

The Devastating Impact of Evictions on Connecticut Families¹

By CECIL J. THOMAS



Remember, for a moment, your childhood home. If you are a parent, envision the home in which you raised, or are raising, your children. What words would you use to describe that place and the associated memories? What do we strive for in the creation of appropriate spaces and environments in which to raise children?

For many, our childhood homes evoke positive memories: of more carefree times, of safety, stability, and security. This is not a universal truth for all, and particularly untrue for Connecticut’s low-income families. For low-income children—in Connecticut and across the country—safety, security, and stability in a childhood home is an elusive promise, in particular because of evictions. For low-income children and their families, evictions present a full panoply of harmful effects, devastating in impact and enduring for years.

The Fragile Families study, conducted by Princeton University and Columbia University, illuminates the many challenges and disadvantages facing low-income American families.² The related research on the prevalence of evictions among American children is shocking. The study estimates, when accounting for both formal and informal evictions, that close to 15 percent of children born between 1998 and 2000 in US cities were evicted from their homes by age 15.³ These numbers become even more staggering when examining the effect on low-income families, as more than 1 in 4 children in families living below the federal poverty line experienced an eviction by age 15.⁴ Children born to Black and Hispanic mothers

are significantly more likely to experience eviction than children born to white mothers or mothers of other racial and ethnic backgrounds.⁵

As I write this, the COVID-19 pandemic rages on, causing significant illness, death, economic hardship, and countless other harms. While Connecticut⁶ and Centers for Disease Control⁷ eviction moratoriums stopped many evictions in 2020, an

Connecticut, reported that they were “Very likely” or “Somewhat likely” to leave their homes due to eviction within two months.¹¹ Connecticut households with children reported these risk-of-eviction levels at significantly higher levels than households without children.¹²

Numbers of this scale are overwhelming, and may belie the devastating harms¹³ that each of these evictions will present

“And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
In the sun that is young once only, Time let me play and be
Golden in the mercy of his means...”

—Dylan Thomas, “Fern Hill” (1945)

avalanche of evictions is expected sometime in 2021, when those protections expire. Between May and October of 2020, an estimated 8 million Americans have newly “slipped into” poverty, with Black, Hispanic, and families with children disproportionately affected.⁸ Childhood poverty in Connecticut was on the rise even before the pandemic, increasing from 13 percent in 2010 to 14 percent in 2018.⁹ Estimates of the impending eviction crisis are staggering. Stout Risius Ross, a global advisory firm, estimates that between 128,000 and 169,000 Connecticut renter households are at risk of eviction.¹⁰ The October 28 to November 9, 2020 US Census Bureau Housing Pulse Survey found that 67.3 percent of surveyed adults, in renter-occupied housing units in Con-

to the affected family. The eviction crisis is one that disproportionately impacts people of color, particularly women with children. Evictions cause homelessness and housing insecurity. The speed of the eviction process forces families into shelters, or housing of last resort, or into overcrowded situations that further the spread COVID-19.¹⁴ The record of the eviction operates as a permanent obstacle to securing future housing, as many landlords, even publicly-subsidized landlords, often refuse to rent to tenants with an eviction record. Evictions severely increase debts and financial harms, in the form of late fees, court filing fees, marshal service and attorneys fees, missed work, and lost or damaged personal property. Children’s educational progress is affected, particu-

larly at a time when distance-learning at home has become a “new normal.” The resulting housing instability forces children to move into different school systems, with different teachers and classmates, and causes social instability in lost connections to supportive people, places, institutions, and organizations. The harms to physical and mental health, for both mothers and their children, has been found to last years after the eviction has been completed. Simply put, evictions are traumatic and devastating, and we are facing an impending avalanche of evictions in the months ahead.

I understand that the scope of the problem is enormous and daunting. I am reminded, though, of that old story of the child on the beach, throwing starfish back into the ocean to prevent them from drying up under the approaching noonday sun. When challenged on the futility of these efforts, the child picks up yet another starfish, throws it back into the ocean, and replies, “I made a difference for that one.” There are approximately 21,000 lawyers admitted to practice in Connecticut.¹⁵ What would happen if each of us undertook representation of just one low-income household facing eviction in the year ahead?

Numerous studies, which will be addressed in a future column, have demonstrated the beneficial impact of providing representation to tenants facing eviction. The resulting benefits to the represented family are broadly impactful, and result in significant realized savings in societal and government costs. There are many ways that you can help. Consider signing up to provide eviction defense representation through CBA Pro Bono Connect,¹⁶ which will allow you to receive access to training and to be connected to Connecticut’s legal aid providers for case referrals.¹⁷ You may also consider supporting one of Connecticut’s legal aid programs, that are the primary providers of direct representation to tenants facing eviction. These programs all face significant funding cuts in the year ahead, due to the economic impact of COVID-19. Finally, please lend your support to legislative efforts to provide access

to justice to tenants facing eviction. Legislation to provide counsel to tenants facing eviction were introduced in Connecticut in 2016 and 2019, and we are long overdue for progress in this area.

Any and all of these efforts will be impactful. You will help level an uneven playing field, stand in the breach of an impending eviction crisis, and ensure access to justice for those who have no other meaningful hope of retaining a lawyer. Most importantly, your representation might provide some measure of safety, security, and stability for a child in that most evocative of places: her childhood home. ■

NOTES

1. This is the second column in a series on Connecticut’s eviction crisis. For the first in the series, please see “Connecticut’s Eviction Crisis and the Right to Counsel Movement,” *Connecticut Lawyer Magazine*, Vol. 30, No. 6 (July/August 2020).
2. <https://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu>
3. Lundberg, L., Donnelly, L. “A Research Note on the Prevalence of Housing Eviction Among Children Born in U.S. Cities.” *Demography* 56, 391–404, (2019).
4. *Id.*
5. *Id.*
6. State of Connecticut, Governor Ned Lamont, Executive Order No. 9H (October 20, 2020) <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/Office-of-the-Governor/Executive-Orders/Lamont-Executive-Orders/Executive-Order-No-9H.pdf> (last retrieved on November 20, 2020).
7. Temporary Halt in Residential Evictions To Prevent the Further Spread of COVID-19, 85 *Federal Register* 55292 (September 4, 2020) <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/09/04/2020-19654/temporary-halt-in-residential-evictions-to-prevent-the-further-spread-of-covid-19> (last retrieved on November 20, 2020).
8. “8 million Americans slipped into poverty amid coronavirus pandemic, new study says,” *NBC News*, October 16, 2020 <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/8-million-americans-slipped-poverty-amid-coronavirus-pandemic-new-study-n1243762> (last retrieved on November 20, 2020).
9. Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020 KIDS COUNT Data Profile (Connecticut, June 22, 2020) https://www.aecf.org/m/data-book/2020KC_profile_CT.pdf (last retrieved on November 20, 2020)
10. Estimation of Households Experiencing Rental Shortfall and Potentially Facing Eviction (Stout Risius Ross, 9/30/20-10/12/20) <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJoiNzRhYjg2NzAtMGE1MC00NmN-jLTlIOTM0YjM2NjFmOTA4ZjMyIiwidCI6Ljc5MGJmNjk2LzE3NDYtNGE4OS1hZj0LTc4ZGE5Y2RhZGE2MSIsImMiOiJN9>
11. U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey, Week 18, Housing Table 3b (October 28 - November 9, 2020) <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2020/demo/hhp/hhp18.html#tables> (last retrieved on November 20, 2020)
12. *Id.*
13. See generally, Matthew Desmond, “Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City” (2016). See also, Desmond & Kimbro, “Evictions Fallout: Housing, Hardship, and Health,” *Social Forces*, Volume 94, No. 1, September 2015, pp 295-324; Desmond et al., “Forced Relocation and Residential Instability Among Urban Renters,” *Social Service Review*, 89 (2) (2015) pp. 227-262.
14. See note 7 above. See also, Sheen, et al., “The Effect of Eviction Moratoriums on the Transmission of SARS-CoV-2, medRxiv,” October 27, 2020 (<https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.10.27.20220897v1.full>) (last retrieved on November 20, 2020); Benfer, et al., “Pandemic Housing Policy: Examining the Relationship Among Eviction, Housing Instability, Health Inequity, and COVID-19 Transmission,” November 2020 (https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3736457)
15. https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/market_research/national-lawyer-population-by-state-2020.pdf
16. American Bar Association National Lawyer Population Survey (2020) <https://www.ctbar.org/members/volunteer-today/CBA-pro-bono-connect/for-attorneys> (last retrieved on November 20, 2020)
17. To learn more about how to navigate Pro Bono Connect, please see *Connecticut Lawyer Magazine*, September/October 2020 “Time to Go Pro Bono” column https://www.ctbar.org/docs/default-source/publications/connecticut-lawyer/ctl-vol-31/1-septoct-2020/ctl-sept-oct-20-column-time-to-go-pro-bono.pdf?sfvrsn=e06b274a_4



Cecil J. Thomas is the 2021-2021 president-elect of the Connecticut Bar Association and chair of its Pro Bono Committee. He is an attorney at Greater Hartford Legal Aid, where he has represented thousands of low-income clients, predominantly in housing matters, since 2006, and has obtained significant appellate and class action victories on behalf of low-income Connecticut residents. Attorney Thomas also co-chairs the legal aid subcommittee of the Covid-19 taskforce, which led the development and launch of Pro Bono Connect in April and May of 2021.