

LOS ANGELES

South L.A. residents, USC students struggle to pay rent as the threat of eviction still looms

1 in 5 county tenants have missed or been late on rent during the pandemic

By: Ike Allen

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About 1 in 5 renters in Los Angeles County have paid their rent late or missed a rental payment since the start of the pandemic, a study released jointly by UCLA and USC on Monday shows. While an eviction moratorium remains in place, the study found that around 40,000 L.A. County tenants reported that their landlords started the eviction process, even though they can't legally be forced out.

The eviction moratorium was extended by Gov. Gavin Newsom this week, but these tenants risk losing their homes when it expires.

In anticipation of such hardships for tenants, the Los Angeles City Council voted unanimously Tuesday to delegate \$10 million in federal relief funding to a legal defense fund for tenants under threat of eviction.

While this year has been difficult for many renters, low-income tenants, disproportionately Black and Latino, have borne the brunt of L.A.'s housing crisis, the UCLA and USC researchers found.

"COVID-19 has magnified and exacerbated renter's difficulties, by depriving them of the income they relied on to stay current on rent," the researchers wrote.

The study found many of these tenants have relied on unsustainable means such as credit cards and payday loans to cover the cost of their rents,

Richard Green, director of the USC Lusk Center and co-author of the study, said the majority of those who missed their rent had lost their jobs, or had a member of their household get sick. In spite of the worries that some landlords expressed about the eviction moratorium, tenants who could pay their rent still did, Green said. Yet some landlords proceeded with evictions.

The study's findings were corroborated by an LA Times investigation of police data, which found that landlords continued to use methods such as locking tenants out and shutting off utilities to enforce evictions, even under the moratorium.

"There was nobody who was going to accept the paperwork," Green said, "but I guess you can still go to your tenant and say: 'I'm going to evict you.'"

Edgar Campos, director of the non-profit TRUST South L.A., said that immigrant tenants may be more likely to be exploited by landlords and unlawfully evicted. TRUST, which works as a land trust to help prevent displacement of South L.A. residents, advocates for rent freezes and rent forgiveness along with a strong eviction moratorium.

“You have situations where landlords can take a more confrontational stance, and folks, for fear of being deported or other issues, may just leave the premises,” Campos said

Even if they know their rights, tenants often cannot fight back and leave when landlords tell them to.

“The lack of clarity when it comes to those protocols, coupled with fear,” Campos said, “make for a situation that’s not helpful to tenant rights.”

Landlords took advantage of South L.A. tenants long before the pandemic.

TRUST South L.A. works with tenants in the vicinity of USC, where Campos said off-campus student housing and other development has displaced more and more Black and brown residents who spent their lives in the area.

In 2017, the new owners of the properties on the 1100 block of Exposition Boulevard evicted their tenants, displacing nearly all of them to renovate the buildings and transform them into student housing. It was among the many instances demonstrating the struggle of affordable housing in a neighborhood that is home to a large, private university.

As the pandemic upended the economy across Los Angeles, more members of the USC community have also struggled to afford off-campus housing and pay rents on time.

When USC alum Sam Cavalcanti was laid off from her job at an escape room in March, she immediately alerted her landlord. “They responded at first within a few days,” she said, “but as I explained my situation, they started to not reply at all.”

Like many other Californians, Cavalcanti waited for weeks for her unemployment claim to be processed.

“Whether the landlord approved my late payments or not wasn’t going to change the fact that I simply could not pay at the time,” Cavalcanti said. “So I was less asking for permission and more informing him that the money just isn’t there.”

After falling three months behind on her \$850 rent, Cavalcanti eventually reached her property management company, StuHo, and paid it off.

“I was moving out in August, so I wanted to pay it all properly out of fear that they would hold that against me somehow, and that could hinder me applying for housing elsewhere,” she said.

StuHo did not immediately respond to Annenberg Media’s request for comment.

A petition on Change.org calls for the Lorenzo, an off-campus apartment complex for USC students, to waive or reduce rents, which start at \$950, during the pandemic. The petition has over 1,000 signatures.

“Although most of the residents have already left the complex due to fear of their own safety, having all amenities closed, and having cancelled all events. Lorenzo still charges all residents with the same price tag,” the petition reads, “...These students have to figure out a way to pay their rent.”

The UCLA-USC study found that in the midst of an income crisis layered on top of a housing crisis, the best solution is rental assistance. LA County began offering emergency rent relief in August, but it will only be enough for a fraction of those in need. Not only would expanded rental assistance prevent evictions, researchers concluded, it could alleviate tenants’ long-term struggles like paying off their loans and credit card debt.

“Renters can pay their rent, landlords can pay their mortgages, and I see that as the only fix,” Green said. “At the end of the day, you’ve got to put money in the hands of renters.”



About Ike Allen

Ike is a journalism MS student interested in writing about food as a lens for other social issues. After graduating from Columbia University, he worked as a freelance food journalist and has been published in Atlas Obscura and Culinary Backstreets.

✉ isaacall@usc.edu

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