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'Worst thing we've ever seen': Thousands of evictions loom in St. Louis

Janelle O'Dea

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Ryan Gipson rests on the back of a rented U-Haul truck during his move to a new apartment in University City on Jan. 20, 2021. Gipson's former landlord turned off the water to Gipson's old apartment. He recently found a new one nearby, with cheaper rent. Photo by Sara Diggins, sdiggins@post-dispatch.com

Sara Diggins

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Janelle O'Dea

ST. LOUIS — Thousands of eviction filings are piling up in St. Louis and St. Louis County courts, leaving landlords and tenants frustrated, and advocates predicting a tidal wave of homelessness to come.

Landlords have filed for almost 5,000 evictions since mid-March, when local courts suspended them, according to data compiled by the Eviction Lab, a Princeton University research project that tracks filings across the country. Landlords, attorneys and tenants say that some of the suits have since been dismissed, payment received. Others have settled, with promises of rent checks to come. But many, they say, are stuck in court, waiting for moratoriums to lift.

The U.S. rental industry has not seen a moment like this before, said Tim Thomas, research director at the University of California-Berkeley Urban Displacement Project. The Great Recession affected homeowners and the economy in general. But this recession has hit service workers the hardest. And evictions affect low-income households the most, Thomas said.



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“This pandemic, in particular, is probably the worst thing we’ve ever seen in terms of eviction and risk of homelessness and housing instability,” Thomas said.

Local social service agencies echo the concern.

The Metropolitan St. Louis Equal Housing and Opportunity Council set up an eviction defense program and hotline in early August. It got more than 400 calls by the end of the year, said Elisabeth Risch, assistant director of the council — about 60% more than normal.

“It’s definitely a lot more than we have ever seen before,” Risch said. “I think the landlords are kind of getting desperate.”

The hotline has taken in more calls about illegal lockouts, too, Risch said. Those calls came in once a month prior to the pandemic, but now ring at least once a week.

Employment Connection, a job and housing assistance program, received twice the number of calls for rapid rehousing and eviction prevention services in 2020 as it did in 2019, said Director Sal Martinez.

Deon Hollins was one of those calls.

Hollins, 29, lives downtown with his son, Tarqi, 3 and daughter, Zarqi, 2. His girlfriend signed the \$700-a-month lease with him, but has since moved out, he said via Facebook Messenger. He lost his job cleaning warehouse carpets in March, about a week after the pandemic hit St. Louis. He also worked at White Castle, but was let go there, too, about a month later, he said.

He told his landlord he lost his job, but said managers don’t seem to care. Working out a payment plan isn’t the issue, for him — it’s having the money to make those payments.

Finding work that pays well enough has been a struggle.

Hollins said he is now \$6,000 behind in rent, and his landlord filed to evict him a few months ago.

Building owner Mills Properties did not respond to a request for comment.

Rising tension

St. Louis and St. Louis County ordered a **stop** on evictions beginning in March, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the metro area. The orders expired, and were **extended**, and extended **again**. The federal government, in the interest of preventing evicted residents from moving in with other people and creating crowded conditions during a pandemic, also ordered a moratorium on evictions, **set to expire April 1**.

But the order only stops the physical removal of tenants and their belongings. It hasn't halted the filing of eviction suits in court.

The Eviction Lab tracked filings in St. Louis — more than 1,900 since mid-March — and in St. Louis County, where landlords filed more than 2,600.

There were far fewer, in total, in 2020 compared with a four-year average compiled by the Eviction Lab. Filings were trending higher in January and February last year. They fell sharply in April after the moratoriums started, but have since begun to rise again. Last month, numbers neared normal.

It is not, however, the number of filings that concerns housing groups, tenants, landlords, and the rental industry: It's the backlog, and the fear that the tenants in those filings will be put out all at once, at the end of the moratoriums. It creates a rising tension between landlords, who are missing their money, and tenants, who may already be out of work and are now threatened with homelessness.

St. Louis Sheriff Vernon Betts is still serving evictions in commercial cases, and when residents are engaged in criminal activity. But he won't put tenants out for nonpayment of rent.

"I've got landlords upset with me," Betts said. "But if I did that, I would be held in contempt of court."

Tenants also call, claiming they don't have to pay rent, Betts said.

"I said, 'I don't know where you heard that,'" Betts said. "I didn't say that. I said no evictions."

St. Louis and St. Louis County officials have set aside millions of dollars for back rent and mortgage payment assistance, for thousands of families.

But it hasn't been enough to stem the tide.

'A bloodbath'

Matthew Chase is an evictions lawyer in the St. Louis area, representing landlords and property managers.

Chase has filed 1,400 cases since March 15, he said. Of those, just under a third have been dismissed.

"There's just going to be a bloodbath of people being set out all at once," Chase said.

In normal times, Chase said, half the cases are solved through payment plan agreements between landlords and tenants.

"Rarely are tenants still there on the day the sheriff comes to execute a possession order," Chase said.

Edward O'Daniel, property manager at St. Louis Property Management, said he and his clients have worked with tenants for months to prevent putting an eviction on their records. But tenants often don't take warnings seriously until legal paperwork arrives, he said, and landlords are reaching a breaking point.

"We tried to work with people," O'Daniel said. "But we are not a payment plan service company. It's quite a change for us to keep a separate file for everyone, with what their plan is, that they will pay so much on this date, or every Friday after that, or every third Tuesday."

Some require multiple callbacks per week. And, sometimes, their stories change.

He is frustrated hearing about stimulus checks landing, without seeing a corresponding bump in rent payments.

The eviction filings, at day's end, are just a glimpse of the bigger problem. Only so many cases go to court.

Others, like the fight between landlord Phillip Jordan and renter Ryan Gipson, simmer, boil, and then dissipate, unresolved.

Gipson, 46, said he was laid off from his job at a construction company, before he discovered his ex-coworkers got COVID-19. Then he caught it himself.

At some point, he missed paying rent at his University City apartment — and suddenly found his electricity disconnected.

Jordan, a retired aircraft mechanic at Boeing, said Gipson only paid three months of a year lease, then stopped paying rent. Worse, Jordan said, Gipson told Jordan that he knew he couldn't get kicked out.

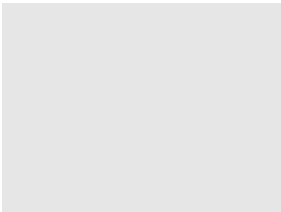
So when Jordan had to replace circuit breaker boxes, he didn't rush to hook Gipson back up.

Now both are out: Jordan, the money. Gipson, a home.

It was a tough year, Gipson said.

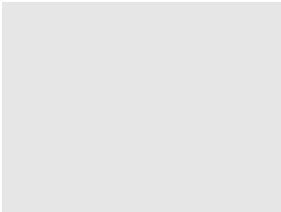
"People lost cars. People lost rental properties. People lost homes," he said. "People lost family members."

"Everyone I know," he said, "took a loss in 2020."



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Photos: Ryan Gipson moves into new apartment

Ryan Gipson, transfers his belongings from a storage unit at the U-Haul center in Overland to a new apartment in University City on Jan. 20, 2021. Gipson and his family rented three storage units to hold their belongings after they were evicted from their apartment. Photo by Sara Diggins, sdiggins@post-dispatch.com

Photos: Ryan Gipson moves into new apartment

Ryan Gipson, transfers his belongings from a storage unit at the U-Haul center in Overland to a new apartment in University City on Jan. 20, 2021. Gipson and his family rented three storage units to hold their belongings after they were evicted from their apartment. Photo by Sara Diggins, sdiggins@post-dispatch.com

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Ryan Gipson, right, and his fiancé Mulinah Jackson, right, empty belongings from a storage unit at the U-Haul center in Overland to take to their new apartment in University City on Jan. 20, 2021. Gipson and his family rented three storage units to hold their belongings after they were forced from their apartment over the summer. Photo by Sara Diggins, sdiggins@post-dispatch.com

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