Evictions in Detroit return to pre-pandemic levels

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Evictions of working class families in Detroit have surged back to pre-pandemic levels, according to a study by the University of Michigan (U-M). A policy brief published on Monday shows that, at the current rate of eviction filings, 61,000 tenants will be threatened with forcible removal from their homes in Detroit this year.

Researchers at Poverty Solutions, an initiative at U-M dedicated to preventing and alleviating poverty, found that eviction filings rose from historic lows in Detroit during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and 2021 to 75 percent of pre-pandemic rates by June of this year.

The researchers examined 68,000 case records filed with the 36th District Court in Detroit between January 2019 and June 2022 to track annual eviction filing trends and make a projection for the rest of 2022.

Alexa Eisenberg, researcher at Poverty Solutions, explained in a press release the devastating reality that has returned to impoverished urban centers like Detroit following the government's ending of protections against eviction put in place during the pandemic. "In Detroit and cities like it, COVID-19 eviction response measures disrupted a status quo of unjust and unmitigated mass displacement," she said.

Eisenberg continued, "The policy changes early in the pandemic showed us evictions are preventable but inevitable within a system that prioritizes landlords' investment interests over tenants' health and human right to shelter."

Although the Poverty Solutions report does not mention it, the elevation of the capitalist drive for profit and the protection of private property interests above human life was a primary feature of the response of the entire ruling establishment to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Poverty Solutions analysis shows that tenants' access to legal defense against eviction during the pandemic increased slightly but, even then, Detroit landlords were four times more likely to have attorneys than those being threatened with eviction.

One category of proceedings measured by the study showed that default judgements imposed on tenants who failed to show up for court remained the primary cause of evictions. Even though this rate declined by 44 percent during the pandemic, it remained the number one reason families were thrown out of their homes. The report said that 83 percent of tenants evicted during the pandemic "never had their day in court," equivalent to one quarter of all closed cases.

Meanwhile, the favorable relationship of the state and courts toward property owners was shown by the fact that 9 out of 10 pandemic-era evictions "involved properties operated unlawfully by landlords in violation of City of Detroit's rental ordinance, despite the law stating that landlords may not occupy rental units or collect rent without a Certificate of Compliance (CoC)."

The Poverty Solutions policy brief, entitled "A Public Health Crisis, Not A Property Dispute: Learning from Covid-19 Eviction Response Measures in Detroit" advocates for a stricter implementation of tenant protections and the passage of laws to prevent "arbitrary or retaliatory evictions," banning evictions during the winter and during the school year for households with children and establishing eviction diversion programs.

However, the dead end of such initiatives is on display in Democratic Party-controlled Detroit. Although the city council unanimously approved a "right to counsel" ordinance in May that guaranteed an office for eviction defense to be established by October, funded with $6 million in federal COVID relief funds and $4 million in philanthropic funding, the program

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has no staff or any functioning procedures.

The dramatically rising number of evictions in Detroit is part of an escalating nationwide crisis. As reported Monday on the WSWS, the lifting of eviction restrictions in January has resulted in a "tidal wave of eviction proceedings" by landlords across the country. In New York City, two months after the lifting of the state moratorium, Legal Aid and Legal Services workers were overwhelmed with a massive number of cases.

As in Detroit, the New York City Right to Counsel law, which was passed in 2017, has proven to be completely useless, with the over 90 percent of tenants threatened with eviction showing up to court with no lawyer by September. As our report noted, "There were 685,000 renters in New York City who owed back rent as the Eviction Moratorium ended and 220,000 tenants now faced eviction."

The eviction crisis is escalating while other indicators of the dire social reality facing the poor in Detroit are also being reported. In October, the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) reported that food insecurity increased substantially after the expiration of federal monthly tax credits on January 15, 2022.

The study reviewed multiple data sources from January to July and found a nearly 25 percent increase in food insufficiency. The article, entitled "Association of the Expiration of Child Tax Credit Advance Payments with Food Insufficiency in US Households," is based on a study from a nationally representative sample of 592,044 families in the US.

Among the findings of the study is that "the loss of monthly (child tax credit) payments was associated with an increase in the prevalence of households with children in the US reporting sometimes or often not having enough to eat, a condition associated with adverse health outcomes across the life span."

The Advance Child Tax Credit (CTC) monthly payments from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) were provided to more than 35 million households with children in the US between July and December 2021. The ARPA was passed by the US Congress and signed into law by President Biden on March 11, 2021.

According to Anne Kuhnen, a tax policy analyst for the Michigan League for Public Policy (MLPP), the JAMA report's findings come as no surprise. "This is something that a lot of us in the policy world have already known for a long time—that when Congress failed to act on expanding or continuing the monthly child tax credit payments that were part of the American Rescue Plan, that a lot of Michigan kids and families were going to suffer as a result," she told the *Michigan Advance*. Kuhnen added, "Families in Michigan are absolutely being squeezed."

Under the ARPA, eligibility for the tax credits was expanded to include families earning very low income or no income. It also included a boost in credit amounts to $3,000 per child aged 6 to 17 per year and $3,600 per child younger than 6 per year, and provision for half of the credit as an advanced monthly payment between July and December 2021.

What this meant was that an estimated 92 percent of families with children received $250 to $300 monthly per child between July and December 2021. Analyses of the program show that parents spent the monthly payments on food, utilities, rent, clothing and educational expenses. These monthly payments expired in January 2022, after the Democratic Party-controlled Congress failed to extend the policy.

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