



Evictions slowed during pandemic but some - Seattle Times, The: Web Edition Articles (WA) - July 21, 2021

July 21, 2021 | Seattle Times, The: Web Edition Articles (WA) | Heidi Groover; Seattle Times business reporter

Although a statewide moratorium sheltered many tenants from eviction over the last year, some renters still lost their **housing** in more informal ways, according to a recent report from researchers at the University of Washington.

In a survey of renters with low incomes, about 16% reported a landlord texting, emailing, calling or telling them in person to vacate their rental unit, compared with 9% before COVID-19. Nearly 6% reported a landlord shutting off utilities compared with 4% before the pandemic.

The findings come as Washington prepares to loosen limits on evictions and as governments begin to step back and take stock of their response to the pandemic.

When the coronavirus hit last spring, Gov. Jay Inslee halted most evictions. Today, a "bridge" policy limits financial evictions but allows some others. In Seattle, a city moratorium remains in place through the end of September.

The policies have slowed eviction proceedings on an unprecedented scale: In King County, the number of evictions filed since the start of the pandemic is roughly one-tenth the number filed in 2019, according to the **Housing** Justice Project.

Even so, the authors of the UW report argue some tenants still faced sometimes illegal pressures to move. State law bars landlords from evicting or locking out a tenant without a court order or from shutting off utilities except to make repairs.

"The moratorium has been successful in preventing a surge of formal evictions, but we're seeing part of this being replaced by informal evictions," said Matthew Fowle, a doctoral candidate who co-authored the UW report.

The UW study has some limits. Researchers interviewed 25 tenants and surveyed 410, all of whom had low incomes and called the Tenants Union of Washington State for help during the pandemic. The report notes they "may not necessarily represent the broader low-income tenant population in Washington state." The report has not yet been peer-reviewed.

Landlords have pushed for an end to the eviction moratorium, saying they are struggling to pay bills and are in some cases unable to remove tenants who are a nuisance to their neighbors.

Brett Waller, director of government affairs for the landlord group Washington Multi-Family **Housing** Association, said he believes renters with written leases are less likely to be subject to illegal informal actions.

For landlords, he argued, "the goal is always to keep residents in their units because it costs money to have a tenant move out."

Waller said policymakers should focus on speeding up rent assistance to address low-income tenants' **housing** challenges.

For tenants in the survey and interviews, the pandemic worsened the effect of poor conditions they were already facing, according to study co-authors Fowle and associate professor Rachel Fyall.

Tenants living with substandard conditions, such as mold, told researchers they spent more time in those homes because of stay-at-home orders. Some said their landlords delayed maintenance during the pandemic, and some reported negative effects on their mental health due to **housing** stress.

Those effects hit some renters harder: About 76% of white tenants surveyed reported loss of income because of the pandemic compared with about 80% of Black tenants and 85% of Hispanic or Latino renters surveyed.

And the last-minute extensions of the state's eviction moratorium shook renter confidence in the policy, researchers found in interviews with tenants. Inslee, and local and federal officials, sometimes waited until just before the policy was set to expire to announce that eviction relief would stay.

Some tenants said that meant they spent that time weighing whether to spend limited funds on paying off back rent or on a deposit for a new, more affordable rental.

"Many felt they couldn't actually rely on the moratorium to protect them because they had already made a decision to move or stay," Fowle said.

The region's longstanding lack of affordable **housing** exacerbates tenants' struggles, Fyall said.

"So many of these challenges would be lessened if our **housing** market was not so tight," Fyall said. "When we have a situation where people feel like they don't have options for mobility, it just increases the other challenges."

