

# As residential eviction proceedings in New York City skyrocket, renters are left without legal representation

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The longstanding dearth of affordable housing in New York City, which has been exacerbated by the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on working class families, has now reached a new level of crisis, with hundreds of thousands facing eviction from their homes.

The temporary moratoria on evictions, implemented during the initial waive of the pandemic, have long since been revoked. The federal ban was lifted by a Supreme Court ruling last summer and New York state's ban ended on January 15. Now, the continuing effects of the pandemic—the plague of unemployment, low wages and mounting medical bills with little or no insurance—combined with skyrocketing inflation are creating conditions in which growing numbers of New Yorkers cannot afford to pay rent and are therefore facing eviction.

The Community Service Society of New York reports that 685,000 renters owe a staggering total of \$3.3 billion in back rent. There are currently more than 220,000 pending eviction cases in the boroughs of Manhattan and Brooklyn alone. And the rate is accelerating.

There were approximately 6,000 new cases filed during February. In March, the monthly total grew to more than 7,000 new cases, an increase of 17 percent. The avalanche of cases has grown to such a degree that the existing mechanism to provide legal representation to those families already facing destitution is being overwhelmed.

In New York, such services are provided by three legal firms under contract to the city's Office of Civil Justice. One of these, the Legal Aid Society, has just announced that it cannot take on 130 new cases in

Manhattan and 100 in Brooklyn this month. Legal Services NYC, another group, is unable to take on any additional cases in Brooklyn. This is on top of hundreds of cases that these firms have already refused to accept in Queens and the Bronx. There is every reason to believe that the situation will only worsen.

Even before the pandemic struck, the housing crisis in New York was already immense. City residents have long been heavily rent burdened, spending a high percentage of their incomes on rent. In 2017, 42 percent were spending more than 30 percent on rent and 23 percent more than 50 percent.

Now rents are increasing rapidly following a temporary dip during the initial onslaught of the pandemic. For example, in January of this year, the average monthly rent in Brooklyn was \$3,162, up 5 percent from a year ago. In Manhattan, the average rent was \$4,570, a 16.9 percent increase from \$3,909 the year before. The vacant housing inventory is down 86 percent from last year.

During the first quarter of 2019, more than 36,000 eviction cases had been filed. The eviction moratoria imposed during the pandemic only delayed this process. As the backlog is compounded by the additional impact of COVID-19, the crisis in housing for the working class will be truly staggering.

The city passed legislation in 2017 that afforded the same right to free legal representation to those unable to pay as afforded to criminal defendants. That system has now been overwhelmed by the effects of the pandemic.

Legal representation is thus being denied to families who are in peril of being forced into already filthy, overcrowded homeless shelters or onto the street, where

Mayor Eric Adams, a Democrat elected on a law-and-order platform, is implementing brutal, police-state measures against the tens of thousands who are already “living rough.”

Little is being done, not only to address the immediate problem caused by the lack of resources to provide adequate legal services to those affected, but regarding the thoroughly inadequate supply of affordable housing in the city.

The lack of affordable housing is being further compounded by a proposal to allow the rents on the nearly 1 million apartments that fall under the city’s rent-stabilization regulations to increase more than has been allowed for over a decade. The Rent Guideline Board has recommended increases of between 2.7 and 4.5 percent for one-year leases and 4.3 to 9 percent for two-year leases to satisfy the demands of powerful city landlords.

At the same time as the availability of affordable, private residential rental housing is far below the need, there is also a crisis in New York’s public housing. In 2018, federal prosecutors accused the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) of overseeing grossly deteriorated conditions in its housing complexes. At the time, the Democratic administration of Bill DeBlasio proposed spending \$2.2 billion over 10 years to make the necessary improvements. Little has come of that. Less than 10 percent of the proposed projects have begun.

The housing crisis is not limited to New York City. Both home prices and rents are expected to rise sharply in the near future across the United States.

Nationally, home prices are expected to increase by 7 percent over the next year. Rents are projected to grow even more quickly: 11.5 percent over the next 12 months and 5.2 percent over the coming five years.

With real value of wages declining and prices increasing at rates not seen in more than four decades, workers and many middle class families face an impossible situation. Not only is the “American dream” of home ownership becoming a cruel joke, but even the ability to keep a roof over one’s head is increasingly coming into question.

In the home of finance capital, as economic inequality reaches new heights, with the working class descending into destitution while the wealth of the ultra-rich increases astronomically, the coming social explosions

will be enormous.



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