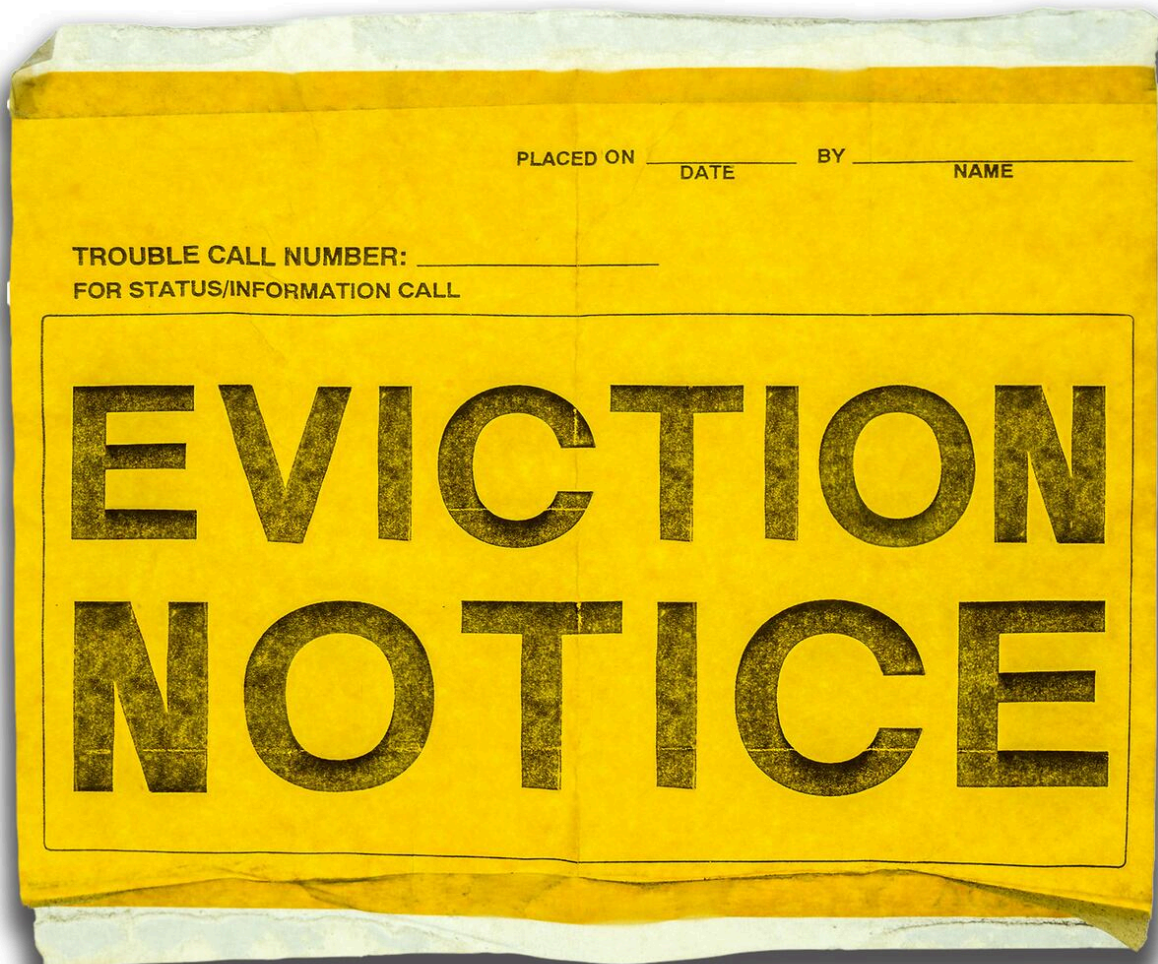


# Eviction takes its toll on more than one's finances

Researchers have only begun to uncover the big picture of what happens to the human body when experiencing displacement.

By **Lindsay Crudele** Globe correspondent, Updated July 3, 2024, 6:00 a.m.



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Home, in theory, is a refuge. But when home doubles as an investment, tenants are often faced with a different reality: rent increases and eviction notices. And there's more: New

research links eviction with premature death, stress-related disease, and other health consequences. In Massachusetts, displaced individuals feel that impact.

Because of fragmented data collection, it can be difficult to measure the true number affected by eviction, but researchers have begun to uncover the big picture of what happens to the human body when experiencing displacement. The state housing court saw nearly 39,000 evictions last year. By April 2024, more than 13,000 cases were seen in the state, according to data from [MassLandlords](#) and the [Massachusetts Housing Partnership](#). Reasons range from rent non-payment to “[no fault](#)” (which made up about 12 percent of cases last year). In no-fault evictions, the process allows landlords to seek to remove tenants for no reason linked to tenant wrongdoing. The population affected by eviction is larger: Researchers suggested that court filings do not list all household members, as well as situations handled outside the court system.

“You fall asleep thinking about that, and then ... the minute your eyes open, that’s the first thing you think about,” said Annie Gordon, who has lived for 48 years in Mattapan’s [Fairlawn Apartments](#) (rebranded as “SoMa Apartments at the T”). In 2018, [DSF Group](#) purchased the 347-unit building for \$65 million, after which Gordon received a rent increase, followed by eviction proceedings.

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Gordon, along with other neighbors, is now a leader of the building's tenant union, guided by nonprofit [City Life/Vida Urbana](#), and has been fighting to resist displacement for the past six years.

Nationally, an eviction threat alone is associated with a 20 percent increase in [premature death](#) risk, said [Nick Graetz](#), a postdoctoral researcher with Princeton's [Eviction Lab](#), according to research delivered this past winter that crossed eviction data with census data. That risk increases to 40 percent with a formal judgment. [Those affected](#) by eviction are disproportionately Black renters, especially mothers living with children, and Graetz said nearly 30 percent of all Black women renting with children are threatened with eviction annually.

"Some days I just go in my room, close my door, and just sit in there and cry," said Betty Lewis, another SoMa resident and tenant association member who has received a notice to quit after more than 40 years in residence.

Housing security can become precarious for anyone, researchers said.

"In general, we live under a system that makes it really difficult to retain our housing whenever we experience a problem," Graetz said. "A sudden health issue in your family or car crash or any other unexpected problem can snowball into what's effectively an eviction in a really short amount of time."

Lauren Honigman, a staff attorney and clinical social worker with [Greater Boston Legal Services](#), said the organization sees many clients with "very significant disabilities," such as anxiety, major depressive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Eviction can exacerbate underlying health conditions and compound stress-related substance abuse, she said.

“I think, sadly, a lot of families who are displaced end up in the emergency assistance shelter system,” Honigman said.

It begins before court is in session.

“Once the eviction notice is posted on your door, once you receive that filing, that comes with a tremendous burden of stress,” said [Kathryn Leifheit](#), a researcher at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Stress itself can alter gene expression (“the process by which the information encoded in a gene is used to direct the assembly of a protein molecule,” according to [Genome.gov](#)) and disease processing, said Leifheit, whose research found links between eviction and heightened blood pressure and an increased risk of preterm birth and low birth weight.

Eviction can mean more than a change of address: It can remove individuals from support systems.

Once just minutes from her best friend, Cloie Andrysiak now lives more than an hour from her. It took seven months to find a new home when her Watertown landlord notified her that he would be moving into her apartment. After going to 50 open houses and a stint living with family, Andrysiak and her husband, Matt, used their retirement savings to fund a small down payment on a Southbridge home. The couple feel lucky, but also pinched by now-doubled housing costs, and struggle with trusting the idea of permanence.

“I’m hoping that at some point I will get to the point where I’ll be able to find the time to paint the walls, but right now, I’m just trying to keep the walls,” Cloie said.

“I have sleepless nights now, the way I never had before, where I can’t keep those gears from turning, of like, how do these bills get paid?” Matt said. The couple are employed full time but are considering taking on second jobs.

“It wasn’t like, OK, you buy a house and everything’s good,” Cloie said. “Now it’s like, you buy a house that actually puts you behind the ball, and now you have to work twice as hard to keep it, and then maybe ... you’ll be lucky enough to get to the comfort level you were at before.”

In interviews with the Globe, tenants described feeling forced to choose between health and housing costs. And experts say that stress can become psychological trauma.

“People who get evicted are more likely to fall out of social safety nets, so they might forget to renew their Medicaid or their SNAP or their WIC,” said Leifheit, noting that reminder letters sent via mail may miss a recipient who moved recently.

The impact ripples out into the community. During the pandemic, Leifheit observed that after displacement, doubling up with friends and family was associated with an increase in infectious disease transmission and COVID-19 death.

Among the most severe outcomes of displacement is homelessness, Graetz said, noting that the population is notoriously difficult to track.

“Trying to find alternative housing is incredibly difficult,” said Honigman, adding that people are turned away for many reasons, even with subsidies.

“I’m exhausted,” said Bree Whelon, an activist in Southern New Hampshire who has lived with chronic homelessness since the age of 13 and was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2016. Whelon said she was unable to match Section 8 vouchers with landlords twice, and now waits in a queue of thousands for another chance.

“People have asked me to speak at different rallies and such recently, and [I] had to decline because I tell them, I feel like I’m just screaming into the void,” said Whelon, who is sleeping in a tent on a friend’s property.

“People don’t choose to live in poverty,” Honigman said.

For those who continue to rent, eviction's impact lingers, as public court records, regardless of reason, can brand a tenant problematic to future landlords. Early intervention is key to reducing the threat before it happens.

“We need to be considering policies to reduce evictions and guarantee affordable housing as not just housing policy, but also as health policy,” Graetz said.

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