last week at 806, had the highest number of excess deaths due to evictions through Sept. 3, an estimated 4,456 people. This was followed by South Carolina, whose moratorium expired on May 14, leaving residents unprotected for 16 weeks, contributing to over 37,500 new COVID-19 cases and an estimated 1,090 fatalities.

After South Carolina, and continuing the trend of southern states that went double digit weeks without a moratorium, Louisiana recorded 959 excess deaths through Sept. 3 with nearly 30,000 excess cases after its moratorium expired on June 15. Following Louisiana, Mississippi recorded 804 excess deaths with 22,010 excess cases after going 12 weeks without a moratorium. Alabama had the fifth most estimated excess deaths with 621, after a statewide moratorium expired on May 31.

As the study makes clear, state eviction moratoriums did not prevent all evictions. Landlords could still use alleged lease violations to justify the removal of tenants.

The CDC moratorium likewise has not stopped thousands of evictions from going forward. It also doesn't absolve tenants of any past due rent or late fees that might have accrued, meaning potentially millions of evictions, and with them, millions of cases and tens of thousands more deaths loom with the moratorium expiration at the end of the month. Stout's Investment Banking estimates that by January, renters will be behind as much as \$34 billion.

Despite the extreme public health disaster, some landlords, such as Taylor Verhaalen of Stout Management Company, which oversees nearly 9,000 units across 56 buildings in Las Vegas, Nevada, have already begun taking tenants to court in spite of the federal moratorium.

"We've left it up to the courts to interpret how they're going to enact the CDC moratorium," Verhaalen told the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. Verhaalen declined to state how many eviction filings the company had already submitted since the expiration of an Oct. 15 statewide moratorium.

For tenants to be eligible to be included in the CDC moratorium, renters have to sign a declaration form, under penalty of perjury, which states they have used their best efforts to seek government assistance, will not have earned more than \$99,000 in annual income and would be unable to pay full rent because of a layoff, reduced wages or work hours, or "extraordinary out-of-pocket medical expenses," which in the US can be virtually anything from a check-up to trying to obtain a COVID-19 test.

Even for tenants who have provided a declaration, Verhaalen says he will still be filing eviction cases against them. "Our intention was that the judges would look at the paperwork submitted by the tenants and do some type of validation to

make sure they had financial hardship," he said. "So far, that hasn't been the case."

While it hasn't been the case yet in Nevada, judges throughout the country have begun to push back on the CDC moratorium as more landlords bring eviction filings to court. In September, a North Carolina judge ruled that because a tenant was not in federally subsidized housing, the moratorium did not apply to them, even though the moratorium does not discriminate between federal and private renters. And on Nov. 24, a federal judge in Missouri rejected a request to halt evictions after a tenants rights group claimed Jackson County officials had violated the CDC moratorium.

Speaking to the Associated Press, Emily Benfer, a law professor at Wake Forest University, said, "We are seeing variations in the way courts are applying the CDC order, and we are also seeing a lack of knowledge among tenants and property owners. Advocates are working overtime to inform tenants of their rights under the CDC order and, in many places, evictions are going forward."

The confusing myriad of expiring protections for tenants has allowed landlords to take advantage of tenants resulting in thousands of people illegally evicted under previous CARES Act protections. In Maricopa County, an *Arizona Republic* investigation found that more than 900 evictions were filed against tenants who fell under CARES Act protections, with most of those renters wrongfully charged hundreds of dollars in late and legal fees.

There are more than enough homes and resources for everyone on the planet to have safe accommodations while avoiding the virus; the fact that safe housing remains unobtainable for millions of people in the richest country on the planet underscores the need for the abolition of private property and the implementation of an internationally coordinated scientific plan to fight the virus.

Last week, the Eviction Lab at Princeton University, which tracks 26 major US cities, found, so far, landlords had filed 114,808 evictions throughout the pandemic, with nearly 4,000 evictions last week alone. The continued processing of evictions will continue unless the working class intervenes independently through coordinated action through rank-and-file workplace and neighborhood safety committees to stop the medically dangerous and socially unnecessary practice. The political struggle to provide housing for all, save lives, and end the threat from COVID-19 begins with joining the Socialist Equality Party and taking up the fight for socialism.



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